LEGISLATIVE PARTIES IN THE MEXICAN CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES
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NÚMERO 93

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LEGISLATIVE PARTIES IN THE MEXICAN CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES
Introduction

Legislative parties have not been treated as separate subjects in the study of Mexican politics. Political parties are regularly regarded as monolithic units with an undifferentiated internal structure. And yet, legislative parties are clearly distinguishable organizations with members, goals, leaders, and resources. Even more, institutional theories explaining the practice of presidentialism in Mexico build on assumptions about the operation of legislative parties, which basically remain unaccounted for. Unrestrained presidential government has not only depended on the control of a single-party—namely the PRI—over the whole policy-making circuit as defined by the Constitution—the presidency, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Also, there are other conditions pertaining to the behavior of the legislative PRI, such as discipline and presidential leadership (Weldon 1997, Casar 1998).

Over the long period of PRI dominance of Mexican politics the study of the Congress could have been exhausted by the study of the legislative PRI. The PRI majority monopolized the constitutional powers formally residing in the two chambers of Congress. However, the persistent erosion of the PRI’s political dominance over the last two decades reached a turning point in the 1997 mid-term congressional elections. As the PRI was unable to win the majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the legislative opposition parties have come to the fore. Accordingly, explaining party discipline and subordination to the president of the Republic in the legislative PRI is no longer sufficient. We also need an explanation that accounts for patterns of behavior of the opposition legislative parties.

The main thrust of this paper is that these problems are just two faces of the same coin. Building on the theory of political ambition (Schlesinger 1991), it assumes that the collective behavior of legislative parties responds primarily to the career advancement strategies of individual legislators. Legislative parties in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies may pursue conflicting political goals, but their individual members are elected into office and seek the advancement of their political careers under the same institutional framework.

The central argument of this paper is that legislative parties act as agents of the national party organizations that control both the nomination to office in the Chamber and the future careers of lame-duck legislators, who are Constitutionally prevented from running for reelection in consecutive terms. To develop this argument the paper is organized as follows. The first part deals with the effect of electoral institutions on the career strategies of politicians seeking and holding office in the Chamber. The second shows how legislative parties are instrumental to the advancement of the career goals of individual legislators. The third section treats the
Electoral institutions and the political strategies of legislators

The theory of political ambition asserts that the behavior of politicians is a response to their office goals (Schlesinger 1991). In achieving elective office politicians can depend on two factors—their individual reputation before the electorate and the collective reputation of the party that nominates them. The significance of the individual-reputation component is defined by the extent to which the personal characteristics of candidates matter in elections. The collective component of a politician’s chances to achieve office is determined by the importance of the party label in elections. In general, both the individual and the collective components are regularly present in elections, but what is uncertain is their relative significance in determining a politician’s chances to gain elective office. The key variables defining the relative importance of the party label versus the personal vote are the institutions that regulate competition for office between and within parties (Shugart and Carey 1991, Morgenstern 1997).

Members of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies (MCDs) are elected through a system that combines single-member and multi-member districts. There are 300 diputados uninominales elected by plurality in single-member districts and 200 diputados plurinominales elected in five multi-member districts. The number of single-member districts was fixed at 300 in 1977. Multi-member districts, however, have experienced important changes in number and size. Legislation passed in 1977 set up four multi-member districts with a magnitude of 25 each. Further changes in 1987 introduced one more multi-member district and increased their magnitude to 40, bringing about an overall rise of 100 multi-member districts (Nacif 1997).

Multi-member districts have the same district magnitude, with each of them being entitled to elect 40 MCDs. Single-member and multi-member districts are geographically overlapping and tied by the same ballot. The voter casts one single ballot subject to a double counting that produces two seat-relevant vote totals. The first vote total determines who wins the plurality in the single-member district. The second vote total serves to allocate seats in multi-member districts. Seats in multi-member districts are assigned according to each party’s share of the total vote cast.

There is a third vote-significant total at national level to determine which parties are entitled to take part in the allocation of seats disputed in multi-member districts. The electoral threshold is two percent of the national vote. The current level was established in 1996, rising from the previous 1.5 level introduced in 1971.
within the district, this being the reason why they are also named proportional representation seats.

There is a significant difference between single-member and multi-member districts. This has to do with the probability for individual candidates to gain office in the Chamber. Candidates in single-member districts depend directly on the decisions taken by the electorate. In the case of seats disputed in multi-member districts, the likelihood to win office also hinges on another factor – the candidate’s position in the party slate. As the contest for proportional representation seats operates under closed lists, the candidate’s position in the party slate is a decision taken in advance by the party organization which the electorate cannot alter.

One important restraint on individual politicians seeking office in the Chamber is that political parties have control of access to the ballot. The nomination by an officially registered political party is a legal prerequisite to contest for federal office. By banning independent candidacies this arrangement provides a source of power to political parties. Gaining official registration as a political party is a costly and time-consuming process that prevents politicians from seeking office in the Chamber outside registered parties. Electoral legislation also has granted political parties complete discretion to establish their own nominating procedures. Formal nominating rules vary substantially from party to party. However, there seems to be a substantial degree of centralization in Mexican political parties with National Executive Committees (NECs) controlling the assignment of the most valuable party candidacies. As I argue later, this pattern originally derives from high levels of office rotation imposed by the constitutional banning of consecutive reelection to the Chamber.

The institution of non-consecutive reelection is another important constraint that molds the career strategies of politicians seeking and holding office in the Chamber. A forceful break of one term out of office clearly discourages legislators from pursuing reelection as a long-term career goal. To complete a three-term career in the Chamber takes 15 years, spending six of them out of office. Available information confirms that the prospect of three years in the wilderness for every term of service prevent politicians from pursuing long careers in the Chamber (see Table 1). In the period from 1985-1991 an average of less than ten percent of outgoing legislators went back to the Chamber of Deputies after the compulsory one-term break (Lujambio 1995). The return rate dropped to non-significant levels for those serving a third term in the Chamber.

2 For an analysis of changes in the PRI nominating rules and practices see Langston 1997.
3 The constitutional amendment prohibiting the consecutive reelection of elective officials serving in the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, state legislatures and municipal presidencies was introduced in 1933. See Nacif 1997 for an analysis of the causes and consequences of this institutional change.
Non-consecutive reelection also shapes the relationship between members of the chamber of Deputies and their constituencies. According to Shugart and Carey (1992) the probability that voting behavior being affected by the personal characteristics of candidates is associated with the magnitude of electoral districts. The larger the number of seats elected within a single territorial constituency, the less important is the personality of candidates as a factor in mobilizing the electorate.

A large district magnitude might help to explain why the identity of the 40 candidates appearing in the party list for each multi-member district have no significant influence in voters' decisions. Nonetheless, the same theory would lead us to expect a significant personal-vote component in the 300 single-member districts of the Chamber. But the inability to run for reelection inhibits the development of permanent links between incumbent legislators and their constituents. Even more, since candidates running for the Chamber are constantly changing, voters are unable to gather sufficient information about their personal characteristics. Opinion poll surveys demonstrate that the vast majority of Mexicans do not know the name of their district's outgoing MCD nor that of the candidate they are voting for (Beltrán 1997). Clearly, party labels are the most significant influence on their voting decisions even though MCDs are elected in single-member districts. The overwhelming importance of party labels in elections to the Chamber renders individual politicians dependent on the party organization to achieve their career goals.

The prohibition of consecutive reelection also affects the way parties nominate candidates to the Chamber. By removing the incumbent from the competition for party nominations, non-consecutive reelection provides NECs with an open slate of candidacies to allocate among aspiring politicians. Of course, the ability of NECs to control the nomination process is restricted by nominating lobbies linked to the party organization. The characteristics of nominating lobbies vary from party to party. The PRI, for instance, operates through a system of quotas whereby affiliated unions, state party organizations and other political associations compete for party nominations (Langston 1998). Nevertheless, non-consecutive reelection enhances the potential influence of NECs in the assignment of slots in the party list of candidates, allowing for a considerable degree of centralization in the nomination process (Nacif 1997).

The prohibition of consecutive reelection instills what Schlesinger (1991) termed "progressive ambition" -the aspiration to attain an office more important than the one a politician is currently seeking or holding. Progressive ambition among MCDs is encouraged by high turnout rates in other elective offices. In fact, all elective offices in Mexico have 100 percent turnout rate as they are either bound by
non-consecutive reelection or subject to a one-term life limit.\(^4\) Given the position of the Senate and state governorships in the hierarchy of office opportunities, they represent the most attractive elective office goals of MCDs.\(^5\) However, MCDs also target offices of similar status such as the mayoralties of important municipios and leading positions in state legislatures and the Mexico City Assembly. As part of their strategies to survive in politics, MCDs often seek reelection for a second term because of the Chamber's career potential.

The political strategies of MCDs concentrate on opportunities where their chances to gain office are higher. The probability of achieving office depends primarily on the electoral support for the party label. The reputation of individual candidates plays no significant role in the races for the Senate, state legislatures and the Mexico City Assembly. The personal vote is arguably gaining a new significance as levels of competitiveness rise in gubernatorial races. Accordingly, individual reputations are becoming more important in the quest for party nominations. Nevertheless, this is unlikely to substantially change the political strategies of MCDs. Making a name in state politics usually requires more than a spell in the Chamber. Even more, a successful bid for state governor cannot depend solely on the candidate's individual reputation; the backing of a vote-winning party label is necessary.

The party organization is also important in terms of the number of opportunities for career advancement. Parties are organizational networks linking rotating offices within which politicians advance their careers. The political ambitions of MCDs focus on offices where their party has either incumbency status or is well positioned to mount a realistic challenge to the incumbent. The larger the electoral strength of a political party across federal states the greater the number of available office opportunities for MCDs to capture.

In summary, although non-consecutive reelection has a dispersing effect on career goals, MCDs can still be characterized as seeking external promotion to other elective office opportunities. While their office goals may vary substantially, the electoral strategies of MCDs tend to be very similar. MCDs depend on the party reputation to achieve office and advance their careers. Accordingly, MCDs do not have electoral incentives to go against the party line. On the contrary, we should expect party leaders to reward legislators serving to fulfill the party's collective interest. Uncooperative legislators may face powerful sanctions in terms of career opportunities.

\(^4\) The president and state governors are bound by a life limit of one term. The prohibition of consecutive reelection holds for other elective offices including federal senators and deputies, state deputies, and municipal presidents and counselors.

\(^5\) Available data on career paths show that over the period from 1982 to 1991, more than one third of incoming senators came straight from the Chamber. As for state governors, two out of ten had service in the Chamber as last office experience (Nacif 1996).
Legislative parties and the national party organization

Drawing on Cox and McCubbins (1991) we can define legislative parties as the organizations through which legislators solve a collective action problem—that of improving the career advancement probabilities of all legislators from the same party. The relative significance of the individual and collective components in the attempt to achieve office affects the cohesiveness of these organizations. Cooperation with or defection from the legislative party can be viewed as part of the strategies of legislators to maximize their chances of achieving their career goals.

Where career advancement hinges on making a personal mark in the opinion of current or future constituencies, cooperation with the party is subordinated to cultivating an individual reputation, and therefore legislative party organizations tend to be decentralized. Legislators need to preserve a substantial degree of independence from the party leadership in order to strengthen links with specific constituencies. In contrast, where the chances of legislators to survive in politics and advance their careers are mostly dependent on the party's collective reputation, there are grounds for the development of centralized party organizations (Shugart and Carey 1991). Centralization serves the purpose of providing party leaders with sufficient power to protect the collective good shared by all members of the party.

In the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, since legislators depend on the party reputation to achieve office and advance their career we should expect a high degree of centralization in legislative party organizations. Centralization serves the purpose of guaranteeing the cooperation of individual MCDs with the party's collective goals. However, legislative parties in the Chamber are temporary associations. They dismantle at the end of the three-year term as their members are not allowed to run for reelection. Why should individual MCDs cooperate with the legislative party leadership if their political futures lie outside the legislative party organization?

The political careers of politicians seeking and holding office in the Chamber do not depend on the legislative party, but on the national party organization headed by the party's NEC. Legislative parties operate in practice as agents of their respective NECs. In fact, legislative party leaders are not primarily responsible to the party's parliamentary fraction but to the NECs. NECs have the prerogative to appoint the leaders of the legislative parties. NECs delegate authority to the legislative party leadership to realize the collective interests of the national party organization.

The prerogative to appoint the legislative party leadership is a by-product of the nominating power of party NECs. NECs select the legislative leaders during the nomination process. Future legislative leaders are nominated to safe districts or top positions in the party slate of candidates in multi-member districts. The formal constitution of the legislative party leadership is announced by the party NEC some time after the elections and before the new session of the Chamber begins. The process takes place amidst much speculation by the press about possible candidates.
The names of legislative party leaders are announced to the public long before the Chamber convenes.

The PRI differs from opposition parties in one important respect, the PRI's NEC is subordinated to the president of the Republic. The Chief Executive is the head of the national organization of the PRI. He has had the power to staff the PRI's NEC, including the NEC chair (Casar 1998). This aspect of the PRI organization has rendered the PRI legislative party an agent of the president of the Republic. The administration defines the party program and the legislative party provides the changes of legislation required to carry it out.

Subordination of the PRI's NEC to the president of the Republic has been a long-standing characteristic of the PRI organization. It is probably an equilibrium sustained by the arrangement of electoral institutions. In fact, this characteristic is not completely exclusive to the PRI. In opposition parties, once the presidential candidate has been nominated, NECs is reduced to a secondary position. Presidential candidates exert substantial leverage in the nomination of party candidates to other elective offices such as the Chamber and the Senate. The NECs of opposition parties gain prominence as their presidential candidates fail to win the office. Even then, as long as unsuccessful presidential candidates have potential for the second run they remain highly influential figures within their parties.

**Legislative parties and procedural coalitions**

The Chamber is a collective decision-making body that operates through majority rule. The powers that formally rest in the Chamber as a whole are in practice exercised by coalitions of legislators forming majorities on the floor. The chamber operates through two different majorities (Jones 1968), substantive majorities passing legislation in the Chamber, and procedural majorities necessary to organize the Chamber for business. Substantive majorities basically wield the law-making authority of the Chamber. Procedural majorities organize at the beginning of the session to capture the power to structure the process of legislation and fill positions of influence within the Chamber.

Legislative parties coordinate the formation of decision-making majorities as they seek to capture the powers of the Chamber to fulfill their collective goals. When a single party has a majority of seats it can monopolize the procedural powers of the Chamber. Single-party majorities manage the assignment to positions of influence such as committee memberships and chairs and control the legislative agenda by regulating the flux of bills from committees to the floor. Single-party majorities regularly translate their procedural power into substantive power as they control the formation of law-making majorities on the floor.

In the absence of a single-party majority, a coalition of parties is necessary to organize the Chamber and pass legislation. Multi-party procedural majorities
allocate procedural advantages among members of the coalition. Members of the coalition use their procedural advantages to influence the substance of legislation. However, multi-party procedural majorities do not necessarily act together when it comes to passing legislation. Different law-making coalitions can be formed on the floor of the Chamber, even though the same multi-party procedural majority persists throughout the session.

The party system and the system of governance in the Chamber

Since legislative parties are the organizations coordinating decision-making in the Chamber, regulating the functioning of this body responds to changes in the partisan balance of power. Over the long-standing political hegemony of the PRI, the Chamber was ruled by a single-party committee—the Gran Comisión (GC). The role of the GC was that of a committee on committees. Congressional rules endowed the GC with the power to staff standing committees. The GC had no direct involvement in floor activities. Congressional rules provide that the meetings of the Chamber’s plenary be chaired by the Directive Board, composed by one chair and two secretariats. The chair of the Directive Board was charged with presiding over floor-debate and conducting roll-call voting procedures. The Directive Board has always been a rather weak body, as congressional rules have provided for the monthly renewal of both the chair and secretariats.

Members of the GC were not responsible to the Chamber’s majority. They were elected by state delegations. Congressional rules even provided that in the case of small state delegations with only two MCDs the GC representative was picked at random. The GC was not designed to operate as a party committee. Up to 1979 congressional rules did not recognize the existence of legislative parties. However, as the PRI dominated state delegations, all members of the GC were members of a single legislative party. This political fact became more important for members of the GC than their formal link to state delegations. Practice turned into law as the new parliamentary procedures enacted in 1979 (Ley Orgánica del Congreso del Unión) explicitly provided that the GC be formed by members of the majority party and chaired by the leader of that party.

6 The GC can be traced back to the rules of parliamentary procedure (Reglamento para el Gobierno Interno del Gobierno Federal) enacted in 1824. It persisted for more than one and a half centuries even though new parliamentary rules were introduced in 1897, 1934 and 1979. The dissolution of the GC was the result of the absence of single-party majority in the Chamber after the 1997 elections.

7 The Ley Orgánica of 1979 responded to the changes in the partisan composition of the Chamber brought about by the new electoral legislation introduced in 1977. The 1934 rules of
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The first attempt to regulate the operation of congressional opposition parties came with the enactment of the Ley Orgánica, following the introduction of the 1977 electoral reform. It created the figure of “parliamentary groups” to organize the congressional opposition, which grew in size and number of parties as a result of the introduction of 100 proportional representation seats. The Ley Orgánica granted parliamentary groups a minimum of rights in the law-making process, and vaguely defined the responsibility of the governing majority to provide them with offices, staff, and financial resources. The only requirement to form a parliamentary group was a minimum of four legislators, which has allowed tiny delegations of small opposition parties to operate separately as parliamentary groups.

The Ley Orgánica of the Congress did not provide any specific role in the process of governance to parliamentary groups. The GC, which began to be regarded as the embodiment of the PRI “parliamentary group”, retained its structure and powers, remaining as the traditional governing organ of the Chamber. However, as the parliamentary groups of opposition parties fought for a role in the business of the legislature, the practice of government in the house was adjusted. The congressional opposition claimed not only the right to take part in the floor debate, but also demanded its share in the system of standing committees. Accordingly, floor proceedings and committee assignments became two regular matters requiring negotiations between the PRI leadership and the parliamentary groups of opposition parties. Therefore, the exchange of procedural agreements evolved into a practice increasingly necessary to maintain the house in operation.

A further expansion of proportional representation seats from 100 to 200 in 1987 brought about an increase in the size of the parliamentary fractions of opposition parties. The pressure to reform the old system of governance based on the GC grew as the PRI suffered a substantial loss of voter support in 1988. The PRI majority in 54th Legislature (1988-1991) was reduced to only 10 votes, creating enormous difficulties in running the Chamber as the parliamentary groups of opposition parties adopted obstructionist strategies to force changes in legislation and parliamentary proceedings.

The 1991 mid-term congressional elections increased the PRI majority in the Chamber from 10 to 71 votes. But the house was ripe for reform, and the new PRI leadership made a swift move to change the prevailing governing arrangements, seeking to prevent the radical obstructionism that characterized the 54th Legislature. The PRI leadership put aside the framework provided by the congressional rules. Drawing on the practice of procedural agreements negotiated between parliamentary parties, the PRI drafted new rules for the operation and governance of the Chamber.

The “parliamentary agreements” of the 55th Legislature were hammered out first by the leaders of all parliamentary groups, and then approved by unanimity in parliamentary procedure (Reglamento para el Gobierno Interior del Congreso de la Unión) remain binding, although the Ley Orgánica has over-ruling authority.
the plenary. They consisted of a short list of basic rules. The parliamentary agreements, though not having any legal status, provided a new institutional framework for the organization of the Chamber. The central innovation was the constitution of the new Comisión de Régimen Interno y Concertación Política (CRICP) – a small committee formed basically by the coordinators of each parliamentary group, and presided over by the chair of the GC as leaders of the majority party.

The CRICP took over the authority as committee on committees formerly resting in the GC. The CRICP preserved PRI rule of the Chamber of Deputies. The leaders of the PRI presided over the new multiparty governing body, and the most important positions in the Chamber were reserved for the members of the PRI. The PRI still controlled every aspect of the law-making process. The arrangement was devised to gain the procedural collaboration of the opposition parties, without which majority rule could no longer operate. And to the extent that the reform was intended to prevent radical obstructionism from the opposition parties, it was highly successful. Furthermore, it set up a framework that facilitated the coordination of multiparty law-making coalitions, while the PRI still retained the power to produce legislative change on its own.

Despite immediate acceptance of the new parliamentary understanding in the Chamber, the CRICP is a poorly defined institution. Its decision-making and voting procedures were not properly spelt out. The constitution of the new governing committee remain ambiguous. In principle, the CRICP incorporates the leadership of all parliamentary fractions. However, the differences in size among legislative parties are huge, and therefore the vote of each party could not have the same weight. In practice, the CRICP has operated through a system of weighted voting based on the size of parliamentary fractions as floor majorities can reverse parliamentary agreements.

The 1997 mid-term elections had important consequences in terms of the Chamber’s governing arrangements. As the PRI lost its majority in the Chamber, the GC, being already reduced to a lesser status with the creation of the CRICP, received its coup de grâce. Since no party won the overall majority in the Chamber, the conditions to form the GC were not met. The PRI remained as the largest parliamentary fraction only 12 votes short of the overall majority. However, all opposition parties including PRD, PAN, PVEM and PT joined together to form a new procedural majority. The coalition was known in journalistic jargon as the G-4.

The main goal of the G-4 was to suppress the procedural advantages that the PRI enjoyed. One of its first decisions was to change the constitution of the CRICP by limiting its membership to the leaders of the five parliamentary fractions, thereby crushing PRI predominance in this body. Also, the G-4 agreed that the CRICP would be presided by an annually rotating chair and that the leaders of the three main
parliamentary fractions—PAN, PRD and PRI—would alternate throughout the three year session.

Delegation to committees

The rules governing the process of legislation in the Chamber provide that bills submitted for the consideration of the assembly be referred to committee for study and analysis before they are debated and voted on the floor. Internal procedures allow for exceptions when the Chamber determines that a bill is of "urgent and obvious resolution". However as the decision to circumvent committees requires a two-thirds majority, normally legislative proposals are not expected to reach the floor unless they have been previously examined and reported on by the relevant committee.

Committees have the power to collect information through hearings and investigations. They are also invested with the authority to draft the actual language of bills, and to report legislation to the plenary. Internal procedures also reinforce the role of committees by providing that what is debated and voted upon is the bill as reported by committee, not as it was originally introduced in the Chamber. A central feature of committees reporting legislation to the floor is that they are permanent bodies as their members enjoy security of tenure for the duration of the session. Accordingly, standing committees have jurisdiction over a specific policy area, which can be deduced from their denomination.

Staffing standing committees is perhaps the most important organizational task of legislative parties. Standing committees had to be formally constituted within the first 15 days after the session begins. Since the 1991 reform, the list of members of all standing committees, including chairs and secretariats, is drafted by the CRICP and then submitted to the plenary for discussion and approval. The party leaders sitting in the CRICP negotiate party shares of committee slots. By convention, committee slots are allocated according to party share of seats in the plenary. Proportionality however is just a rule of thumb. The PRI in the past and the G-4 coalition in 1997 have imposed some form of over-representation to guarantee control of decision-making at committee stage.

The 1991 reform of the Chamber also ended PRI monopoly over committee chairs and secretariats. Prior to 1991 the allocation of these positions was a family business sorted out through negotiations within the PRI delegation. The practice adopted after the Chamber reform was to assign committee chairs and secretariats to each party in accordance with the size of their parliamentary fraction. This process has led to intense negotiations between party leaders sitting in the CRICP.

8 Before the 54th Legislature (1991-1993) this was a prerogative of the GC.
Party leaders coordinate the assignment of committee seats, secretariats and chairs to members of their party delegation. The fact that standing committees, as their parent chamber, are reconstituted from scratch at the beginning of each session provides party leaders with enormous leverage in allocating committee slots. The absence of seniority claims or previous attachments to particular committees among incoming MCDs renders the party contingents in committees mere creatures of the leadership of the day.

Committee assignment discretion has an enormous significance in terms of the ability of standing committees to gain some degree of independence. Where standing committees have evolved into autonomous policy-making bodies, as in the US House of Representatives, one of the foundations of this development has been the custom of seniority. Seniority guarantees re-assignment to committee members and provides that chairs be given to members with the longest service on each committee (Smith and Deering 1990). Certainly, despite the system of seniority political parties are able to exert some leverage in the committee assignment process and in promotion to committee chairs (Cox and McCubbins 1991). Nevertheless, seniority rights operate as a significant institutional restraint on the party leadership.

Under PRI rule there was very little delegation of authority to committees in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies. The PRI leadership had the ability to circumvent committees to expedite the passage of legislation. Congressional rules stipulate that committee reports must have the endorsing signature of all committee members before they are referred back to the floor. When demanded by political expediency, the PRI leadership had the ability to draft committee reports and then circulate them among committee members to collect their signatures. In such cases, committees did not have to convene at all for bills to be reported back to the floor and their involvement in the process of legislation was reduced to a mere formality.9

It is difficult to say how extended this practice was. Apparently, it became less common as the involvement of opposition parties in committee activities grew. However, PRI contingents on committees worked under the close supervision of the party leadership, which had the capacity to control the timing and content of their reports. With most of the PRI legislation coming from the executive departments, the legislative PRI used Chamber committees as revising bodies (Padget 1965, de la Garza 1972, and Nacif 1995). Committees held regular meetings with administrative officials of the executive departments which had the responsibility of introducing and sponsoring changes of legislation. Amendments to executive bills at committee stage were not unusual. Committees provided an opportunity to incorporate the requests of interest groups represented in the PRI which executive officials did not take into consideration in previous stages.

9 Opposition MCDs used to complain that, as their signatures were not necessary for committee reports to reach the floor, they did not know of bills until these were referred back to the floor for debate (de la Garza 1972).
The G-4 coalition introduced some changes to the committee system. All committees were to have an equal size of 30 members each. Some committees disappeared while new ones were created. The overall number of committees, however, did not change substantially. The number of committee chairs going to the parties forming the G-4 coalition grew. More importantly, the chairs of committees dealing with crucial pieces of legislation such as the Budget and Finance committees were given to the PRD and PAN, the main parties in the G-4 coalition.

The lack of a single-party majority in the Chamber has rendered the committee stage more significant in terms of the end-result of the legislative process. The disciplined endorsement of PRI committee contingents no longer guarantees the flux of legislation from committee to the floor. For bills to be reported back to the floor the support of a multi-party majority is necessary. Accordingly, the exchange of agreements between parties to build law-making coalitions takes place at committee stage.

However, the fact that committee reports are necessarily the product of multi-party negotiations does not mean that the independent influence of standing committees on the law-making process has increased. High levels of party discipline pervade all political parties and basically the committee assignment powers of legislative party leaders remain unrestrained. Committee contingents continue to act as disciplined agents of their political parties. On issues affecting the party reputation NECs define the party's position and get directly involved in the negotiation of legislative deals. Committee contingents may contribute to define the party's position, but the party NEC takes the decision.

Where committees can have an independent influence on the process of legislation is in dealing with non-partisan policy issues. The conditions for committees to advance independent initiatives, however, are highly demanding. Committee proposals need the backing of a cross-party consensus to reach the floor and can only prosper if they are unopposed by the executive.

Agenda control

One of the crucial powers that the PRI monopolized as long as it had the majority in the Chamber was the ability to control the traffic of legislation from committees to the plenary, and the scheduling of bills on the floor. Formally, congressional rules require committees to report bills back to the floor within five days after committee referral. This restrictive provision, however, has only survived because it has been hardly enforced. In practice committees operate as filters in the legislative process.

The initiation of bills in the Chamber is a rather open procedure. The Constitution restricts the authority to introduce legislative proposals to the president of the Republic, state legislatures and MCDs, but congressional rules guarantee committee referral to every bill that comes before the floor. It is at committees that
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legislative bills are dealt with on political considerations, compensating for the relative openness of the legislative process at its initial stage.

As head of the majority party in the Chamber, the PRI legislative leader was in charge of monitoring bills through the committee system and shepherding them to the floor. The nature of his authority was procedural rather than substantive. He operated as the middleman in the regular interaction between the executive branch, where the leadership of the national party organization resides, and the legislative party. The role of the PRI legislative leader was to keep the party parliamentary fraction united around the legislative program of the president and to prevent any interference in the law-making process. In practice, his task was to provide for efficiency in delivering the legislation demanded by the president. The large legislative majorities that the PRI regularly enjoyed and complete dependence of MCDs on the party organization to continue their political careers made this task relatively easy.

Table 2 shows data on the process of legislation in the Chamber during the last three years of PRI dominance, coincident with the first half of president Zedillo's administration. The data confirm that opposition parties, specially PAN and PRD, took advantage of their ability to initiate legislation. They drafted half of the initiatives introduced to the Chamber. However, most of the bills initiated by opposition parties did not have any real chances to become law. Only a small number of these bills were actually reported to the floor. The number of bills passed by the Chamber was even smaller.

Committee reports are regularly approved by the plenary. The small difference between bills reported to the floor and bills passed by the Chamber in most cases reflected negative committee reports that the plenary endorsed. A single committee report on a specific piece of legislation might contain negative reports on other initiatives dealing with the same subject.

The control of the PRI majority over the legislative agenda was reflected in the fact that nearly every single bill introduced by the executive made its way from committee to the plenary and was finally passed by the Chamber. Executive bills amounted to 76.9 percent of total number of bills passed by the Chamber during the first half of Zedillo's administration. As the president is in practice the head of the PRI, executive departments were in charge of drafting the legislative program of the party. Accordingly, a rough estimate of PRI agenda control in the Chamber is the share of bills approved by the plenary of both the executive and PRI legislators taken together, which amounted to 83.4 percent during the 56th Legislature (1994-1997).

Table 2 separates out financial bills from other executive initiatives. There are regularly four financial bills: the Budget of the Federal Government, the Public Revenue Bill, miscellaneous changes in legislation linked to the Revenue Bill, and the Public Account Bill. This type of legislation has a special constitutional status. Financial legislation is annually recurring and by constitutional provision can only
be initiated by the president of the Republic. In the Chamber, financial bills go through the regular legislative procedure, except that they have to be scheduled according to constitutional deadlines. Non-financial executive bills provide a more accurate picture of presidential control over the Chamber’s legislative agenda. Table 2 shows that even if we take out financial legislation, executive predominance is overwhelming.

PRI legislators were not very active in promoting changes in legislation. They initiated substantially less legislation than opposition MCDs. The reasons for this pattern of behavior are two-fold. On the one side, members of the legislative PRI have no political incentives to play an active role as lawmakers competing with executive departments in the policy process. On the other side, MCDs are usually lacking in professionalism and expertise; the president of the Republic can rely on the more resourceful and technically competent administrative departments.

Table 2 also shows that more than half of the bills initiated by PRI legislators failed to pass the committee stage. This rate of committee report might seem low given the fact that the PRI had the majority in the Chamber. However, it only reflects that the initiatives of individual PRI legislators do not regularly have the backing of the party leadership. In fact they compete for it. The PRI leadership in the Chamber ensures that legislation reported by committees is compatible with the agenda and policy goals set up by the president of the Republic.

As the PRI lost its majority, the 1997 mid-term elections had important implications in terms of agenda control in the Chamber. The formation of the G-4 coalition aimed at breaking the long-lasting PRI monopoly over the legislative process in the Chamber. The criteria to organize Chamber activities was no longer the expedient delivery of the legislation demanded by the executive. Instead, the main purpose of the G-4 coalition was to enhance the influence of opposition parties in the legislative process. Although the G-4 coalition had the majority in the Chamber, it was not able to legislate by itself, for the PRI still controlled the Senate’s majority and the president has the power to veto bills passed the Congress. However, opposition parties sought to strengthen their negotiating position by capturing procedural advantages in the Chamber.

Opposition parties shared a common good in preventing that a PRI-dominated coalition gained the power to organize the Chamber. The new parliamentary organization was to allow opposition parties to push legislation through the Chamber even against the PRI position. A case in point is the initiative to reduce the Value Added Tax (VAT) from 15 to 12.5 percent in December 1997. All opposition parties backed the VAT reduction bill. The Chamber passed the initiative against the PRI vote. Subsequently, the PRI majority in the Senate rejected the bill and returned it to the Chamber. The G-4 coalition resorted to the Chamber’s right to a second closure.

\[\text{The Congress can over-ride presidential vetoes by qualified majorities of two-thirds.}\]
in the exchange of motions with the Senate, where the initiative was finally killed.\footnote{By constitutional provision a bill cannot be re-introduced during the same session after the revising chamber has rejected it for a second time.} Opposition parties anticipated that the VAT reduction bill would not be enacted. But they used their new power in the Chamber to make their mark in public opinion by putting blame on the PRI for the tough economic measures adopted by the Zedillo administration in 1995.\footnote{One of the consequences of the economic crisis set off by the devaluation of the Mexican peso in December 1994 was a substantial drop in tax collection. To correct public finances, president Zedillo sent to the Congress an initiative to increase the VAT from 10 to 15 percent. Amid widespread discontent in public opinion the bill was passed by Congress thanks to the disciplined support of the PRI majority.}

However, opposition parties did not form the G-4 coalition to deal with the PRI as a single bloc and legislate by consensus. Opposition parties individually preserved their capacity to negotiate with the PRI to pass specific pieces of legislation. In fact, as the Chamber dealt with the annually recurring financial legislation initiated by the president—the budget and public revenue bills—the G-4 coalition split. The executive hammered out a deal with the PAN leadership to form a winning coalition with the PRI in the Chamber to pass the 1998 budget and public revenue bills.

As the exchange of agreements between executive departments and opposition parties begins before the president formally initiates legislative proposals, data on the process of legislation does not fully capture the new role of opposition parties in the Chamber. Even more, it is still too early to assess the significance of the Chamber’s new partisan composition. Only one year of the session has elapsed and a number of initiatives are still pending in committee stage. Nevertheless, despite these caveats available information on the legislative process during the first year of session reflects some changes in the operation of the Chamber.

As Table 3 shows the most remarkable change has been so far a drop in the executive’s share of bills reported to the floor and approved by the Chamber. Committee activities have not concentrated in reporting executive legislation as in the past. Executive bills account for less than one third of the total number of bills reported by committee. The executive’s share of the legislative production of the Chamber has gone down from 76.9 to 48.8 percent.

Changes in the Chamber’s legislative agenda become more acute if we take out the annually recurring financial legislation. The president’s share of the total number of bills reported to the floor and approved by the plenary has dropped by more than 50 percent. However, the ability of opposition parties to push legislation through the Chamber has not grown at the same rate. Their share of bills approved by the Chamber amounts to 31 percent, similar to that of the executive and the PRI taken together (33.4). These figures show an sharp contrast with the pre-existing patterns in the PRI dominated 56th Legislature (1994-1997). However, the growth in
the opposition's share of approved bills reflects a drop in the amount of legislative production in the Chamber rather than a greater contribution of the PAN and the PRD to the law-making process.
Conclusions

Mexican politicians seeking and holding office in the Chamber of Deputies plan their careers under strict institutional restraints. To begin with, they need the nomination of an officially registered political party. Party nominations are not born equal. Some nominations entail good chances to win office while others are just a ticket to nowhere. Being placed on top of the party list of candidates to multi-member districts guarantees election to the Chamber. The chances to achieve office drop quickly to zero as the candidate’s position in the party slate lowers. Nominations to single-member districts also vary according to the support for the party label at district level. Irrespective of the type of electoral race a politician is nominated to, their chances of succeeding do not depend on what they individually do but on the collective reputation of the party.

Politicians serving in the Chamber, as all elective officers in Mexico, are prohibited from running for reelection in consecutive terms. Accordingly, they seek to continue their political careers by moving to other elective offices outside the Chamber. Office opportunities available for outgoing MCDs vary from state governor, senator, state legislator and municipal presidencies. However, in seeking political survival MCDs are lacking in electoral incentives to build an individual reputation as separate from that of the party. They depend on the collective reputation of their party to expand the number of office opportunities to which they can realistically aspire and to increase the chances to win the specific offices they pursue. The party reputation is a collective good of paramount importance for individual politicians to lead successful careers.

The central goal of legislative party organizations is to protect and enhance this collective good. Their task is to guarantee that individual legislators from the same party cooperate with the advancement of the collective goals of the party as a whole. In this sense, party leaders in the Chamber are entrusted with powers to punish uncooperative behavior and to reward party loyalty. The powers of legislative party leaders depend on whether the party enjoys majority status or not. Normally, legislative party leaders can promote legislators to positions of influence in the Chamber, since congressional practices guarantee to all parties a share of committee seats and chairs. Of course if the legislative party has majority status, the powers of the leadership increase. They have the power to assign the most important positions in the Chamber and to regulate the traffic of legislation from committees to the plenary, guaranteeing party control over the legislative process.

Legislative parties however are only temporary associations, which cannot escape the rotating nature of the Chamber. Legislative party leaders have no direct influence on the career advancement prospects of individual legislators. Their true principals lie outside the Chamber in the party organ that coordinates the nomination
to elective office—the National Executive Committees (NECs). In fact, NECs select
the legislative party leadership and get involved in the process of legislation when
the party reputation is at stake.

In the case of the legislative PRI, subordination to the president of the
Republic has been a by-product of presidential control over the party NEC. As the
legislative PRI enjoyed majority status, the executive controlled the legislative
agenda of the Chamber. By regulating the traffic of bills from committee to the
plenary, the legislative PRI had the power to prevent interference with the legislative
program of the president from individual legislators or opposition parties. As the PRI
lost its majority in the Chamber, the capacity of opposition parties to influence the
law-making process increased substantially. Legislative initiatives need the backing
of multi-party majorities to succeed. However, even if no single-party has the ability
to push or block the flow of legislation from committee to the floor, strict partisan
control over the legislative agenda persists.
Tables

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience in Office of Incumbent Deputies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
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### Table 2

Agenda control in the Chamber of Deputies under PRI majority

The flow of legislative bills from committees to the floor in the 56th Legislature (1994-1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Referred to committee</th>
<th>Reported to the floor</th>
<th>Approved by plenary</th>
<th>Report rate</th>
<th>Success rate</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
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<td>33.5</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>76.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial bills</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>28.7</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRD</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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1 This category includes the federal budget, the public revenue bill, miscellaneous legislation linked to the revenue bill and the public account bill.
### Table 3

Agenda control in the Chamber of Deputies without PRI majority

The flow of legislative bills from committees to the floor
in the 57th Legislature (1997-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Referred to committee</th>
<th>Reported to the floor</th>
<th>Approved by plenary</th>
<th>Report rate</th>
<th>Success rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Executive</strong></td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Financial bills²</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>PAN</td>
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<td>23.7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.2</td>
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<td>25.7</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>6.9</td>
<td>42.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
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<td>3.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committees</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Weldon and Romero 1998a, 1998b.

¹ The data presented in the table refer to the first year of session of the 57th Legislature, which breaks down into two ordinary periods one going from September 1 to December 31, 1997, and the other from March 15 to April 31, 1998.

² This category includes the federal budget, the public revenue bill, miscellaneous legislation linked to the revenue bill and the public account bill.
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