Electoral Competition and Institutional Change in Mexico (review)

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business leaders strengthened the PAN's electoral appeal, but the party failed to reform its internal regulations to benefit from that increased popularity.

Overall in assessing the party's political abilities, Mizrahi concludes that PAN leaders have demonstrated they are better managers in the sense of achieving integrity and efficiency, but lack a sensitivity to and ability to address the political side of politics. As she points out, they are able to win elections, but quickly distance themselves from the very public which has made their electoral success possible. Leadership tensions accentuate their political problems. Once in office, the newcomers tend to ignore longtime party activists and thus support from that core group is lukewarm. She correctly concludes that while the party's internal divisions are not as sharp as the other two leading parties (PRI and PRD), the PAN nevertheless clings to too many traditions from the past. Most of Vicente Fox's problems can be foretold from this work. Mizrahi accurately argues that the fate of the PAN as a national governing party is central to the fate of Mexican democracy.

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Electoral Competition and Institutional Change in Mexico. By Caroline C. Beer. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. Pp. xiv, 194. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $45.00 cloth; $20.00 paper.

The central claim of Caroline Beer's interesting new book is that the rise of electoral competition "has important institutional consequences" (p. 2) which strengthen legislatures, alter patterns of political recruitment, reinforce trends toward decentralization, and in general improve the quality of governance. This claim reverses the usual direction of causation, focusing on how institutional design sets up incentives that either strengthen or weaken governmental accountability. Instead, Beer focuses on how competitive elections create incentives for institutional reform. The empirical basis for these claims is subnational (state-level) governments in Mexico. Broad similarities in the structure of these subnational governments—all legislatures are unicameral, relatively small, and elected via a mix of proportional representation and plurality—allow Beer to argue that variation in local competition rather than institutional differences explain the evolution of her dependent variables. The book is well written and draws upon new sources of data about variation in the evolution of local democracy and institutional development in Mexico.

Nevertheless, the components of her argument do not all achieve the same level of success. The strongest chapters utilize different data sources (case studies of three states and Beer's own survey of local congressmen in eighteen states) to argue that electoral competition does in fact lead to increased legislative autonomy, incentives to capture more resources for the legislature, and increased legislative activity. Beer makes a strong argument that if these trends occur in a context which prohibits reelection of legislators, they should surely occur in contexts where legislators who

expect to return have much greater incentives to invest energy in enhancing their institutional power. The causal mechanism is plausible. Despite some weaknesses in specific data (particularly the low return rate of the congressional survey and its dependence on perceptions of the congressmen themselves), her findings are intriguing and mutually-reinforcing.

Less successful is her chapter on changes in the career paths of governors over time. Her focus on elected governors rather than candidates limits the scope of this argument to mostly PRI politicians; it is unclear whether competition has similar effects on minority parties. PAN governors in her sample are more locally oriented—but PAN candidates always had more locally oriented careers, even when they were not competitive enough to get elected. In fact, they had little opportunity to develop national careers due to their exclusion from national power. The PAN's tendency to select locally rooted candidates had little to do with levels of competition.

More importantly, candidate selection in the PRI continued even after 1994 to reflect decisions by the national political elite. In other words, the state 'cases' she uses are not truly independent cases. Instead, she shows that national elites within the PRI began to select different kinds of candidates as general competition increased. The process was largely discretionary rather than determined by the rise in competition per se, and was the subject of much debate (and consternation) within the party. Moreover, the observation of a trend toward localism depends on the existence of a previous pattern of PRI selection of nationally rooted candidates, rather peculiar to Mexico. Finally, it is not clear that locally rooted candidates (or strong local legislatures) are necessarily more accountable, honest, and efficient. Most of her findings have to do with the redistribution of power between executive and legislature, and between national and local elites rather than measuring government outputs directly.

Beer raises many of the most troubling questions herself, noting that "the precise mechanisms by which electoral competition strengthens representative institutions may be unique to Mexico" (p. 145) and that "the institutional changes resulting from electoral competition . . . may not improve the quality of democracy in all circumstances" (Ibid.). The effects of small variations in electoral competition, visible in Beer's very fine-grained analysis, may actually be overwhelmed by larger institutional differences (such as electoral systems) in cross-national analysis. It is to her credit that she acknowledges such difficulties. However, it may limit the usefulness of her work to scholars of institutional reform in other contexts.

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