

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

## The Puzzle of Single-Party Dominance

This book is about single-party dominance, its persistence, and its downfall. Dominant parties have maintained continuous executive and legislative rule for decades despite genuine partisan competition in countries spanning almost all world regions. In these systems, opposition parties compete but lose in open elections for such extended periods of time that we can speak of a “dominant party equilibrium.” What sustains this equilibrium and what makes it break down is the subject of this book. Fashioning an adequate explanation is important partly because the current literature falls short and partly because explaining single-party dominance has profound implications for our understanding of the forces that encourage or stunt partisan competition, the process of opposition party building in inhospitable circumstances, the quality of political representation, and the dynamics of regime stability or breakdown in hybrid systems that combine authoritarian and democratic features.

This book focuses both on the question of single-party dominance in general and on the specific case of Mexico where the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained power for longer than any noncommunist party in modern history. The PRI and its predecessors won every presidential election from 1929 to 2000, held the majority in Congress until 1997, won every governorship until 1989, and controlled the vast majority of municipalities. It was so powerful and seemingly unshakable that leaders in other developing countries wanted their own PRI (Krauze, 1997: 549–550), and major political actors inside Mexico thought of it as virtually “the only game in town.” Despite long-term equilibrium dominance, opposition parties began to expand in the 1980s, and by 1997 the PRI

2 *Why Dominant Parties Lose*

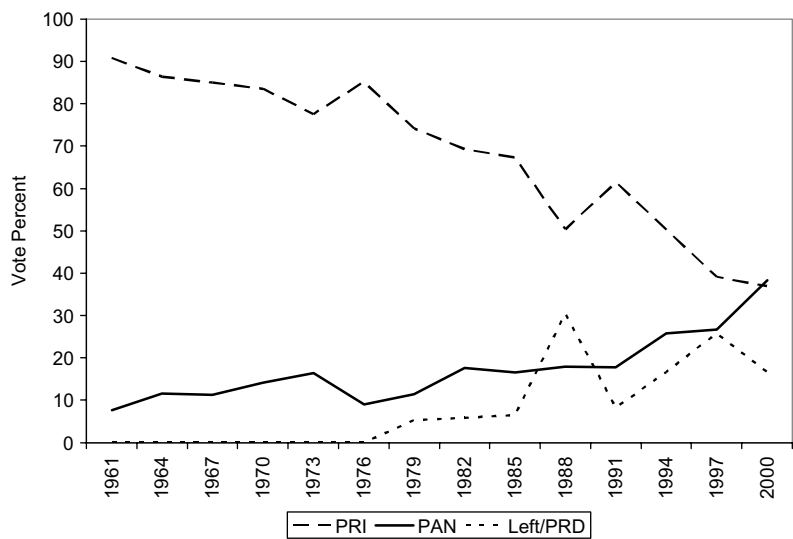


FIGURE 1.1. Lower House of Congress Election Results, Mexico, 1961–2000.

had lost its majority in Congress to the National Action Party (PAN) on the right and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) on the left. In 2000, Vicente Fox of the PAN won the presidency and became the first leader in Mexico’s modern history to peacefully receive power from a rival political group.

The PRI’s long-time dominance is surprising because it occurred in the context of regular elections with meaningful contestation, where opposition forces were allowed to register as parties and compete for all elected posts. The PRI’s ultimate loss and Mexico’s transformation into a fully competitive democracy is also intriguing because, as in other dominant party systems, change occurred without the breakdown of the incumbent regime, but rather through painstaking party-building efforts by opposition candidates and activists. Over decades these volunteers built challenger parties and fashioned increasingly powerful electoral challenges to the PRI. But for most of their existence, they remained small parties that made niche appeals to minority electoral constituencies and were thoroughly uncompetitive at the polls. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that they expanded into major parties with a catchall character that could challenge PRI dominance. Figure 1.1 illustrates the long period of PRI dominance, its protracted decline, and the simultaneous rise of the opposition parties.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Puzzle of Single-Party Dominance*

3

What accounts for equilibrium dominance and its eventual breakdown in Mexico and elsewhere? How do traditionally undercompetitive party systems transform into fully competitive democracies? What allows previously small and weak niche-oriented challenger parties to become larger and more powerful catchall competitors that can win elections? What accounts for the timing of dominant party decline in general and why, in the particular case of Mexico, did this change occur in the 1980s and 1990s rather than decades earlier or later?

## THE PUZZLE

Current approaches cannot explain equilibrium dominance or its breakdown, and in fact, the alternative theories predict that dominance never exists or it never ends. Most existing theories about party system competitiveness were crafted to explain the dynamics of partisan competition in the fully competitive democracies, and they assume a level playing field where both incumbents and challengers have equal opportunities to appeal to voters in a fair electoral marketplace. In particular, they discount the effect of differential resource endowments by assuming that no party is advantaged with extra money, more canvassers, or the ability to communicate more often and more effectively with voters. The assumption that the electoral market is “neutral” or perfectly fair in which no party has a systematic advantage underlies existing work in the best-known approaches to party competition in the comparative-historical, institutional, and formal theory traditions. But I show empirically that dominant party systems have sufficient social cleavages, enough voter demand, and permissive enough electoral institutions for competitive opposition parties to emerge, even though they do not for long periods of time. Thus, these schools overpredict opposition party competitiveness and therefore cannot explain why single-party dominance occurs at all.

The recognition that incumbency advantages matter has been incorporated into some theoretical statements about party competition, principally in more recent formal theory treatments. However, in their current form, these “non-neutral” models that assume an unfair electoral market for votes err in the other direction and cannot explain why a challenging party would ever enter competition. According to these models, opposition parties that are doomed to lose should not form in the presence of a systematically advantaged incumbent, and therefore dominant party

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)

systems should collapse into one-party regimes that endure indefinitely without challengers.<sup>1</sup>

If these approaches were correct, then, discounting the fully closed authoritarian regimes, the world should be populated with fully competitive democracies or one-party regimes where challengers are allowed to form but do not. Clearly, neither set of approaches explains the dominant party equilibrium that exists when opposition parties compete but persistently fail.

Specific work on Mexico largely echoes these two approaches from the party competition literature. In the 1950s and early 1960s, authors argued that Mexico under the PRI was a democracy, albeit an uncommon one where the incumbent continuously won reelection (Fitzgibbon, 1951: 519; Cline, 1962: 149–156, 173; Scott, 1964: 146). But if meaningful electoral competition were also fair, then we cannot account for the absence of at least one viable challenger. In the 1960s and 1970s, authors began to think of Mexico as a fully closed authoritarian regime, or what Mario Vargas Llosa called the “perfect dictatorship,” that should be compared to the military regimes in South America (Brandenburg, 1964: 3–7; González Casanova, 1965; Kaufman Purcell, 1973: 29; Reyna and Weinert, 1977). But if elections were neither meaningful nor fair, and the PRI won consistently through outcome-changing electoral fraud and bone-crushing repression, then there would have been little reason to turn to parties and instead opposition forces should have formed revolutionary movements designed to overthrow the regime or social movements designed to reform it. To be sure, these movements did exist at times in Mexico and other dominant party systems, but opposition forces also consistently formed parties to compete in elections as their primary organizational expression.<sup>2</sup> Thus, existing conceptualizations of Mexico's political regime under the PRI either overemphasize its democratic characteristics, leading

<sup>1</sup> This approach argues that individually rational politicians who want to win elections should always join an incumbent party with a higher probability of victory than a challenger party that is expected to lose. Opposition parties may still form if they can attract personnel by offering a much higher probability of *nomination* than the incumbent party; however, because the incumbent's probability of *victory* is so much higher, assured nominations probably only attract those who have no future chance of winning nomination in the dominant party, such as failed presidential contenders (Epstein, 1967). I take up this issue in more detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> Opposition forces sometimes form parties in fully closed authoritarian systems, but unlike in dominant party systems, they are not the main outlet for opposition activism. Throughout the book, “fully closed authoritarian” refers to regimes that are noncompetitive and nonresponsive.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Puzzle of Single-Party Dominance*

5

to the puzzle of why opposition parties failed, or overemphasize its authoritarian characteristics, leading to the puzzle of why opposition parties formed at all.

## THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

In this book, I develop a resource theory of single-party dominance and opposition party development that focuses on incumbency advantages. I argue that challenger party competitiveness is primarily determined by two types of dominant party advantages: the incumbent's resource advantages and its ability to raise the costs of participation in the opposition. Dramatic resource advantages allow the incumbent to outspend on campaigns, deploy legions of canvassers, and, most importantly, to supplement policy appeals with patronage goods that bias voters in their favor. Dominant parties also impose two types of costs on candidates and activists who decide to affiliate with a challenger. One type of cost is the opportunity cost of foregoing the material advantages that they would have received by joining the dominant party, such as a stipend, kick-backs, or access to an old boys' network of business contacts and favors. The other cost is the cost associated with targeted physical intimidation, beatings, or even killings of opposition activists that occur episodically in some (but not all) dominant party systems. Between these tools, resource advantages are more important. Though potentially harsh and almost always threatening, repression in these systems never rose to the level of purging or purifying the body politic as it did in fully closed authoritarian regimes. Incumbents' access to these competition-altering tools clearly varies across countries and over time, and taking stock of these variations plays a key role in this study.

By virtue of their incumbency advantages, dominant parties attract and retain virtually all careerist politicians who want to win office. So who forms opposition parties? Contrary to the purely instrumental assumptions about individual politicians in existing theory, in-depth interviews in Mexico and anecdotal evidence from other cases reveal that opposition party elites *also* value policy and partisan expression as a way of transforming voters' hearts and minds. But the only citizens willing to pay high costs and reap uncertain benefits are those who strongly disagree with the status quo policies offered by the incumbent. These ideologically oriented candidates and activists build opposition parties when existing theory suggests that they should not, but they end up creating niche parties that make specialized appeals to minority electoral constituencies. The challenger

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)

parties' appeals are then sufficiently out of step with the preference of the average voter that they remain too small to beat the dominant party at the polls. Only when the incumbent's advantages diminish can challengers attract the more moderate personnel that may transform niche challengers into electorally competitive catchall parties.

Dominant party resources primarily come from diverting public funds for partisan use. Unless access to these public resources is blocked by a professionalized public bureaucracy or their use for electoral purposes is prevented by an independent electoral management body with oversight and sanctioning authority, incumbents will skew competition in their favor by dramatically outspending competitors on campaigns and all aspects of party building. Where these institutional constraints do not operate, the magnitude of the incumbent's resource advantages rises and falls with the degree of state ownership over the economy.<sup>3</sup> In this context, state-owned enterprises are particularly important because they are prone to politicization. Their often-secretive budgets and lack of third-party oversight yield manifold opportunities to blur the line between public and partisan resources. Thus, the political economy of dominance involves creating a large and politically controlled public sector. When privatization deprives incumbents of access to illicit public resources, single-party dominance is threatened. In short, economic and political monopolies are mutually reinforcing in the dominant party equilibrium.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR MEXICAN POLITICS

This resource theory of single-party dominance helps understand key analytic problems in Mexico's politics. First, my argument accounts for opposition party existence but failure beginning with the initiation of the post-Revolutionary party system and single-party dominance in 1929. In the face of the PRI's advantages, challenger parties only existed because a hard core of ideologically committed citizens formed them to express their deeply anti-status quo beliefs. Citizens who wanted political careers overwhelmingly threw their lot in with the PRI. But opposition personnel were so anti-status quo that they made challenger parties into specialized tight-knit clubs that lacked broad appeal. From an electoral perspective, their organizations and campaign styles seemed designed to fail because they only brought out the faithful and never made a significant dent in the

<sup>3</sup> Threats to the size of the state may come from a variety of sources, including international pressure. Levitsky and Way (2006) provide a conceptualization of this relationship under the category of "Western linkage."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Puzzle of Single-Party Dominance*

7

PRI's power. Commentators tended to explain their failure as the result of electoral fraud. There is compelling evidence that the PRI won several key elections, especially local contests, through fraud in the 1980s when opposition parties became more competitive (Eisenstadt, 2004). There is also speculation that the PRI stole the 1988 presidential elections, and even though there is "abundant proof of electoral tampering . . . it has not been possible to unearth evidence – documentary, verbal, mathematical, or otherwise – to conclusively demonstrate that Salinas lost and Cárdenas won" (Castañeda, 2000: 233). As a result, we cannot know whether the PRI committed outcome-changing fraud or simply padded its victory (Castañeda, 2000: 232). In general, during its many decades in power, the PRI's politicization of public funds tilted the partisan playing field so much in its favor that it did not need to steal elections in the counting; it won them through unfair advantages before election day.

Second, my argument helps explain opposition parties' failure to coordinate against the incumbent. Opposition coordination failure helped sustain PRI dominance, especially during its final two decades in power as its resource advantages waned. It would seem natural for challengers to coalesce in a broad anti-PRI front, much like they eventually did in Chile against Augusto Pinochet or in Kenya against retiring President Daniel Arap Moi's KANU party (Howard and Roessler, 2006; Van de Walle, 2002). Despite their mutual interest in democracy, opposition elites did not coordinate because they were ideologically polarized on economic policy around a comparatively centrist PRI. These policy differences resulted from the very pattern of opposition party building that discouraged all but the most anti-status quo volunteers from joining them. Since elites refused to coordinate, mass-level coordination was greatly complicated and anti-PRI voters who prioritized democracy were left to gamble on which challenger party had the better chance of defeating the incumbent in a given election. Riker (1976) first characterized elite coordination failure as a key reason for dominant party persistence, but he did not specify why opposition parties would form on the extremes in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Unless the incumbent has tools to expel challengers from the most efficient position – typically at the center of the distribution of voter preferences – then, as neutral theories suggest, opposition parties should win

<sup>4</sup> Riker's argument was about unidimensional competition in India, a dominant party democratic regime. As I show below, competition in dominant party authoritarian regimes is typically two-dimensional and includes a cross-cutting regime dimension that gives challengers common cause against the incumbent. Thus, opposition coordination failure in these systems is even more puzzling.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)

with at least the same probability as the incumbent, thus ending single-party dominance.<sup>5</sup> My argument supplies Riker's missing mechanism by showing how the dominant party's advantages carve out a broad center for the incumbent.

Third, a focus on incumbency advantages also helps understand the opposition's ultimate victory. The economic crisis beginning in 1982 angered voters and increasingly turned them against the PRI. Yet the incumbent continued to win national elections until 1997. In fully competitive systems, when voters dislike the incumbent, they more or less automatically turn to the opposition by voting the incumbent out. This did not happen in Mexico in the 1980s in large part because the PRI still had access to the resources of massive state-owned enterprises, dominated the airwaves in campaigns, and outspent competitors by a factor of about ten. By the late 1990s, in contrast, state control over the economy had decreased dramatically and a leaner federal public bureaucracy yielded fewer patronage jobs. As a result, the PRI's national patronage system ran dry. The PRI increasingly favored legal public financing, but this new system included oversight mechanisms that benefited all parties and made partisan competition for votes much fairer. As resource asymmetries declined, opposition parties improved substantially at the polls; however, their expansion was not automatic since decades of niche-party building constrained their ability to take advantage of new opportunities. It was not until the late 1990s that opposition parties managed to overcome this inertia and overturn PRI majorities.

Finally, my argument about the origins and development of opposition parties among ideologically polarized political elites has relevance for two important aspects of post-transition politics in fully democratic Mexico after 2000. Despite Congress's increasing independence and importance as well as widespread agreement that Mexico's state needs reforming, major legislation has stalled and Congress remains plagued by gridlock. One reason is that the interparty coordination problems that once hampered electoral coordination now militate against legislative coordination (see Bruhn and Greene, 2007). In addition, unlike other authoritarian incumbents that were virtually destroyed after losing the executive branch, the PRI has remained competitive in federal elections (see Greene, 2008). This has occurred in part because persistent intra-party rigidities in the PAN and PRD have kept them from convincingly claiming the political center.

<sup>5</sup> See the section "Supply-Side Approaches" in this chapter for an expanded discussion.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Puzzle of Single-Party Dominance*

9

In developing my account of PRI rule and its breakdown, I describe opposition party development during much of 20th century Mexico. Yet my description differs from existing work. Excellent literature on the PAN (Mabry, 1973; Arriola, 1994; Loaeza, 1999; Chand, 2001; Mizrahi, 2003; Shirk, 2005) and the PRD as well as its forerunners (Carr, 1992; Bruhn, 1997; Sánchez, 1999; Borjas Benavente, 2003) draws out these parties' differences. To be sure, the PAN is a rightwing party with an upper- and middle-class core constituency and links to both 19th century economic liberalism as well as the Catholic Church. The PRD, on the other hand, is a leftwing party with deep roots in previous communist and socialist parties, urban poor people's movements, and radical intellectual cliques. But a closer look shows striking similarities. Both parties faced a common fate of long-time struggle as regime outsiders, and they both crafted quite similar party-building strategies and organizational profiles as a result. By theorizing the dynamics of single-party dominance, I account for these similarities.

In an excellent book that became available only after my book was completed, Beatriz Magaloni (2006) offers an analysis of PRI dominance and decline that runs parallel to my argument in several general ways.<sup>6</sup> Both books conceptualize single-party dominance as an equilibrium that was unsettled by economic conditions beginning in 1982; however, we have contrasting views about the causal importance of voters versus party elites in ending dominant party rule. Magaloni focuses on voter dissatisfaction in the face of economic crisis whereas I focus on the opposition parties' capacity to take advantage of this dissatisfaction. Voter dissatisfaction with the PRI is clearly important, but it alone cannot account for two key outcomes that my theory can explain. First, like other approaches that I discuss below, Magaloni's theory presumes that opposition parties were always viable alternatives for voters dissatisfied with the incumbent party. I show this is not the case and that the dynamics of dominance compelled opposition elites to build challenger parties that were out of step with the average voter's preferences and thus could not generate enough support to win national elections until the late 1990s. Second, we agree that opposition coordination failure was a major element in sustaining PRI dominance in its final decades, but Magaloni argues that

<sup>6</sup> I had earlier benefited greatly from Magaloni's (1997) doctoral dissertation which focused more specifically on voting behavior in Mexico but did not contain the extended argument about PRI dominance found in her book. I cite her dissertation (along with the corresponding citations of her book) numerous times throughout the present study.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87719-0 - Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Kenneth F. Greene

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ideologically polarized voters produced this outcome. Although *opposition voters* were indeed polarized to the left and right, given that voters *in general* were quite moderate, opposition party elites' strategies were the cause rather than the consequence of their noncentrist support bases (Greene, 2002b). Thus, I argue that opposition party behavior was the binding constraint on transforming Mexico from a dominant party system into a fully competitive democracy. I craft a theory of opposition party building in dominant party settings that can explain why opposition parties remained undercompetitive and uncoordinated for decades as well as why they eventually expanded enough to win. I use this argument to explain the dominant party equilibrium and its breakdown in Mexico as well as in a number of the world's other dominant party systems.

## BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Studying party dynamics in Mexico and other dominant party systems gives analytic leverage on four broader questions that are of interest for comparative politics. First, although work on single-party dominance goes back at least 50 years to Duverger (1954), Tucker (1961), Blondel (1972), Huntington and Moore (1970), Arian and Barnes (1974), Sartori (1976), Pempel (1990), Brooker (2000), and Cheng (2001), none of these studies actually supplies a viable theory of dominant party persistence or decline. These authors were mostly concerned with the creation of dominant party systems and as such they focused on the major periods of nation building that produced them (e.g., revolution, independence, reconstruction after defeat in war, or sustained struggles between rival political forces over modernization). Some argued that incumbents' initial legitimacy as harbingers of national transformation underwrote their long-term dominance. But it is unlikely that the mechanisms that *produce* dominant party rule also *reproduce* it over time, and leading authorities on dominance have recognized that founding projects have limited staying power. Levite and Tarrow argued that "subcultural dominance cannot be indefinitely sustained by dominant parties in societies undergoing change . . . regimes age and even epochal events pass into memory" (1983: 299). Tucker (1961) noted that dominant parties tend to lose their founding ideology quite early and transform from "revolutionary nationalist regimes" into "extinct revolutionary nationalist regimes" or what Huntington (1970: 23, 40–41) called "established one-party regimes." In the specific case of Mexico, analysts similarly referred to the PRI as a "pragmatic" dominant party that primarily sought to sustain itself in