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[Review of: J.I. Domínguez, K.F. Greene, C.H. Lawson, A. Moreno (2015) Mexico's Evolving Democracy: A Comparative Study of the 2012 Elections]

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Book Review

– *Mexico's Evolving Democracy: A Comparative Study of the 2012 Elections,*
  edited by Jorge I. Domínguez, Kenneth F. Greene, Chappell H. Lawson,
  Alejandro Moreno. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Why did the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* that had governed Mexico in
authoritarian fashion until 2000 re-emerge victoriously in the 2012 presidential
elections? And what implications does the PRI's return to federal power have
for Mexican democracy? These are the overarching questions that guide this
edited volume, in which sixteen scholars from Mexico and the U.S. collaborat-
ed. The authors draw on the tools of quantitative political science and base
their analysis on a unique data source: the Mexico 2012 Panel Study (https://
mexicopanelstudy.mit.edu/about), a survey research project for which a repre-
sentative sample of voters was interviewed at the beginning of the electoral
campaign and again shortly after the election. This setup makes it possible to
investigate systematically if and why voters changed their mind about the can-
didates in the run-up to the election; whether they were influenced by cam-
paign messages, or by gifts and favours; which issues weighed on their minds
as they evaluated their options; and how deep voter attachment to political par-
ties runs. The volume includes chapters on electoral regulation, campaign and
media effects, clientelism, the impact of violence, as well as on the importance
of television and social media. In terms of outlook and approach, the book con-
tinues in the footsteps of its predecessors (Domínguez, & Lawson, 2004, on the
2000 presidential election; Domínguez, Lawson, & Moreno, 2009, on the 2006
election). All of these volumes aim to speak to scholars looking for an in-depth
analysis of Mexican democracy, but also to political scientists with a broader
interest in elections and campaigns.

Overall, the chapters of the volume suggest that Mexican voters evaluate
their options in much the same way as voters in other democracies. The authors
argue that a desire for competent and effective governance, rather than authori-
tarian tendencies among the electorate, is the primary reason why the PRI was
able to win back the presidency. Drawing on survey data, the authors find that
Mexican voters are strongly committed to the principles of electoral democra-
cy, but that they are deeply dissatisfied with how it has worked in practice.
Even though favourable television coverage for the PRI's candidate, Enrique

Peña Nieto, as well as clientelism influenced the election, these irregularities are insufficient to explain the outcome. Ultimately, so the authors argue, voters were given few good choices and – despite reservations about the PRI's past record – they were underwhelmed by the alternatives presented by the other major parties: Andrés Manuel López Obrador for the leftist PRD and Josefina Vásquez Mota for the centre-right PAN. In a climate where a majority of voters was gravely concerned about the direction of the country and the economy, the PRI's past record became an asset, rather than a liability. Its campaign cantered around the argument that it would be able to govern competently. Instead of formulating concrete policy proposals, the PRI focused almost exclusively on the promise to deliver better results than the incumbent PAN administration. Peña Nieto 'seemed to have no interest in, and no talent for, policy positioning or analysis' (p. 260). In the final chapter of the book, Jorge Domínguez, a veteran in the study of Mexican politics, reiterates his belief that the voters are the heroes of Mexico's democratic transition and have proven themselves to be 'prudent democrat[s]' by pushing for change through institutional channels. Domínguez concludes by expressing a hope: 'May President Enrique Peña Nieto earn the same respect as a constitutional democrat as his predecessors, and may he best them as a successful policy wonk' (p. 268).

The book went to the press at a time when there was still hope for a 'Mexican moment', a set of reforms that would reinvigorate the economy and provide an impetus for addressing poverty and inequality. This hope has since faded, and the president's approval ratings have fallen to a dismal 12 per cent as of January 2017. In an opinion poll commissioned by the newspaper *Reforma*, 78 per cent of respondents state that the economic situation in the country has deteriorated during the past 12 months and 82 per cent disapprove of the way the president has handled the economy.[1] On the eve of the Trump presidency, which appears poised to disrupt U.S.-Mexican relations, Mexicans are thus again saddled with the ineffective leadership they had sought to reject during the 2012 presidential election. Convincing alternatives continue to be difficult to come by, though, and the same poll identifies Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who ran unsuccessfully in 2006 and 2012, as the current frontrunner in the race for the presidency. While the hopeful outlook expressed in the book's conclusion appears to have been dampened, a warning expressed in the book's introduction is all the more relevant: 'The most serious risk, then, is cartelization of the electoral sphere, in which competition remains real but ordinary citizens have little say over who competes.' (p. 25).

A new panel study for the 2018 presidential election is already in preparation.

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Note

1. *Reforma* (http://gruporeforma-blogs.com/encuestas/, accessed 19 January 2017).

References

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