Abstract
Mexican President Felipe Calderón boldly decided to confront organized drug traffickers with military support, despite prognostications that this would ignite great violence. Little academic literature comprehensively assesses the origins of his policy decision. Employing an institutional framework, this article compares Mexico’s historical and contemporary party system and law enforcement institutions to reveal their effect on Calderón’s campaign environment and public opinion, which shaped his anti-drug policy.

This paper demonstrates how Mexico’s historical party system and law enforcement institutions allowed drug trafficking to strengthen while leaving the Mexican presidency and state weaker. It argues that these institutional legacies, combined with the forces of democratization, public opinion, and United States (US) influence, resulted in Calderón’s decision. Discussion concludes with lessons learned and potential policy implications for Mexico.

Introduction
After winning Mexico’s 2006 presidential election, Felipe Calderón decided to use the military to dramatically escalate the government’s battle with organized crime and drug trafficking. This article examines the factors that led to this decision. It builds upon previous research to demonstrate that Mexico’s historical party system and law enforcement institutions allowed drug...
trafficking to strengthen while leaving the Mexican presidency and state weaker. The paper discusses how these institutional legacies collided with Mexico’s democratization, public opinion, and US influence to result in Calderón’s decision.

The decision to pursue such a confrontational policy was a risky one, as pointed out by Jorge Chabat of Mexico’s Center for Research and Teaching in Economics prior to Calderón’s election. Chabat warned that a confrontational war on drugs in Mexico would likely bring about great violence, as occurred when the Colombian government attempted a similar crackdown.1 Examining Calderón’s decision is necessary to understand both why he ran the risk of unleashing such violence and the potential policy implications for Mexico.

**Mexico Under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional**

The end of the twentieth century brought a wave of change to Latin America as nations transitioned to democratically governed societies. Mexico, however, did not become a genuine democracy until Vicente Fox’s 2000 presidential victory, which ended decades of rule under the hegemonic Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Prior to the 2000 election, Mexico’s popular elections were historically superficial, as they were prone to ballot rigging and dishonest tallying practices.2 Although opposition parties existed and were represented in Congress, their inclusion was intended to lend the appearance of credibility to Mexico’s political system rather than genuinely challenge the centrist PRI.3 This was especially true prior to the late 1980s and 1990s, which is when the PRI’s control began to weaken.

For decades, the PRI maintained control of Mexico’s government through a powerful patronage system.4 The PRI’s role was to galvanize voters, manage patronage distribution, and disseminate political messages to the public. Although the PRI possessed an aura of power, the president ultimately determined policy. This distinction kept the party at a distance from actual policymaking, weakening its power to shape government actions.5

What was able to strengthen under the PRI’s rule was organized drug trafficking. While increased violence and media attention regarding Mexico’s drug problem are a new phenomenon, drug trafficking within the country’s borders has existed for decades, with the PRI’s assistance. Reports referring to the PRI highlight some members’ belief “that cutting backroom deals with organized crime in Mexico is the best way to control violence.”6 Negotiating with organized crime constitutes a markedly different approach than disarming it—the objective expressed by Calderón’s Administration.7
A symbiotic relationship emerged between the government and the drug trafficking community. The PRI gained its legitimacy through electoral support, which traffickers could contribute. This strengthened Mexico’s one-party dominance in elections while fostering a “state sponsored racket,” which Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán-Martínez define as “informal institutions through which public officials refrain from enforcing the law or, alternatively, enforce it selectively against the rivals of a crime organization, in exchange for a share of the profits generated by the organization.”

As a hegemonic, centralized authority not threatened by other parties, the PRI and its presidents were able to control law enforcement, or lack thereof, as they pleased. Well-organized traffickers were reliable partners, and the PRI gave them favorable treatment on operating licenses, and in some instances integrated them into governmental agencies. Drug lords even appeared in public with elected officials, including at the wedding of governors’ children. Mexico existed in a state of “pax mafia.”

Clientelism under the PRI reign also extended to civilian law enforcement, which has historically been a weak institution that has failed to gain the trust of Mexican citizens. In past years, politicians have used police forces as a political tool, sometimes to employ violence against citizens. The corrupt character of civilian law enforcement further cemented citizen distrust in the institution. George Grayson provides an overview of Mexican law enforcement’s corruption in the context of the Federal Security Directorate (DFS), an elite police force also involved in intelligence activities:

[The] DFS epitomized the worst in police forces. It recruited poorly educated individuals, mostly men aged 30 to 45; its roster included both civilians and military personnel; it demanded that operatives show loyalty to their individual sponsors, thus privileging personal commitments over institutional loyalties; it paid relatively low salaries and turned a blind eye when members supplemented their incomes by trafficking in drugs, extorting money, or selling protection to hapless businessmen and prostitutes.

Eventually, the DFS was disbanded precisely because of its corrupt character. However, other federal, civilian law enforcement agencies have been discredited for similar reasons. The Federal Judicial Police and Federal Highway Police, for example, were charged with torture and drug trafficking offenses.

Due to law enforcement corruption, drug lords such as Sinaloa leader
El Chapo could remain safe; El Chapo supposedly disbursed five million dollars monthly to bribe police and other officials.\textsuperscript{16} Police susceptibility to bribes increases in institutions where resources and a culture of professionalism are lacking. This was the case with Mexican police forces, which have been consistently under-paid, under-trained, and under-equipped, contributing to a sense that serving on the force is not a professional career.\textsuperscript{17} Mexico’s contemporary law enforcement remains ineffective as a result of this history.

**Democratization: the PRI’s Decline and the Challenge of Organized Crime**

In the 1980s and 1990s, the PRI’s grip on power began to loosen. During its leadership, the PRI broadcasted messages outward rather than bringing them in from lower party levels.\textsuperscript{18} This is distinctly different than a party that relays citizen concerns up the chain of command to influence presidential policies. Such a process risks alienating the citizenry, which was likely compounded by Mexican presidents’ free reign—restricted only by a six-year term limit—under the PRI regime.\textsuperscript{19} After decades in power, the PRI’s dominance weakened due to internal party conflict and Mexico’s economic crisis, along with the resulting transition towards a market economy.\textsuperscript{20}

In response, the party system began to shift toward genuine democracy. The center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) rose as legitimate challengers to the PRI. A larger and stronger plurality of party representation in the legislature reflected the increased competition and presidential limitations.\textsuperscript{21} For example, even prior to complete democratic transition, President Ernesto Zedillo—a member of the PRI—had difficulty passing reforms without a PRI majority in the legislature.\textsuperscript{22}

The PRI’s fragmentation also impaired the Mexican government’s ability to collude with and control organized crime. Democratization led to the collapse of the state-sponsored racket when the hegemonic PRI fell and could no longer shield traffickers from law enforcement. Increased violence resulted as cartels fought to assert their control against a state intent on enforcing the law.\textsuperscript{23} This is an ironic effect of democratization, given that democracy is often seen as the end of the road, the ideal state.

Former Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín referred to democracy as what “cures, feeds, and educates.”\textsuperscript{24} However, democratization led to the collapse of the PRI patronage system, which opened a power vacuum that organized crime filled and used to develop a parallel, informal authority.\textsuperscript{25} During his visit to Zitacuaro in Mexico, William Finnegan witnessed
cartels’ capacity to establish such authority. Finnegan offers Mexican citizen testimonies that exemplify how cartels’ power has permeated society. Much of his article discusses one cartel, *La Familia*, which provides employment and help for those in need. If residents in their territory fall ill, but are without the financial resources to seek medical assistance, the cartel pays for the necessary hospitalization and medical care.  

Some Mexican residents even associate cartels with modernity and progress. “They’re a second law[,]” a schoolteacher in Zitacuaro said of *La Familia*, ‘Maybe the first law.”

Such good deeds as those described by Finnegan are likely not done for the greater good of society, but rather to establish cartels’ authority and popularity in a given territory. To maintain their prominence, cartels need to establish informal mechanisms of control, such as by extorting local businesses. The cartels’ extortion system challenges the Mexican government’s authority by establishing a parallel tax system, which places a burden on small businesses. Cartels’ provision of services threatens to legitimize illicit organizations that, unlike the government, are not accountable to the people, and are thus unreliable and prone to discriminate against those that do not obey their orders.

**Calderón’s Decision to Dismantle Organized Crime**

Mexico’s transition to democracy began with former President Vicente Fox, who attempted to reinvigorate the war on drugs after years of PRI collusion with traffickers. Upon taking office, Calderón could choose either to continue with this effort or not to advance it further. Selecting the latter would have risked sending a message to traffickers and Mexican citizens that the government was either incapable of, or indifferent to, ending the drug trafficking challenge. It also would have bolstered the growing perception that increased violence was undermining the state.

Using military force is a visible and traditional manner to assert authority, which Calderón chose to demonstrate he was the commander in chief. His need to assert this authority resulted from democratization and his election environment. While democratization strengthened Mexico’s party system, it diminished presidential power. Also, Calderón’s victory was contested as he superseded his 2006 presidential opponent by an extremely thin margin – one percentage point. Calderón’s opponent, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, did not quietly accept defeat. Instead, Obrador engaged in five months of protest that continued until inauguration day. Drug trafficking presented a highly visible opportunity for Calderón to assert himself and gain public support.
Calderón apparently took public opinion into consideration in deciding to run on a law and order platform – a position which he then acted upon in office by using the military to fight drug trafficking. In 2005, when Calderón was running for office, 71 percent of people living in urban areas reported feeling insecure in their cities of residence.\(^{35}\) Drug trafficking was of particular concern amongst citizens around this time. According to a 2006 poll by one of Mexico’s most circulated newspapers, *El Universal*, nine out of 10 people considered drug trafficking a serious problem.\(^{36}\)

Results from 2006 exit polls corroborate that Calderón was in touch with voter priorities: the area of highest concern for Calderón’s supporters was insecurity.\(^{37}\) Only four days into his campaign, Calderón stated that he would be the drug traffickers’ worst nightmare, as he would fight against the danger that drugs and alcohol present.\(^{38}\) Once in office, he fulfilled this campaign promise. Rather than allowing drug trafficking to persist in a controlled manner in exchange for political support, the Calderón Administration has tried to fragment cartels. This decision received early support: Calderón’s public approval ratings stood at 68 percent in April 2007,\(^{39}\) despite the controversial circumstances of his election.

**Calderón’s Decision to Use a Military Approach**

Local government was unprepared to handle the task of managing organized drug trafficking, due to PRI policies that constrained development. The PRI concentrated expenditures at the federal level for years.\(^{40}\) This limited Calderón’s resources, since local police were “starved to dysfunction” and likewise unprepared to combat organized crime.\(^{41}\) The military was left as Calderón’s sole viable option to combat drug trafficking.

Additionally, after years of PRI-fueled corruption, the Mexican public does not hold law enforcement in high regard. There is a widespread fear among citizens “that the police may be in league with the criminals.”\(^{42}\) According to *Latinobarómetro*, a top surveyor of public opinion in the region, the percentage of Mexican citizens expressing no confidence in the police has oscillated between 48, 34, and 37 percent for the years 2005, 2006, and 2008 respectively.\(^{43}\) The highest level of mistrust in the police over these three years preceded Calderón’s presidency. Given Calderón’s slim victory and the changing party system dynamics that weakened the presidential institution, his decision to reform the police and rely on the military to combat trafficking is logical. It is also difficult to fight a challenge with an institution not seen as legitimate.
Calderón’s decision to use the military was also influenced by the nature of the drug trafficking problem, which requires the government to confront a well-rooted and well-organized force. Cartels use sophisticated weaponry that is significantly more powerful than what the police forces possess. This has contributed to great violence that challenges the state’s authority:

One of the most critical elements in the decision to use the military was the amount of violence between the election and when we took over, a senior presidential adviser said. The executions, the decapitations, the confrontations between the drug gangs [gave rise to]…a perception in society of lawlessness, that there was no state.

Strengthening the law enforcement system will be a long process. Therefore, “while even Mexican military elites caution against involving the military in policing drug trafficking in the medium-to-long run, they believe it is the only short-term option available for President Calderón to establish social order.” It is also a policy that Mexico’s northern neighbor historically supports.

US influence was a likely factor in Calderón’s decision to use the military: The US government has been involved directly or indirectly in Mexican counter-drug efforts since the beginning of the twentieth century. This is a natural development given Mexico’s geographic proximity, the resulting shared economic and political concerns, and the high drug consumption rate in the United States.

As early as World War II, US policy has been attempting to “twist the arm of Mexican policy makers to curb the export of illegal substances.” A US-approved policy on a controversial, cross-border issue – which military intervention in drug trafficking was – could improve Mexico’s relations with its powerful neighbor.

US foreign aid requirements create another powerful incentive for strong anti-drug efforts. Since the 1980s, the US has required nations with drug production and trafficking issues to report adequate efforts at drug curtailment in order to receive foreign aid. Mexico and Colombia are included on the list of nations that must fully cooperate with US narcotic reduction goals to qualify for foreign aid. Colombia lost its certification in 1997, and the subsequent aid withdrawal likely contributed to destabilizing and discouraging financial investment in its economy. Although Mexico never lost its certification under
the PRI leadership, corruption related to drug trafficking was a source of tension between the US and Mexico. Calderón’s confrontational approach to uprooting drug traffickers represents an attempt to distinguish his leadership from previous administrations and send a cooperative signal to the US.

In October 2007, almost immediately after Calderón took office and increased the use of force against drug traffickers, the US Congress passed the Mérida Initiative. Its passage demonstrates that Mexico received increased foreign aid following its implementation of measures that the US traditionally supports. Critics branded the initiative as a “Colombianization of Mexico,” as it seeks to militarize law enforcement to fight the drug war, with the US providing a substantial amount of financial aid. Despite efforts by the US Congress to earmark funding for “softer” items like institution building and anti-corruption efforts, only $50 million of the $1.3 billion in Mérida Initiative funding over fiscal years 2008 through 2010 has been allocated towards the non-security focused Economic Support Fund. The remaining $1.28 billion has been appropriated to the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) accounts.

Cooperation and diplomacy on the part of both countries are necessary to resolve drug trafficking and related violence. Demand for drugs in the US fuels Mexican production and trafficking to satisfy the cross-border consumption. Additionally, 93 percent of the firearms recovered by the Mexican government in 2008 alone originated in the US. Calderón could not assume that choosing a policy in line with the US’ preference would prompt more stringent arms control. However, his strategy could represent a cooperative move made with the hope that the US would make such a concession.

**Looking Forward**

*Gauging Calderón’s Policy Via Public Opinion*

There are many ways to assess a policy’s effects, but public opinion remains an important indicator. Domestic perceptions were a contributing factor to Calderón’s policy decision, which he determined at a time when Mexicans were concerned with security and drug trafficking. If the public deems the government’s war on drug traffickers unsuccessful, the Mexican state stands to be discredited as a crime controller. This result would reinforce organized drug traffickers’ strength, as they would be seen as having won the battle and able to continue their illegal activities.

Though the policy’s effectiveness may take years to gauge, early indications show that the Mexican public largely supports Calderón’s strategy.
According to an April 2010 Mitofsky report, 47 percent of Mexicans consider the government-instituted operations to fight organized crime a success. Additionally, 74 percent of Mexicans still believe that the army is the institution to combat drug trafficking, despite a slight decrease from earlier poll numbers.

Despite this early support, public opinion may shift toward disapproval if the current violence levels continue. Violence has increased markedly since Calderón’s inauguration. In 2009, the number of drug-related causalities reached 6,587, an increase of over 500 percent from 2001. However, administration officials believe this may be an indication that organized crime groups are losing their control over the state. Such visible conflict could also contribute to a public impression that the government is actively addressing the drug trafficking challenge, which would help strengthen the state’s legitimacy.

Another potential implication of Calderón’s policy, and the uptick in conflict, could be a public desire to return to a policy of colluding with drug traffickers as a way to minimize violence. Whether either side would accept this retreat is debatable. Negotiations with cartels would also represent a step backwards for the Calderón Administration, which has invested great effort in defeating organized drug trafficking. It would also send the undesirable signal that cartels overpower the state.

The Importance of Building Civilian Law Enforcement Capacity

Mexico’s contemporary law enforcement remains weak because of its history. Its lack of resources and professionalism, combined with endemic police corruption, has resulted in low citizen confidence in local and federal level forces. This institutional weakness contributed to Calderón’s decision to use military force to fight drug trafficking. After all, as Ángel Gustavo López-Montiel stated, even “after painful experiments with military, police, and civilian commands, public safety remains the weakest and most vulnerable aspect of every local administration.”

While Calderón initially relied on the military for public safety, he is now working to improve civilian law enforcement. For example, he initiated “Operation House-Cleaning” to remove corrupt public officials, including some from police forces, that were colluding with cartels to thwart Administration anti-drug efforts. Calderón also restructured the federal police units to create a single agency, using Spanish and French forces as examples, in hopes of improving the institution and increasing its professionalism. Additional efforts to improve civilian law enforcement include the creation of a new national database to facilitate information and intelligence sharing...
and the provision of federal subsidies to incentivize state and municipal units to meet certain standards. Calderón has even attempted to strengthen the civilian police forces by integrating military personnel. Military forces, fearful of downgrading their benefits and reputations, resisted this move. This recalcitrance underscores the negative reputation that continues to plague civilian law enforcement.

However, despite these efforts, much work remains. As recently as October 2008, members of the Federal Office of Special Investigations of Organized Crime (SIEDO) were dismissed for their role in selling anti-drug information. Civilian law enforcement reform remains important because informal institutions often supplement weak ones; “if people don’t trust the police or courts, crime groups will fill those roles.” As the second democratically elected President, Calderón bears the burden of reversing public opinion and the mistrust in the formal institutions that was so prevalent at the time of his election.

The Importance of Strengthening Formal Institutions

If the government can incorporate more citizens into the formal sector, establish itself as a legitimate force to tackle illicit activities, and create a more equitable society with opportunities for citizens, drug traffickers will lose a key resource. However, as long as the formal economy and institutions do not offer a good alternative to illicit activities, people will continue selling drugs despite the increasing risks because the drug trade is extremely profitable. By fostering a more equitable society and a more robust formal economy, the government can diminish incentives for people to engage in drug trafficking as a means to make a living.

Also important for Mexico’s future is the manner in which it invests government funding. An emphasis on security spending can divert funding from other important streams such as education, health, and infrastructure. These are areas in which future dividends are reaped, since they support human capital development. How the Mexican state balances these investments in light of the drug trafficking issue will have future consequences for the state’s ability to advance its economy and society. Security spending is critical to combat organized crime and its associated violence. Concurrent investment in aforementioned budget items that support citizen development, as well as in job creation, is essential to incorporate citizens into the formal sector and reduce incentives to enter the profitable drug trade.
Conclusion

Before Calderón took office, there were predictions that aggressive anti-drug policies would cause violence as the Colombian drug war had.69 Due to years of collusive coexistence with the hegemonic PRI, drug cartels were highly entrenched in Mexican society. Despite the challenge involved, Calderón made confronting the cartels a priority for several reasons.

Mexico’s party system was historically weak and dominated by one hegemonic entity. Its collapse initiated a contemporary system with increased congressional and party system strength, which in turn weakened the presidency.70 The PRI regime, which allowed traffickers to establish their networks, also planted the seeds for violence when it fell from prominence and its protection for cartels vanished. Cartels needed to fight to assert their control against a state intent on enforcing the law.71 Years of corruption, collusion, and growing drug trafficking violence created a perception of insecurity amongst citizens.

Understanding why Calderón selected the military as a main component of his policy requires consideration of the other independent and intervening variables this article examines. Mexican civilian law enforcement still struggles against long-standing deficiencies related to its general lack of preparation and professionalism. Past party system legacies contributed to weak localities with long established cartels; therefore, a prepared police force was needed to support Calderón’s policy. Since the existing police force lacked such preparation, the military was a viable alternative.

This approach aligns with historical US preference, a strong intervening variable explored in this article. Given the US’ historical involvement in Mexican drug policy and its preference for a militarized anti-drug strategy, its influence stands out as a likely contributor to the policy selection. Relations with the US also occupied a place on the 2006 Presidential agenda, likely influencing Calderon’s decision further.72

Calderón’s decision also coincides with Mexican public opinion trends. Prior to his election, insecurity and crime, in addition to economic concerns, were citizens’ main preoccupations.73 Early in Calderón’s campaign, the Mexican newspaper El Universal published a survey indicating that drug trafficking was a serious public concern.74 Domestic opinion also supported military involvement given low confidence levels in police forces, and the public continues to support this method.75 Noting the policy’s articulation as a response to public opinion is not to distinguish it as the only or best way forward, but rather to demonstrate the link between Calderon’s decisions and
the citizens he represents – a necessity, given Mexico’s recent transition to a democracy.

Examining Calderón’s policy origins also highlights lessons learned. Mexico demonstrates the danger of centrally concentrated power and resources. Despite Eduardo Medina-Mora Icaza’s statement that the Administration would prefer anti-drug efforts to be a police force issue, the PRI apparatus left local levels unable to wage the drug trafficking fight. In fact, democratization allowed drug traffickers to fill the local-level vacuum that was created when the hegemonic PRI authority was removed, which presents an additional challenge to resolving the drug trafficking problem.

Decreasing organized drug trafficking strength would benefit the Mexican government and prevent it from being discredited as unable to control crime. It would also provide it more flexibility in allocating funding away from security efforts as well as in setting the tone of the nation’s policy agenda. Determining the policy’s success or failure remains to be seen, as Mexico’s battle against organized drug traffickers is a fluid phenomenon with effects that cannot yet be comprehensively assessed. What can be explained, and what this article has outlined, are the factors that led to the policy’s emergence, lessons learned, and potential implications for Mexico.

Endnotes
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19 Philip, “Presidency, Parties and Democratization,” 132.
20 Philip, “Presidency, Parties and Democratization,” 140.
22 Domínguez, “Scholarly Study,” 399-400.
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71 Snyder, Durán-Martínez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence?,” 265.
74 Zavala Rojas.
75 “Percepción Ciudadana Sobre La Seguridad En Mexico.”
76 Quinones, “State of War,” 79.
77 Finnegan, “Letter from Mexico,” 44.