

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Democracy and Bad Government in Latin America

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This essay reviews the following works:

Los últimos años de la reforma agraria mexicana, 1971–1991: Una historia política desde el noroeste. By Luis Aboites Aguilar. Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico Press, 2022. Pp. 333. Paperback. \$280.00. ISBN: 9786075643199.

Non-Policy Politics: Richer Voters, Poorer Voters, and the Diversification of Electoral Strategies. By Ernesto Calvo and Maria Victoria Murillo. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 300. Hardcover. \$85.00. ISBN: 97811087497008.97.

The Volatility Curse: Exogenous Shocks and Representations in Resource-Rich Democracies. By Daniela Campello and Cesar Zucco. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. vii + 240. Paperback. \$39.99. ISBN: 9781108795357.

Hybrid Regimes within Democracy: Fiscal Federalism and Subnational Rentier States. By Carlos Gervasoni. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 290. Paperback. \$29.99. ISBN: 9781316510735.

Life in the Political Machine: Dominant-Party Enclaves and the Citizens They Produce. By Jonathan Hiskey and Mason Mosely. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. vii + 282. Hardcover. \$82.00. ISBN: 9780197500408.

Conservative Party-Building in Latin America: Authoritarian Inheritance and Counterrevolutionary and Struggle. By James Loxton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 304. Hardcover. \$74.00. ISBN: 9780197537527.

Votes for Survival: Relational Clientelism in Latin America. By Simeon Nichter. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 324. Paperback. \$32.99. ISBN: 9781108449502.

Local Mexico: Democratic Transitions in an Authoritarian Context. By Patricia Olney. Boulder, CO: First Forum, Lynne Rienner Press, 2018. Pp. 351. Hardcover. \$89.95. ISBN: 978-1-62637-683-0.

This cache of recent books on Latin American politics gives proof of the depth and width of the topics, theories, and empirical methods of those working on political economy, clientelism, and political parties in Latin America. Most of these works consider what must be the central question of the past decades: Why do millions of Latin American citizens continue to suffer government incompetence, poverty, and clientelism so many years after the third wave of democratization? Except for Loxton's work on conservative party

building in Latin America and Aboites's on the end of land reform in Mexico, the other books presented here could fall under the subtitle "Why Voting Fails to Improve Government Performance in Latin America." Much of the answer relates to the failure of political parties to make credible commitments to programmatic policies and then hold their governments to these promises once in office,¹ although Campello and Zucco, in their work *The Volatility Curse*, blame nations' positions in international markets rather than national parties. According to Campello and Zucco, voting cannot produce better policies because governments do not control most economic outcomes given their mix of exports that make them vulnerable to external shocks. Nichter demonstrates in *Votes for Survival* that governments do not improve their programmatic performance because many citizens are so poor that it is better for them to construct a long-term relation with clientelist politicians, as the state is unable to provide during difficult economic conditions. Olney argues in *Local Mexico* that even after the defeat of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico during the 1990s in municipal elections across the nation, the same elite often continued to control local politics or worse, democratization opened spaces for organized criminal groups to take power. For Calvo and Murillo, parties with greater resource endowments chase after voters with more intense preferences, and Hiskey and Moseley report in *Life in the Political Machine* that authoritarian state governments create or maintain citizens who are not particularly concerned with democracy. Finally, Gervasoni writes in *Hybrid Regimes within Democracy* that an unequal distribution of federal resources to certain provinces in Argentina helps form and sustain subnational authoritarian enclaves that voters cannot easily remove.

Most of these works present a litany of government incompetence, subnational authoritarianism, and the failure of fair elections to improve lives. Party systems in the nations covered by these books—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico—vary quite a bit, demonstrating that more stable systems do not necessarily produce better political outcomes. Yet while these may be a disheartening set of works, they are crucial for deepening our understanding of the failure of the promise of the ballot box to select competent public servants and remove those who are inept or corrupt. This review outlines the arguments of each work and then compares them to another closely related book under consideration.

Calvo and Murillo, in *Non-Policy Politics*, present a complex argument to explain how political parties in Chile and Argentina determine what to offer voters in elections, whether it be programmatic policies, competence in office, handouts, public jobs, or some mix of those goods. The central question of their work is how parties respond to the different combinations of voter demands given their resource limitations. Crucially, the mix depends on a party's *nonpolicy endowments* (NPEs), defined as a good reputation, party organization (or its network of activists), and targeted distribution of clientelist goods. The authors state that existing party endowments, voter preferences, and party-voter links constrain politicians in their choices over what they offer voters in elections. Two central cleavages that affect party strategies are whether they are dealing with rich or poorer voters and whether the party enjoys greater or reduced NPEs.

The work claims that it is easier for voters to punish poor performance when officeholders offer nonpolicy goods rather than programmatic policies. Voters can shift from preferences for greater or lesser nonpolicy benefits, and parties must attend to these changes or lose votes such that party responses to voter demands can bias public resources to benefit voters with more intense preferences. Citizens, meanwhile, consider the offers of each party, which consist of policy promises and NPEs, and make their decision. So, parties make variable offers because voters have different demands, which often

¹ See, for example, Jorge Vargas Cullell, "Elections and the Muddled Present of the Latin American Democracies," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 3 (2019):784–794.

depend on their socioeconomic status. The problem for parties is that they often miscalculate what voters prefer and thereby shift their policy positions toward a moving target of an ever-changing median voter or voters who hold more intense ideological preferences. Those parties that do not enjoy large NPEs must take a different path: they cannot offer the same policy goals, so they must move away from the median voter to a group that is ideologically closer to the party line to make up for their lack of endowments.

The authors deserve a special mention for how they measured the number of activists per party in each nation in chapter 5, as it is clever and has an important role in the overall argument as they measure the connectedness of voters to party activists. The greater the number of activists in each area or nation, the more constrained the party is from changing its prior distribution of clientelist goods. They measure the total social network of poll respondents by asking how many “Silvias” they know and then measuring the overall number of “Silvias” in the nation’s population, which establishes the size of their networks. Next, they ask how many party activists they have contact with, and they can take the number of known activists over the yearly network number they derived from the Silvia measure.

The question of activist contact with voters is crucial because the ability of the party to respond to the evolving preferences of voters depends partially on its organization, which is equivalent to the number and types of activists. If a party relies on ideological activists who persuade voters to support their organization’s policy goals, then it will not be feasible for party leaders to switch policies, as they will lose this critical NPE (activists). But if the party employs territorial activists who specialize in clientelist distribution, policy change is more likely, which demonstrates how voters’ preferences across parties’ NPEs determine politicians’ willingness to change policy direction.

As interesting as the empirical tests are, the arguments made in *Non-Policy Politics* can at times confuse the reader; for example, the authors claim that voters weigh all policy promises made by parties and the mix of NPEs that are offered and then decide their vote. I am not clear where party identification fits in with this argument; Calvo and Murillo state that party identification is an NPE, but it seems like it is in fact a preliminary filter, which then conditions whether voters are able or willing to examine policies and the NPEs of available party options. Argentine and Chilean voters seem to have stronger partisan ties than most Latin American voters, so this sort of rational appraisal does not seem realistic in other nations, given the amount of attention most voters give to politics. In another example, it is not clear whether nonpolicy endowments are preestablished or whether parties can specialize and invest in certain nonpolicy resources, as the authors argue that both are the case (14–15).

This discussion of party strategies over diversified electoral portfolios that can include clientelism leads us to Nichter’s (2018) work on relational clientelism in Latin America, with an empirical focus on Brazil. Patron-client relations have been studied in the region for decades, first by anthropologists and later by sociologists and political scientists. While most scholars believed that the phenomenon should have receded as the region became more developed and democratized, parties and candidates instead have employed the practice to win more contested elections, triggering a new wave of clientelism—and of course, academic studies. Despite the important work on clientelist practice over the past twenty years, we know little about the demand side of the clientelist equation: the willingness of poorer voters to invest in maintaining longer-term relations with their patrons.

To answer this question, Nichter begins with a puzzle: why does clientelism persist despite economic development and democratization? His answer centers on how citizens help sustain clientelist practices, which, as the author argues, last longer than just the campaign season, even though programmatic policies would most likely be better for their interests. Nichter finds that where poverty and a lack of social protections coexist,

clientelism is more likely: if voters need bags of rice, beans, and oil to survive the month, then one can question which is more useful and credible to politicians and voters in the short term—programmatic ideals, a reputation for positive government performance, or the targeted distribution of subsistence goods.

The argument of longer-term relationships between client and patron and the desire of citizens to maintain these ties go against much of the newer literature on urban clientelism, especially in Latin America, which has focused on one-shot exchanges, typically characterized as vote buying. However, as Nichter sees it, clientelism is not short term, and he defines the longer-lasting relationships as *relational clientelism*. Both voter and politician might wish to sustain the clientelist exchange, but as the author points out, patron and client are involved in a relationship with high possibilities of cheating, as residents can accept clientelist goods and then vote as they wish. Voters, however, can make credible commitments to vote for their patrons by publicly displaying their party preference, and politicians, for their part, become more trustworthy when they remain committed to distributing particularistic benefits to the community over time.

The empirical chapters of the work are readable and convincing. Chapter 4 employs a LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey of over 1,200 urban and rural respondents and the 2002 Brazilian Electoral Study to answer whether rising incomes and income vulnerability had any effects on clientelism in Brazil. One particularly interesting measure of vulnerability is water shortage in rural areas. Chapter 5 uses quantitative evidence contained in the Rural Clientelism Survey in which online survey experiments were employed to show that citizens demonstrate their support and that politicians capture this activity, both during and before election campaigns. These voters then go on to vote for the party with which they have formed a long-term relation. Chapter 6 examines “requesting benefits, another key mechanism by which citizens sustain relational clientelism” (23). The author shows that those who request benefits receive them before and after campaigns. In all, this is an excellent work that allows the reader to better understand how clientelism works.

One argument in Nichter’s work seems out of place, however; the author refers several times to adverse economic “shocks” to defend against the counterargument that decreased poverty has substantially reduced the need for clientelism on the part of citizens. However, a shock implies short-term harm, not long-term adversity, so for an argument based on longer-term clientelist relations to work, poverty must be a lasting problem as well, which seems to be the case in many developing nations. A second comment is that, although it is important that the author brought voters to the center of this explanation, politicians and their brokers—who are always present in practice—are relatively missing from the book. Who provides all these goods? How do politicians maintain some control over the predatory practices of their brokers?

Nichter’s study of relational clientelism fits somewhat well with the Calvo and Murillo work because both deal with how citizens approach the partisan distribution of clientelist goods. The question for the reader is whether politicians working in parties that must win elections continually—especially in the local arena—are able to make the judgments that Calvo and Murillo ascribe to them, and which politician or party leader is making the decisions over campaign portfolios. After reading Nichter’s book, it seems that a solid proportion of poorer citizens do not make the complicated evaluations proposed by Calvo and Murillo and instead vote to keep their kids in school shoes and rice in the pot, no matter what the parties’ policy offers might be.

Campello and Zucco’s (2021) work on Latin American political economy treats a different source of government mismanagement by examining how the fluctuating effects of commodity prices and international interest rates affect domestic politics in low-savings commodity-exporting (LSCE) nations. This argument challenges the now-common assumption that domestic political outcomes are not provoked by international economics, except in oil-producing nations. Because many Latin American nations are

dependent on exports of primary goods, when commodity prices and international interest rates turn against them, their economies suffer the consequences of inflation, falling exports, and budget deficits. The political consequences are profound: when interest rates are low and commodity prices are high, the national economy booms, and chief executives become extremely popular, even if these positive effects are largely out of their control. But when prices fall and rates rise, voters blame the president for the economic downturn with negative electoral consequences. As presidents are better attuned to the fluctuations of the international market, they are more aware of these probable effects before voters are and will therefore choose rent-seeking policies instead of those that would benefit welfare outcomes for all citizens (26). Worse yet, it does not seem to matter whether the combination of international interest rates and commodity prices is positive or negative; either way, the presidents will spend incontinently. If economic tides are high, presidents can rent seek with impunity because they will most likely win the next election; whereas if the international economy is about to tank, it matters little what they do because they will most likely be defeated, in which case, they will also commit waste, fraud, and abuse of the public trust.

The authors dig into the proposed causal mechanisms of the mismatch of voter attribution of economic outcomes—both success and failure—by examining the cognitive limitations of voters. To do so, they create the Good Economic Times (GET) index, a useful measure for cross-temporal and cross-national comparisons of interest rates and commodity prices. The two-time series are combined through a principal component analysis to reduce them to a single dimension (79). Because the GET index is exogenous to presidential popularity or electoral outcomes more generally, Campello and Zucco can speak of causality rather than correlation, for example, when they estimate the effect of the GET index on the popularity of the president (136). As they mention (156), one of the main problems with their analysis seems to be Peru, which had high levels of economic growth, a high GET index, and extremely low presidential popularity. Could it be that Peruvians understand international commodities prices better than citizens of other nations, or that the lack of a functioning party system is behind this unusual finding? I also wish that the authors could have shown more clearly the process in a case study of presidential decision-making in the face of high- and low-GET-index numbers.

Comparing this work to Calvo and Murillo's, one can also ask, if exogenous shocks in nations that export mostly primary goods weigh so heavily on voters' evaluations of parties in office, then what role do voters' perceptions of nonpolicy endowments and programmatic policies play? It seems that in the exogenous shock explanation, voters are relatively unaware or uninterested in how forces out of their government's control can affect their pocketbooks, while citizens in Calvo and Murillo are able to distinguish among both policies and nonpolicy endowments with relative ease.

Subnational authoritarianism

Several large Latin American nations are federal democracies, and as their subnational governments compete for power, they are often less restrained in using authoritarian tactics than their national counterparts, most likely because the rule of law and citizens' organizations tend to be weaker at the state or provincial level. Given this reality, the works reviewed below offer different explanations for the continuing presence of subnational authoritarianism in the region's democracies.

In *Hybrid Regimes within Democracy* (2018), Gervasoni offers an original perspective on Argentine subnational authoritarianism that centers on how fiscal transfers from the federal government to certain subnational units but not others can result in an unexpected outcome: the states receiving large transfers of fiscal resources create local economies that depend largely on federal budgets rather than private investment. In this scenario, both

regular citizens and businesses become dependent on state largesse, which can undermine democratic practices at the regional level. Why? Because as the author notes, “The ability to make a living independent of the state is critical to the practice of democracy” (113). Argentine provincial governments are powerful actors that can rewrite their state constitutions, including electoral rules. And when a province does not have to recur to its citizens for its tax base, it can afford to use authoritarian methods to stay in power, especially by weakening local media and opposition parties, as well as modifying electoral rules that permit unlimited reelection.

Instead of asserting that the alternation in power is the definition of democratization, Gervasoni demonstrates how provincial rents create incentives for the new governing party or politician to become as antidemocratic as the party or family that it ousted from power. To determine whether subunits are authoritarian and to what extent, the author created a survey of local political experts working in Argentina’s provinces who answered a set of questions regarding democratic practice at the subnational and national levels over the previous few years. In addition, the author created the Subnational Democracy Index, which employs government and electoral data to measure electoral and institutional outcomes over several decades.

The subnational rentier state argument could travel well—at least partially—to other federal regimes, such as Mexico’s. “Free” money flowed from the central Mexican government to the states during at least the first fifteen years of democracy (after the PRI’s 2000 defeat), allowing directly elected state governors to become far more powerful than they had been during PRI hegemony, when sitting presidents were able to place and replace state executives and restrain their more corrupt whims through their control over subnational finances. In most states, federal resources never replaced private business, as they did in smaller Argentine provinces, reducing the impulse toward rentier states. However, in the poor, southern states of Mexico, it may well be that federal resources were so great that they had a similar effect, a possibility that awaits further study. Gervasoni’s monumental effort to conduct a state-level expert survey was taken up by Mexican scholars at FLACSO-Mexico and can be found at <https://podesualflasco.wordpress.com/2013/12/18/eepemex/>.

This leads to a question that the author never considers: why did central governments retain the unbalanced conditions of the fiscal pact over time, especially after it became evident that the smaller provinces were capturing a far larger share of federal monies than their population warranted? What worked for one federal administration might not have been a functional equilibrium for another, which begs the question of why central actors could never modify agreements between the federation and states. A second comment is that it would have been useful to trace how judicial and legislative institutions remained weak due to the actions of the incumbents. While both measures of subnational democracy are credible, the work lacked a case study of how the institutions of democracy were both undermined and strengthened under different types of provincial government.

We now turn to another fascinating work on subnational enclaves, but instead of explaining how and why and how local authoritarianism was created, Hiskey and Mosely, in *Life in the Political Machine*, question how the citizens who live in a state or province without alternance in power (which the authors assume to be less democratic) view undemocratic practice as compared to voters in more democratic states (those that have experienced turnover in state government). The central argument of this work is that those citizens living in subnational authoritarian enclaves exhibit attitudes and behaviors that are consonant with nondemocrats, which the authors define as the unwillingness to hold public officials accountable for their behavior in office, lower levels of participation in politics, and lessened concerns for corruption in public office. Mexico and Argentina are used for comparative purposes, and the authors find that voters’ antidemocratic attitudes and behavior allow local machines to remain in power even though they are ensconced in

national democracies. Furthermore, citizens who live in subnational authoritarian enclaves also judge national politicians with the same less-than-democratic standards, which, as the authors point out, have pushed some of the antidemocratic feeling in Latin America.

To support this argument, Hiskey and Mosley use public-opinion polling data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer data. In chapter 4, the authors demonstrate that individual voters living in authoritarian enclaves in both nations are conditioned by the antidemocratic practices noted earlier and see them as normal as opposed to a citizen living in a state that has experienced at least one alternation in power. How do these authoritarian enclaves function? The authors write that the rule of law is politicized; local media is compromised, and the party in power can control access to what should be needs-based social programs to those who support it at the polls. Elections are tainted by clientelism, corruption, and cheating.

In chapter 6, the work turns to the question of whether these antidemocratic attitudes change voting behavior. The logic is that as competition for power takes hold, voters will see a link between the performance of a party in office and their votes. If this competitive link does not exist, then voters evaluate the ability of the government party to deliver private rather than public goods (142). The polls cover both those states where the PRI has lost an election and compare the findings on public attitudes toward government performance in those in which the PRI continues to govern.

After reading Gervasoni's work on Argentine provinces, however, it becomes difficult to accept the central distinction—alternation in power—made by the authors between democratized and nondemocratized states or provinces in Mexico and Argentina. Even if the PRI in Mexico (and perhaps soon, MORENA) or a strongman in Argentina has been defeated at least once in a state government election, one cannot assume that some level of democracy has been achieved.

In the case of Mexico, many candidates who defeated the incumbent had often been a member of the PRI; state resources are still available to buy off opposition groups; the local media outlets continue to be weak; and the judicial system is not independent in practice. Therefore, alternance in office is not necessarily equivalent to a change in political practices or attitudes. Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Morelos would be excellent examples of this reality: poor states whose voters defeated the PRI between seventeen and twenty-two years ago but are still authoritarian and corrupt in many areas of politics. One could expect that voters in these states would still accept many types of antidemocratic practice. In other words, alternation is not enough to ensure democratic practice because institutions of accountability are weak at the federal level and weaker in the states and provinces.

A second question concerns the initiation of democratic alternation—why do certain states alternate earlier than others? Is it because in those states that have not experienced the defeat of the incumbent PRI, voters do not hold prodemocratic attitudes? Or is it because the PRI ran successful campaigns and established relatively good government? The authors could explain what differentiated subnational units in Mexico and Argentina such that it was relatively easy for some states' voters to throw off the yoke of the PRI or a hegemonic family in Argentina, while in others, it was far more difficult. There could be something prior to alternation in power that drives the attitudes necessary to throw out the hegemonic party or family.

Violence and political change

In both works discussed in this section, violence plays an important role, either in the creation and development of right parties, as discussed by Loxton, or in the transitions

from PRI domination in municipal governments in Olney's treatment of local democratization from the 1990s through the 2000s.

Loxton provides an interesting account of right-wing party development and survival, with rich narratives of different cases that help explain why certain right-wing parties endured while most did not. His idea stems from an insight from Di Tella's 1971 work, which argues that a rightist party is important for democracy because then property owners and businesses will hesitate to turn to the military to solve their issues with leftist or populist governments.² The author makes use of careful comparison across four conservative parties in Latin America, two of which have survived and flourished and two that did not. Successful conservative parties are rooted in authoritarian successor parties, specifically military governments that came into power to confront leftist guerrilla movements. Two specific factors or resources help explain why the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) in Chile and Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) in El Salvador outlasted the Unión del Centro Democrático (UCEDE) in Argentina and the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) in Guatemala: the first factor is the resources that came from the parties' authoritarian inheritance, such as party brand, clientelist networks, and a territorial organization. The second factor is the struggle to defeat guerrilla groups that became an important source of cohesion in the years after the return to democracy. Because UCEDE and Guatemala's PAN were not forged in the fire of bloody conflict against leftist guerrillas, they were "rent asunder" by schisms soon after they began to actively seek the vote.

The author defines conservative parties as those whose leaders and members believe that strong property rights are better for society than programs to redistribute wealth. In social terms, conservatives are less likely to approve of shifting societal values, especially in terms of marriage, divorce, sexuality, and abortion. To be termed a successful party, it must have won at least 10 percent of the national legislative vote in the previous five elections. The work also provides a section that carefully considers alternative explanations, such as the size of the peasantry, regional cleavages, and electoral rules, each of which is rejected in turn.

In the substantive chapters, the parties are considered (using mostly secondary literature) in turn and a successful party was compared to a closely related case of a right-wing party that was unsuccessful. Another aspect of the explanation is the success of the military government while in power in Chile (except for a period following the 1982 debt crisis), which gave it credibility in the post-transition world, whereas in Argentina, the military government was an abject failure in terms of economic growth and, of course, in its performance during the Malvinas War. The comparison case to Chile's successful UDI is Argentina's failed right-wing party, UCEDE, which was created in the early 1980s and led by a promarket political leader who had been active in Argentine politics for decades but who had never joined the military government and was, in fact, a vocal critic of it. Loxton states that once President Menem took over the central right promarket reform space on the ideological spectrum, UCEDE's days as a viable party were numbered. All in all, if one wishes to learn about party development and the political histories of these four nations, this is an excellent work to read.

Olney's *Local Mexico* is an excellent treatment of the types of local transitions away from PRI rule in Mexico in the 1990s that also considers the place of violence in political outcomes but in the form of organized criminal groups rather than guerrilla movements. She explains that many of Mexico's current problems (despite better development outcomes over time), such as corruption, ineffective governance, and human rights abuses, stem from the weakness of the PRI as a party organization in local politics during the last

² Torcuato Di Tella, "La búsqueda de la fórmula política argentina," *Desarrollo Económico* 1141, no. 44 (1971): 317-325.

decades of the twentieth century. National-level party weakness allowed local elites to control many smaller municipalities across the nation, but when opposition forces began to defeat the hegemonic PRI at the municipal level in the 1990s, alternance in power did not always mean that democratic actors with interest in promoting stronger institutions or the rule of law were installed in office. Instead, the same political elite simply used new party labels to reach public office, where their actions did not change much from those of the PRI.

The author categorizes municipal transitions into three types: factional splits within the PRI that caused the hegemonic party's defeat and in which society did not participate; electoral revolts (or snowball transitions because their effects were short lived), which were based on societal organization but without long-term participation; and electoral revolutions, those transitions with societal leadership that challenged both electoral procedures, as well as distributional issues. The substantive chapters are of two types: those that present a discussion of each type of transition, followed by a chapter with a discussion of a municipal case that exemplifies the arguments of the prior chapter. Most of the empirical work is based on author interviews during two phases; one before the year 2000's national transition to democracy, in which the PRI lost the presidency, and the other in the years following the PRI's defeat.

In her discussion of transitions due to PRI divisions, the author explains how internal pressures due to candidate selection battles led to fissures in the party and spaces for its factions to win local electoral victories using smaller PRI-aligned parties, especially after the break in 1988 of Cuauhtémoc Cardenas (the son of former president Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934–1940). But instead of the usual story of the transfer of power from the PRI to an opposition party, the author writes, "Control passed not from the PRI to the PRD in these regions (in Michoacán) but rather from the central government, which had controlled rural areas indirectly through local power brokers, to the most powerful local actors" (94). These powerful local actors could be the same local strongmen who remained in power, but now *without* the restraint of the PRI president or new local elites tied to opposition parties, or as was the case in Michoacán, where this loss of hegemonic control gave criminal organizations the opportunity to forge new links with local politicians and police forces (96). A similar argument was made statistically in 2002 by Villareal, but in Olney's work, we see some of the actual mechanisms that led from political competition to greater violence.³

In the second type of transition, after many stolen elections, societal groups forced the PRI to finally accept defeat at the ballot box in municipal races by mobilizing voters and protecting the vote. These successful battles were short lived, however, as independent groups that found themselves in elected office grew weary of fighting the PRI regime and began to mimic its abuse of power. The final category consisted of electoral revolutions, in which committed societal groups won power and then were able to change both laws and clientelist practices. Their leaders often backed greater citizen participation in government and in party activities.

This is an excellent study in large part because the author has spoken to many of the actual actors involved in these transitions. She is right when she states that Mexico's hegemonic regime was too weak to control all its territory directly, so it had to rely on subnational authoritarian power brokers. This is a very different vision of Mexican politics than many of those in the corporatist tradition who argued that the PRI's corporatist sectors took over from the postrevolutionary caciques. Theoretically, Olney could have compared her findings with more "typical" works on transitions, both in Mexico and elsewhere, to emphasize the differences she finds. Further, it would have been a more powerful argument if the author explicitly demonstrated how the structure of PRI power before the 1990s was quite different from the typical view of corporatist authoritarianism. Overall, however, her findings are

³ Andrés Villarreal, "Political Competition and Violence in Mexico: Hierarchical Social Control in Local Patronage Structures," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 4 (2002): 477–498.

crucially important, and Mexicans have realized that democracy is unfortunately not the cure-all, given the lack of a working legal and policing system after the end of hegemony, which promotes impunity, violence, and lower development outcomes.

Aboites Aguilar's *Los últimos años de la reforma agraria mexicana, 1971-1991* comes from a different intellectual tradition from those reviewed above; specifically, his work is a historical recounting of an understudied counterreform that ended Mexico's land reform in 1991, after seventy-six years in operation. As different as this study is from others reviewed here, it is an important counterweight to the theoretically driven accounts of democracy, clientelism, and state-level authoritarianism, as it examines a single policy—land reform—over several decades and the changing interests and opposition tactics of larger landowners and local politicians against the interests of landless peasants and at times national policy makers. In other words, it examines local politics (and economic interests) to better understand changes to a national policy. The author advances three major arguments; first, agrarian reform ended in 1991 after at least two decades of action by local agents—the owners of agroindustry and state governments. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) renounced decades of the postrevolutionary policy of distributing private lands to communal holdings (*ejidos* or *communes*) because of decisions made during the *sexenio* (six-year term) of President Luis Echeverría (1970–1976), twenty years prior.

Second, the lack of protest against the constitutional change that ended agrarian reform was due to a far lower number of peasants on *ejidos* working the land (what the author calls *desagrarization*) as a result of migration to cities and to the United States, as well as the development of a large class of salaried agricultural workers. And finally, the conflict between agribusiness and land reform became a part of the wider protests of various elements of Mexico's business class against the PRI regime that strengthened the center-right Party of National Action (PAN) over time, allowing it to win first municipal and then state elections, before defeating the PRI in presidential elections in 2000.

Mexico's land reform originated in 1915 as a central claim of landless peasants during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1918) and was expanded as a major social policy of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). It was so successful that, by the late 1980s, over 50 percent of the national territory was held communally, meaning that it could not be bought or sold (or mortgaged to take out a loan). The land could be inherited only by the descendants of the holder of the plot. This type of land tenure became problematic over the course of decades as several children were eligible to inherit their parent's plot, dividing them into smaller and smaller parcels. Furthermore, government agricultural policies tended to favor larger, private holdings that were more productive.

The author initiates his analysis in the 1960s, describing the connection between rural protest over land and the dual response of the Mexican government: the federal government was willing to subsidize production with price guarantees for a host of agricultural goods on larger, private land holdings while it continued to redistribute land to *ejidos*, albeit with less productive acreage. However, local peasant protests demanding land and fair treatment became violent and more prevalent as the 1960s wore on. Aboites claims that antireform alliances grew up throughout Mexico between state governments and owners of agroindustry to keep the claims and demands of peasant organizers at bay.

Having outlined the background of agrarian conflict, the author then traces the connection between the decision of President Echeverría to expropriate some of the most productive lands of the northwestern part of the nation (37,000 hectares) to redistribute them to land seekers and the final renunciation of land reform by Salinas in 1991. When President Echeverría made the expropriation decision in 1976, he launched a long-lasting battle between the owners of northern agribusiness, who had been beneficiaries of government spending policies, and the national government. Together with the nationalization of the banking system undertaken in 1982 by Echeverría's successor, José López Portillo, small and medium-sized businesses became a source of the ongoing

conflicts between the authoritarian regime and actors in the business sectors who believed they no longer benefited from the postrevolutionary coalition. Those business owners who wanted to stop the pattern of expropriations on the part of Mexico's presidents turned to the PAN in the 1980s, helping the party gradually win elections in northern and west-central areas of the nation. This book could be an important starting point to interest political scientists working in developing nations and can be read alongside Olney's work to contrast when and why certain democratizing moments tend to produce permanent change, and others do not.

Conclusions

Most of the books reviewed here have emphasized the failure of democratic politics in various Latin American nations, which is a troubling finding that should sharpen our interest in searching out new paths to better connect citizen needs with political outcomes. Meanwhile, clientelism and subnational authoritarianism continue to thrive in the region despite ongoing democratic elections, as violence endures. These works also remind me forcefully of the work done by Matthew Cleary on Mexican municipal democratization and its effects on local service provision, in which he finds that unless social groups continue to pressure local governments who defeated the PRI, they will not enjoy better services.⁴ Electoral competition is not sufficient to keep ambitious, predatory politicians in line.

Most of the books that are reviewed here are both theoretically driven and empirically strong, with several chapters dedicated to empirical tests of different types. I applaud the authors for their extraordinary efforts. However, because political scientists must "prove" the causal mechanisms proposed by their theory, they dedicate hundreds of pages to empirical chapters, which seems to have become the discipline's gold standard for research. So, what follows is not a criticism of the authors per se but rather of the probatory standards for books (rather than articles) that political science demands.

When reading these manuscripts, it became clear that one argument was forwarded at the expense of others, which is normal when making a serious theoretical statement, as these works do. However, as is often the case, one reads them with an eye to other explanations, other cases, or other ways of looking at the same problem, especially because several of the books invite side-by-side comparisons. Would it not be better to only have one (or at most two) purely empirical chapters and expend more space on richer expositions of how the theory presented can work under different institutional rules or comparative cases? Or it might be that different methods, such as interviews and case studies, could be employed to offer a deeper understanding of the arguments in the book. With more room, the authors could contextualize their theoretical propositions with already-existing theories rather than just a few pages dedicated to alternative explanations.

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⁴ Matthew Cleary, *The Sources of Democratic Responsiveness in Mexico* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010).