

NÚMERO 237

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Some Facts and Fictions about Violence and Politics in Mexico

Importante

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JUNIO 2012



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Abstract

This essay examines the effect of Mexico's security strategy and security situation on public opinion. Political and policy analysts are highly divided as to the merits of the Mexican government's war against the nation's drug cartels, with some seeing the war as necessary and violence as inevitable, and others the reverse. The point is not to take sides in this debate but rather to examine how the diversity of opinions about it reverberates across Mexican public opinion. To this end, I develop several testable propositions about how Mexicans might be expected think about public security policy and the recent rise in narco-trafficking-related violence. Specifically, I examine a series of commonly accepted assertions about the perceptions of (1) supporters of the government's security strategy as compared to its political opponents, (2) socioeconomic elites as compared to average citizens, and (3) people residing in areas most afflicted by the drug war as compared to those who view it from safer regions. I use data from the 2010 Encuesta Nacional de Valores (ENVUD) and from Mexico's Office of the President on narco-trafficking-related deaths to demonstrate that some traditionally accepted assertions do not survive empirical scrutiny.

Resumen

Este ensayo examina el efecto de la estrategia de seguridad de México así como la situación de la seguridad en la opinión pública. Analistas de política y de políticas están altamente divididos con respecto a los méritos de la guerra que el gobierno mexicano sostiene contra los carteles nacionales de la droga: algunos ven a la guerra como necesaria y a la violencia como inevitable, y otros tiene la opinión contraria. El objetivo no es tomar partido en este debate sino examinar cómo la diversidad de opiniones acerca de este tema se transmite a través de la opinión pública mexicana. Para este fin, desarrollo varias proposiciones verificables acerca de cómo se debe esperar que piensen los mexicanos acerca de la política de seguridad y del reciente aumento en la violencia relacionada con el narcotráfico. Específicamente, examino una serie de afirmaciones comúnmente aceptadas acerca de las percepciones de: (1) los que apoyan la estrategia del gobierno comparada con sus opositores políticos, (2) las élites socioeconómicas comparadas con los ciudadanos comunes, y (3) las personas que viven en las áreas más afectadas por la guerra de las drogas en comparación con los que viven en regiones más seguras. Uso datos de la Encuesta Nacional de Valores (ENVUD) 2010 y de la oficina del presidente de México sobre muertes relacionadas con el narcotráfico para demostrar que algunas afirmaciones tradicionalmente aceptadas no sobreviven al escrutinio empírico.

Introduction

Since taking office in 1 December 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN) has made the battle against organized crime and public security reforms a major governmental policy priority. Prior administrations had also sought to deal with the nation's drug cartels, engaging in investigations and arrests of suspected drug traffickers or complicit public officials, large-scale seizures of drugs, arms, and money, as well as the eradication of illicit crops and destruction of drug processing laboratories. However, in contrast to prior presidents, including even copartisan ex-President Vicente Fox, Calderón chose to make a coordinated security policy strategy against organized crime a centerpiece of his administration. As a result, upon taking office, the government began an aggressive military and federal police strategy aimed at dismantling the nation's cartels and securing cities increasingly overrun by organized criminal groups. It coupled these actions with a series of measures to reform the nation's security forces and legal institutions, including important judicial and police reforms, as well as other legislation, some of which is still awaits congressional approval.

Despite Calderon's coordinated effort against organized crime, the jury is out on whether the strategy is a step in the right direction or whether it has, in fact, made the situation worse.¹ Most security analysts and political commentators note that Calderon's security strategy has been associated with rising levels of violence, although the causal direction of this relationship is in dispute. To some, Calderon's security strategy has, justifiably or not, provoked conflict. Some analysts argue that the arrest or elimination of drug cartel members works to raise the level of intra- and inter-organizational competition among the drug cartels, which lead to violent solutions.² Others have noted how government police and military operations have been highly associated with the detonation of violence.³ Although some see associated violence as an unfortunate side effect in the fight against organized crime,⁴

¹ Villalobos, Joaquín, "Doce mitos de la guerra en contra del narco", 1 January, 2012, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=72941>. February 2012.

² Guerrero Gutiérrez, Eduardo, "La raíz de la violencia", 1 June, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099328>. Accessed on 26 February, 2012; Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, Alejandro Hope, Denise Maerker, Ana Laura Magaloni, Héctor de Mauleón, Natalia Mendoza Rockwell, Guillermo Valdés, Joaquín Villalobos, "Nuestra guerra: Una conversación", November 1, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102417>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

³ Escalante Gonzalbo, Fernando, "Homicidios 2008-2009, la muerte tiene permiso", January 3, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=1943189>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

⁴ Villalobos, Joaquín, "Nuevos mitos de la guerra en contra del narco", 1 January, 2012, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102505>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

others do not⁵ and, instead, attribute rising violence to the particularities of the government's focus on the arrest or elimination of high- and mid-level cartel members.⁶ Either way, for these analysts, the government's strategy has resulted in a dramatic surge in violence that may have been controlled.

In contrast, other analysts argue that the recent rise in violence in Mexico would have occurred anyway, even without the government's military and police strategy against drug trafficking organizations.⁷ These analysts tend to take a more historic perspective and note that criminal activities were long tolerated by local, state, and national officials, leading to what some call a culture of impunity or high levels of "criminal density" that would have resulted in high crime rates or violence anyway.⁸ These analysts find support in observations that drug traffickers were already engaged in violent confrontations prior to Calderon's accession to office, and that drug cartels were already proving problematic to the state and public security, even in the 1990s.⁹ They also find support in studies that show that violence would have probably risen with or without the government's intervention.¹⁰ Although some analysts take a more nuanced view and argue that that, while the government's strategy against the cartels may have triggered conflict inside these organizations and violence, preliminary evidence also shows that a modified version of the government's strategy seems to be working to bring down violence in some of cities and states most overrun by organized crime.¹¹

The diversity and complexity of positions expressed about the precise nature of Mexico's security problem and the government's strategy for addressing it have become a point of debate, not just among the nation's range of security experts, but also among public opinion makers, politicians, and citizens from all walks of life. As such, the debate has taken on a decidedly political air. High profile political opponents of the current PAN government tend to express the view that the fight against the nation's drug

⁵ Hope, Alejandro, "El mito de los mitos de Joaquín Villalobos", February 1, 2012, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102548>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

⁶ Guerrero Gutiérrez, Eduardo, "La dispersión de la violencia", Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102543>. Accessed 26 February, 2012; Guerrero Gutiérrez, Eduardo, "Cómo reducir la violencia en México", November 3, 2010, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=1197808>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

⁷ Although not intending to argue this, Merino's data support this point. Merino, José, "Los operativos conjuntos y la tasa de homicidio: una medición", June 1, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099329>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

⁸ Villalobos, Joaquín, "Nueve mitos de la guerra en contra del narco", 1 January, 2012, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102505>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

⁹ Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, Alejandro Hope, Denise Maerker, Ana Laura Magaloni, Héctor de Mauleón, Natalia Mendoza Rockwell, Guillermo Valdés, Joaquín Villalobos, "Nuestra guerra: Una conversación", November 1, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102417>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹⁰ Merino, José, "Los operativos conjuntos y la tasa de homicidio: una medición", June 1, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099329>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹¹ Guerrero Gutiérrez, Eduardo, "La dispersión de la violencia", Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102543>. Accessed 26 February, 2012.

cartels was manufactured by Calderón.¹² They argue that Calderón's decision to dismantle the cartels was taken in an effort to divert attention from his slim and highly questioned margin of victory in the 2006 presidential race, with original operations in the early months of the administration raising his approval ratings.¹³ It thus might not be surprising to find many well known members of the opposition Institutional Revolutionary party (PRI) and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) among those who levy criticism against the president's security policy.

Proponents of the PAN administration argue that the fight is something that should have been taken up by prior administrations because organized crime threatens the integrity of political institutions and government across all regions and levels.¹⁴ That several organized crime groups had become increasingly violent in the years prior to Calderón's accession to the presidency supports their views. Such proponents would cite Calderón's efforts to raise public awareness of about the threat organized crime and his intention to undertake public security reforms during the 2006 presidential campaign as evidence that his interest was not taken for political rather than public security ends. And, high profile PAN members or members of the administration have publicly defended in a variety of venues the merits, successes and even some failures, of the government's security plan.¹⁵

The point of this essay is not to take analytic or political sides in this compelling and important debate but rather to examine how the diversity of opinions on the matter reverberates across Mexican public opinion. To this end, I use the analytic debate and political commentary described above to develop several testable propositions about how Mexicans might be expected think about public security and violence in recent years. The examination is by no means meant to be exhaustive; rather it is meant to focus on those assertions that seem to have gained most traction in the public mind. In a presidential and congressional election year when the nation's political parties and public opinion experts are each trying to understand and predict the state of mind of those going to the polls, it is worth examining the nation's political and electoral mood as it relates to the government's fight against organized crime.

¹² Villalobos, Joaquín, "La Guerra de México", August 1, 2010, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=248540>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹³ Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, Alejandro Hope , Denise Maerker, Ana Laura Magaloni, Héctor de Mauleón, Natalia Mendoza Rockwell , Guillermo Valdés, Joaquín Villalobos , "Nuestra guerra: Una conversación", November 1, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102417>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹⁴ Villalobos, Joaquín, "La Guerra de México", August 1, 2010, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=248540>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹⁵ Poiré, Alejandro, "Los homicidios y la violencia del crimen organizado", February 2, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2047020>. Accessed on 27 February 2012. Poiré, Alejandro and María Teresa Martínez, "La caída de los capos no multiplica la violencia: El caso de Nacho Coronel", May 1, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099273>. Accessed on 27 February 2012.

To this end, I examine a series of assertions about the public security views and perceptions of government supporters as compared to their political opponents, socioeconomic elites as compared to average citizens, and people residing in areas most afflicted by the drug war as compared to those who view it from safer regions. To examine the veracity of these assertions, I rely data from the 2010 Encuesta Nacional de Valores (ENVUD), as well as data from Mexico's Office of the President on narco-trafficking-related deaths reported in 2010. The ENVUD data is used to measure individual perceptions about public security and violence throughout Mexico.

Do PAN supporters also support the government's strategy?

Citizen views about the government's security strategy may turn on their political preferences, with supporters of the ruling PAN more favorably inclined toward the government's security objectives and accepting of its social costs than those siding with the PAN's political opponents. Not only did current President Felipe Calderón campaign on the need to address organized crime, a host of studies and public commentary about the passive or active role of the formerly PRI in allowing organized crime and drug trafficking to flourish in the 20th century suggest that PAN adherents would not only support the government's strategy but also value crime prevention more than supporters of other parties. That most drug trafficking violence occurs in states usually controlled by the PRI and sometimes by the opposition PRD could also suggest that PAN supporters would be more accepting of any risks and violence, or at the very least downplay it, associated with the government's efforts to dismantle organized crime groups as well. This line of thinking is reflected in Alejandro Poiré's following statement:

Ante este diagnóstico era impostergable emprender acciones para confrontar a la delincuencia organizada y debilitarla, a la par de una decidida transformación institucional para garantizar la seguridad ciudadana. Como se dijo desde el principio, una lucha de estas dimensiones tiene inevitables costos, las pérdidas humanas son, sin duda, los más lamentables. Desde luego, se trata de un tema complejo y que no puede reducirse a un indicador de éxito o fracaso de las acciones gubernamentales.¹⁶

If it is true that PAN supporters see the government's security strategy as essential for ensuring the nation's long-term institutional integrity more so than other partisan supporters, then the following assertions should be true:

1. *PANistas view the government's security strategy in a more favorable light than supporters of other parties.*

¹⁶ Poiré, Alejandro, "Los homicidios y la violencia del crimen organizado", February 2, 2011, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2047020>. Accessed on 27 February 2012.

2. *PANistas downplay or underestimate the level of violence compared other supporters of other parties.*
3. *PANistas prioritize crime prevention more than supporters of other parties.*

The veracity of these assertions is examined in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Table 1 shows how supporters of the nation's three largest parties, the PAN, PRI, and PRD, qualify the government's level success in the fight against narcotraffickers. Among PANistas, 11.8% believed the government was having "mucho" success, while 35.2% thought the government was successful. Although both PRI and PRD supporters did not demonstrate such positive sentiments toward the government's strategy, their numbers were also fairly high, especially those for PRI supporters. Among this party's affiliates, 10.9% thought the government was enjoying "mucho" success and 31.4% were enjoying some success (an evaluation of 4 out of 5). While a fairly similar number of people thought the strategy was having "mucho" success among PRDistas, a lower 28.4% ranked success at level 4.

These results in Table 1 demonstrates two things. First, they show that PAN supporters are in fact more positive about the government's strategy and perceive that it is enjoying greater success compared to members of opposition parties. However, second, the results also demonstrate that opposition party perceptions are not radically distinct from those of the PAN. A total of 46% PANistas felt that the war against the cartels was having "mucho" or considerable success, compared to 41% PRIistas and 35% PRDistas. Although lower, these perceptions are not dramatically distinct. If opposition parties held radically different perceptions compared to PAN supporters, then we would have seen the plurality of opposition party affiliates claiming the government's strategy was a failure, that is, ranking it as "nada" or 2, rather than at the higher levels. Interestingly, those voters not declaring any party affiliation were more negative than affiliates of either the incumbent or opposition.

Perhaps PANistas downplay or underestimate the level of violence occurring across the nation? Table 2 examines this possibility. As shown, a total of 62.9% PANistas say there is "mucho" or considerable (level 4) violence, compared to 64% PRIistas, 62% PRDistas, and 58% independents. PANistas perceptions of the situation thus do not seem out of line with those of the opposition. In fact, they think things are worse than independents, among with 58% categorizing the situations as having "mucho" or considerable violence. We can thus reject the notion that PANistas underestimate or downplay, the level of violence in the nation. Rather, their perceptions seem in line with their main competitors. If anything, their concern might rather be to convince independents that things are worse than they perceive in order to convince them of the need to continue the fight against the cartels.

Table 3 examines PANista policy priorities. It may be that, given the government's decision to prioritize public security, that PANistas, too, prioritize this policy goal. The results are similar to those in Table 1. While PANistas certainly do seem to prioritize combating crime more than their opponents and even independent voters, their preferences are not dramatically different either. Indeed, PRistas hold quite similar preferences to those of the PAN, with 33.4% PRistas prioritizing crime prevention compared to 35.6% PANistas. PRDistas and independents prioritized combating crime somewhat less, at 29.4% and 28.4%, respectively, but crime prevention still outranked both combating poverty and creating jobs among these voters, something that is still in line with PAN priorities. If the PRI or PRD held dramatically different policy priorities compared to the PAN, then a larger percent share of these partisans should have ranked poverty and/or jobs higher in their preference orderings.

Are elites more critical of the government?

That PANista views are not radically different from supporters of the opposition PRI and PRD or independent voters leaves open the possibility that elites in general may hold different views about the security situation and the government's security policy from other segments of the population. Numerous scholars have shown that people with higher levels of education and socioeconomic means tend to enjoy greater access to and consumption of news and other information, and that they tend to participate in politics and elections at higher rates. We might thus conclude that the nation's elites might also be the most actively engaged in following national and state trends in violence, as well as the public debate about the successes and failures of the government's security strategy. Not only do they consume information published domestically, but they might also be more aware of the commentary about Mexico's drug war and rising violence published abroad, including but not limited to regular coverage given to it in several well known US newspapers. As such, we might expect elites to have a more critical view of the nation's security situation and of the government's strategy to confront it, at least compared to other segments of the population.

If it is true that elites might be more critical of the security situation and the government's role in it, then we should find the following to be true:

4. *Elites think that violence worse and more widespread compared to others.*
5. *Elites have a more critical view of the level of success of the government's security strategy compared to others.*

The reality of these assertions is examined in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 examines whether elites think violence is worse than others. Looking across

people holding different levels of education at the percent share ranking the level of violence in the nation as “much” or considerable (level 4) violence, we see that 28% and 26.1% of those holding undergraduate or graduate degrees, respectively, perceive that there is “much” violence. That is, an average of about 27% of educational elites believe that there is “much” violence. At the other end of the spectrum, 28%, 29.5%, and 30.1% of those without formal schooling or with primary or secondary school education, or an average of about 29%, thought there was “much” violence. Those most likely and least likely to be informed about the intricacies of Mexico’s security situation thus hold fairly similar views about the state of violence. Even those with technical schooling and unfinished university degrees hold views in line with those people with greater educational attainment.

However, interesting patterns arise among people with high school education or teaching certificate degrees (Escuela Normal). These groups tend to hold worse views than all others about the nation’s security situation. This may be due to the level and nature of education they receive in the nation’s numerous public schools. Finishing high school or studying to become a teacher may imply greater capacity to consume news, especially in written formats, and greater attention to and interest in public affairs compared to their less educated fellow citizens. Regardless of what explains this, their more negative views help reject the idea that elites, whether defined narrowly or broadly, think things are worse than other segments of the population. Instead, the conclusion could either be that elites downplay the situation, or that those with mid-levels of schooling exaggerate it, but certainly not that elites think things are worse than others.

Perhaps elites do not think things are worse than others but it could be that they are still more critical of the government’s security policy than others, especially since most of the security analysts, political commentators, and public opinion makers debating about it likely lie among this group. Table 5 examines attitudes about the success and failure of the government’s security policy by level of educational attainment. Of those with finished university degrees or postgraduate education, 18.6% and 17.3%, respectively, think that the security strategy is failing. Nearly 13% of those lacking formal education and 13% those with primary school education think the strategy is failing. A broader portrait of elites, including those with some university education, or of those considered having lesser education, including those with secondary schooling, does not much change this picture. Elites are slightly more pessimistic about the government’s security strategy than are those at the other end of the educational attainment continuum.

Even so, although elites are more negative about the level of success of the government’s strategy, they are not dramatically different from others. About 27% of those without formal education and 28% of those with primary schooling think the strategy is failing (nada) or mostly failing (level 2 ranking)

compared to nearly 36% among those with university degrees or postgraduate education. While these two groups are about 10 points apart in their sentiments, the fact that between 27% and 28% of those located at the lower end of the educational continuum still think the strategy is failing demonstrates that they are also quite negative. Put another way, the fact that about 33% of those with university or postgraduate degrees think the strategy has been successful (much and 4 rankings) and that about 41% of those with no or only primarily school education demonstrates that, while less educated segments of the population view the government's security strategy more positively than elites, a large percentage of elites view it positively, too. Higher educational attainment and any benefits that this might bring in terms of capacity to consume information or access to security analysis or public opinion makers does not make them dramatically more negative about the government's level of success against the nation's drug cartels compared to people without such benefits or access. If this had been the case, then we should have seen either a greater percent share of elites rejecting the government's strategy or a much smaller percent share of them favoring it, especially as compared to their less educated countrymen.

Are perceptions worse than reality (for most)?

It could be that the nature and extent of widespread media coverage of executions, assassinations, and other violent criminal acts associated with drug cartels, not to mention incidents of drug-related corruption found in local, state, and national government, has permeated the airwaves and print news, and with this the public mind, affecting all citizens, regardless of their levels of education or political affiliation. As such, citizens' perceptions may not reflect reality, regardless of whether they live in the nation's more and less violent places. That is, they might all overestimate the level of violence in their localities. Even so, it may also be true that, regardless of the general tendency to exaggerate the state of affairs, those located in the nation's most violent places are likely to be more supportive of the government's efforts as they have greater personal experience with the problem. Along this line of thinking, Joaquín Villalobos writes:

"Para unos la violencia propicia un problema de percepción por el impacto de noticias atemorizantes; pero para otros lo principal son los delincuentes como parte de su realidad cotidiana, ante la cual viven sometidos y humillados. Obviamente, no es lo mismo hablar de convivir con criminales desde Santa Fe, Polanco o la Condesa, que soportarlos en Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo o Michoacán."¹⁷

¹⁷ Villalobos, Joaquín, "Nuevos mitos de la guerra en contra del narco", January, 2012, Nexos en línea. Available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102505>. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

If this statement is true, then we would expect the following assertions to be true:

6. *Everyone thinks the security situation is far worse than it really is.*
7. *Citizens from violent states prioritize crime prevention over other issues.*
8. *People from violent states view the government's security strategy more favorably than people from less violent places.*

The level of empirical support for these assertions is evaluated in Tables 6, 8, and 9. Before proceeding, a note is in order about the categorization of states among those with high, medium, and low levels of violence. I used data from the Office of the President to measure the level of narco-trafficking-related violence during the year of the ENVUD poll.¹⁸ States are grouped into categories measuring whether they experienced high levels of narco-trafficking-related deaths (over 500 total deaths, as occurred in Chihuahua, Guerrero, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacán, Nuevo Leon, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas that year), medium levels of narco-trafficking-related deaths (between 101 and 500 total deaths, including Aguascalientes, Coahuila, Durango, Guanajuato, Morelos, Nayarit, San Luis Potosi, Sonora, Tabasco, Veracruz, Zacatecas), and low levels (between 0 and 100 total deaths, accounting for the remaining 12 states and the Federal District).

Of course, real rates of violence have shifted in the years since 2010, with some states and cities becoming more violent. But given that the ENVUD data was collected in 2010, I use aggregate levels of violence observed that year rather than more typical rates of violence per 100,000 people. An aggregate rather than per capita measure does not reflect the true level of danger faced by any citizen. However, two things lead me to believe that aggregate measures are better than per capita ones. First, it is unlikely that people calculate per capita rates when they consume information on violence in their states or nationwide. Second, that most drug-related violence occurs among drug traffickers or the security forces seeking to rein them in, although there have been increasing attacks against civilians and local and state governmental officials, per capita rates may not reflect the real risks to state residents in any case. It could be that most drug-related deaths occur among visitors, rather than residents of, the states where they were reported. These analytical decisions were made to facilitate the analysis, not to complicate it, although aggregate state death tolls mirror per capita rates. I now turn to the analysis.

Table 6 presents the results gauging whether peoples' perceptions about the state of violence in their states are worse than reality. According to the table, 35.5% percent of those living in a region with over 500 total drug-

¹⁸ Available at: <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/base-de-datos-de-fallecimientos/>. Accessed on 27 February 2012.

related deaths in 2010 also ranked the level of violence in the states as “much.” And, 31.2% of people living in high violence states ranked the level of violence at level 4, the second highest category. This means that about 66% of citizens living in high violence states perceived the situation as quite negative. States with medium levels of reported violence (between 101 and 500 deaths) also found 30.7% and 34.5% of their citizens categorizing the level of violence as “much” or the next highest category (4), with a total of about 65% thinking things are quite bad in their states. The findings were thus the same as for those with high levels of reported violence. It is difficult to judge from these findings whether people overestimate the level of violence in their states, given that it could be argued that anything over 100 deaths in a year might be shocking to anyone hearing about it.

To put things into perspective, it is worth taking a look at citizen perceptions at the other end of the spectrum. Nearly 48% of citizens living in states with much lower levels of violence (100 or fewer total narco-trafficking-related deaths, and all states facing 77 or fewer reported deaths - see Table 7) perceived the level of violence as high or fairly high (“much” or level 4). Although certainly much lower than those living in high violence states, that nearly 50% of citizens living in areas with much lower numbers of total deaths think things are as bad as those living in states like Chihuahua, Guerrero, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacán, Nuevo Leon, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas that year attests to the presence of a notable divergence between perception and reality at the ends of the violence continuum.

Although perceptions may differ from reality, it may be that reality influences preferences. Table 8 examines the preferences of citizens toward combating crime, depending on the observed level of violence in their states. The results show that 37.1% of those living in high violence states prioritize crime prevention over other policies. In contrast, those living in medium- and low-violence states rank combating poverty higher than combating crime. A lower 26.9% and 25.6% citizens in medium- and low-violence states prioritized crime prevention over other policies, a 10 point difference from those in high violence states. It thus appears that, although people in some states may exaggerate the levels of narco-trafficking-related violence in them, their perceptions do not translate into policy preferences. This reinforces the conclusion that perceptions in medium- and especially low-violence states do not reflect reality; if they did, then a higher percent share of voters would have prioritized crime prevention over other policy issues, putting this policy first rather than second after economic issues.

Prioritizing crime prevention should mean that citizens are happy with the government’s security strategy, especially in those states most overrun by organized crime and narco-trafficking violence. Table 9 takes a look at citizen perceptions about the success and failure of the government’s security strategy, by level of observed violence in their state of residence. Those

citizens living with high real levels of violence, however, tended to have slightly less positive views about the government's fight against narco-trafficking. As shown, 8.6% of citizens in high violence states said the government as having "much" success in fighting narco-trafficking, while 28.2 said that they government was having considerable success (level 4 ranking). In other words, nearly 37% of people from high violence states looked upon the government's strategy favorably, compared to a similar 38% for those living in medium-violence states. In contrast, just over 44% of people living in low violence states believed the government was enjoying "much" or considerable success in the drug war, a 6-7% difference. Citizens from lower violence states were thus somewhat more optimistic about the government's strategy success, compared to those living in higher-violence zones. Although the government enjoys considerable support throughout the nation, those citizens from the nation's more violent regions tend to be a bit less supportive than the rest.

TABLE 1. DO PANISTAS VIEW THE GOVERNMENT'S SECURITY STRATEGY MORE FAVORABLY?

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico? * Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?

% dentro de Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?

		Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?				Total
		PRD	PRI	PAN	Ninguno	
Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico? 2.00 3.00 4.00 Mucho	Nada	14.9%	13.6%	9.0%	16.6%	14.5%
	2.00	15.0%	15.2%	12.0%	16.9%	15.5%
	3.00	32.8%	28.9%	32.0%	31.6%	31.0%
	4.00	28.4%	31.4%	35.2%	27.1%	29.6%
	Mucho	8.9%	10.9%	11.8%	7.9%	9.4%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE 2. DO PANISTAS DOWNPLAY THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE?

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cómo calificaría el nivel de violencia que hay en su estado (DF)? * Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?

% dentro de Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?

		Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?				Total
		PRD	PRI	PAN	Ninguno	
Collapsed: ¿Cómo calificaría el nivel de violencia que hay en su estado (DF)? 2.00 3.00 4.00 Mucha	Nada	4.9%	4.8%	5.8%	4.5%	4.8%
	2.00	9.3%	9.6%	8.9%	11.3%	10.3%
	3.00	22.6%	21.1%	22.4%	24.7%	23.2%
	4.00	32.7%	31.4%	30.6%	31.9%	31.7%
	Mucha	30.5%	33.1%	32.3%	27.5%	30.0%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE 3. DO PANISTAS PRIORITIZE CRIME PREVENTION?

Tabla de contingencia En estos momentos, ¿cuál debería ser la tarea más importante del gobierno? * Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?

% dentro de Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?

		Collapsed: Generalmente, ¿usted se considera priísta, panista o perredista?				Total
		PRD	PRI	PAN	Ninguno	
En estos momentos, ¿cuál debería ser la tarea más importante del gobierno?	NS/NC	.1%	.1%	.2%	.2%	.1%
	Combatir el crimen	29.4%	33.4%	35.6%	28.4%	31.0%
	La salud y bienestar de la gente	8.2%	10.8%	9.0%	9.3%	9.5%
	La educación	11.3%	9.9%	9.7%	10.2%	10.1%
	Combatir la pobreza	26.8%	27.0%	24.7%	23.9%	25.1%
	Creación de empleos	23.7%	18.7%	20.4%	27.2%	23.6%
	Otra	.5%	.2%	.4%	.8%	.6%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE 4. DO ELITES THINK THINGS ARE WORSE THAN OTHERS?

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cómo calificaría el nivel de violencia que hay en su estado (DF) en estos momentos? * ¿Hasta qué año o grado aprobó (pasó) en la escuela? ¿Cuál es su último grado de estudios?

% dentro de ¿Hasta qué año o grado aprobó (pasó) en la escuela? ¿Cuál es su último grado de estudios?

		¿Hasta qué año o grado aprobó (pasó) en la escuela? ¿Cuál es su último grado de estudios?									Total	
		NS/NC	Ninguno	Hasta primaria	Secundaria	Preparatoria o bachillerato	Normal	Carrera técnica o comercial	Universidad sin terminar	Universidad terminada		Posgrado (Maestría, Doctorado)
Collapsed: ¿Cómo calificaría el nivel de violencia que hay en su estado (DF) en estos momentos?	Nada	2.1%	7.2%	4.9%	4.8%	3.8%	3.7%	5.2%	6.3%	3.7%	3.2%	4.8%
	2.00	11.0%	12.5%	11.4%	9.2%	8.9%	4.1%	8.9%	9.7%	10.8%	9.0%	10.2%
	3.00	10.3%	23.8%	23.0%	23.5%	20.8%	19.8%	24.3%	25.4%	23.4%	22.1%	23.0%
	4.00	38.8%	28.6%	31.3%	32.4%	32.1%	32.0%	33.5%	32.9%	34.1%	39.5%	32.1%
	Mucha	36.9%	28.0%	29.5%	30.1%	34.3%	40.5%	28.0%	25.7%	28.0%	26.1%	29.9%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE 5. ARE ELITES MORE CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT THAN OTHERS?

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico? * ¿Hasta qué año o grado aprobó (pasó) en la escuela? ¿Cuál es su último grado de estudios?

% dentro de ¿Hasta qué año o grado aprobó (pasó) en la escuela? ¿Cuál es su último grado de estudios?

		¿Hasta qué año o grado aprobó (pasó) en la escuela? ¿Cuál es su último grado de estudios?									Total	
		NS/NC	Ninguno	Hasta primaria	Secundaria	Preparatoria o bachillerato	Normal	Carrera técnica o comercial	Universidad sin terminar	Universidad terminada		Posgrado (Maestría, Doctorado)
Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico?	Nada	15.7%	12.9%	13.0%	15.0%	13.7%	12.3%	14.1%	18.1%	18.6%	17.3%	14.5%
	2.00	23.3%	14.2%	15.2%	14.7%	15.3%	16.8%	17.8%	16.5%	17.5%	18.4%	15.5%
	3.00	34.3%	30.6%	31.6%	30.1%	30.6%	36.8%	31.9%	30.6%	31.2%	30.8%	31.0%
	4.00	20.8%	30.8%	29.6%	31.1%	32.3%	24.0%	26.2%	30.4%	25.2%	24.9%	29.8%
	Mucho	5.9%	11.5%	10.5%	9.1%	8.0%	10.2%	10.0%	4.4%	7.5%	8.6%	9.1%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE 6. DO PEOPLES' PERCEPTIONS REFLECT REALITY?

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cómo calificaría el nivel de violencia que hay en su estado (DF)? * Nivel de Violencia en el Estado

% dentro de Nivel de Violencia en el Estado

		Nivel de Violencia en el Estado			Total
		Bajo	Medio	Alto	
Collapsed: ¿Cómo calificaría el nivel de violencia que hay en su estado (DF)?	Nada	6.6%	5.0%	3.7%	4.8%
	2.00	15.5%	8.7%	8.7%	10.2%
	3.00	30.1%	21.2%	20.8%	23.0%
	4.00	30.2%	34.5%	31.2%	32.1%
	Mucha	17.6%	30.7%	35.5%	29.9%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE 7. STATE LEVEL NARCOTRAFFICKING-RELATED DEATHS, 2007 – 2010

	2007	2008	2009	2010
CHIHUAHUA	239	2115	3342	4426
SINALOA	414	1084	1059	1813
TAMAULIPAS	74	96	90	1209
GUERRERO	298	412	870	1133
MEXICO	109	364	438	622
NUEVO LEON	129	105	112	620
JALISCO	66	148	259	593
BAJA CALIFORNIA	207	778	484	540
MICHOACAN	322	289	587	520
SONORA	135	252	365	494
DURANGO	346	288	275	387
COAHUILA	18	78	179	384
NAYARIT	11	28	37	377
MORELOS	28	48	114	335
DISTRITO FEDERAL	175	144	135	191
VERACRUZ	74	65	132	178
OAXACA	61	117	87	165
GUANAJUATO	51	79	234	152
SAN LUIS POTOSI	10	34	8	135
COLIMA	2	12	33	101
CHIAPAS	57	82	88	77
TABASCO	27	34	64	72
QUINTANA ROO	24	27	32	64
HIDALGO	43	38	34	52
PUEBLA	6	22	28	50
AGUASCALIENTES	37	38	31	46
ZACATECAS	18	25	50	37
QUERETARO	5	6	13	13
BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR	6	2	1	10
CAMPECHE	7	7	6	10
TLAXCALA	0	3	6	4
YUCATAN	4	18	1	2

Source: Office of the President.

TABLE 8. DOES VIOLENCE LEAD CITIZENS TO FAVOR CRIME PREVENTION?

Tabla de contingencia En estos momentos, ¿cuál debería ser la tarea más importante del gobierno?
* Nivel de violencia en el estado

% dentro de Nivel de violencia en el estado

		Nivel de violencia en el estado			Total
		Bajo	Medio	Alto	
En estos momentos, ¿cuál debería ser la tarea más importante del gobierno?	NS/NC	.2%	.1%	.2%	.2%
	Combatir el crimen	25.6%	26.9%	37.1%	31.0%
	La salud y bienestar de la gente	11.8%	8.2%	9.5%	9.5%
	La educación	10.6%	10.6%	9.7%	10.2%
	Combatir la pobreza	28.1%	29.5%	20.4%	25.3%
	Creación de empleos	23.2%	24.0%	22.6%	23.2%
	Otra	.6%	.6%	.6%	.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

TABLE 9. DO PEOPLE FROM VIOLENT STATES FAVOR THE SECURITY STRATEGY?

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico? * Nivel de Violencia en el Estado

% dentro de Nivel de Violencia en el Estado

		Nivel de Violencia en el Estado			Total
		Bajo	Medio	Alto	
Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico?	Nada	12.7%	15.1%	14.9%	14.5%
	2.00	13.4%	16.7%	15.6%	15.5%
	3.00	29.5%	29.8%	32.7%	31.0%
	4.00	32.8%	30.0%	28.2%	29.8%
	Mucho	11.5%	8.4%	8.6%	9.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

TABLE 10. SECURITY STRATEGY AND EXPECTED 2012 VOTE

Tabla de contingencia Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico? * Collapsed: ¿Por cuál partido piensa usted votar en las elecciones de 2012?

% dentro de Collapsed: ¿Por cuál partido piensa usted votar en las elecciones de 2012?

		Collapsed: ¿Por cuál partido piensa usted votar en las elecciones de 2012?						Total	
		PRD	PRI	PAN	Otros	Ns/Nc	Voto blanco/nulo		No vota
Collapsed: ¿Cuánto éxito está teniendo el Gobierno en el combate contra el narcotráfico?	Nada	16.1%	14.0%	9.3%	16.0%	14.9%	13.8%	22.9%	14.5%
	2.00	16.3%	15.4%	11.8%	15.0%	14.8%	18.1%	17.6%	15.5%
	3.00	34.0%	28.6%	31.0%	34.3%	32.0%	32.7%	27.6%	31.0%
	4.00	26.3%	31.5%	34.8%	27.5%	29.8%	28.7%	23.7%	29.8%
	Mucho	7.4%	10.5%	13.1%	7.1%	8.5%	6.7%	8.3%	9.1%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a series of assertions about Mexico's security situation, public policy, and politics. I analyzed pro-government and pro-opposition perceptions about the nation's security trouble, assessments of the situation made by well educated and less educated citizens, and perceptions of the level of violence among those living in lower and higher violence states. Based on ongoing public commentary and political debates on the government's security strategy and its level of success in fighting the nation's drug cartels, I develop several assertions about the perceptions and preferences of these different groups, and test their empirical validity.

Simple analysis of public opinion data from the ENVUD database and narotrafficking-related deaths available from the Office of the President shows that, although a larger percent share PANistas prioritize crime prevention over other policies as well as believe that the government's security strategy is enjoying greater success compared to opposition supporters, their views are not dramatically out of line with those of their political opponents either. Large segments of both PRI and PRD voters also approve of the government's efforts. The analysis also shows that elite perceptions about the level of violence facing the nation are not more negative than those of Mexico's lesser-educated citizens. However, elites hold somewhat more cynical views about the government's security strategy success, although a still important share of citizens from other segments of the population is negative about the government's security efforts, too.

Finally, although a large share of citizens perceive levels of violence to be high, their perceptions do not always match reality. Not only do some exaggerate the level of violence in their states, these same people also tend to be more optimistic about the government's level of success in fighting the nation's drug cartels. This suggests that those led to believe that things are worse than they really are might be those most easily convinced that the government is winning the war against the cartels. The conclusion about the disjuncture between perception and reality in low violence states is also revealed by citizens' public policy priorities. Citizens in low violence states do not prioritize crime prevention over other policies, a contrast to those citizens living in both medium- and high-violence zones. Recalling the commentary by Villalobos noted above, if citizens in low violence areas were to face rising levels of violence and crime, they would likely shift their attitudes toward policy priorities and the level of government security policy success to positions more in line with citizens living in more violent contexts.

The analysis here thus rejects some of the conventional wisdom about violence, policy, and politics in Mexico. In the run-up to the 2012 presidential race, such findings are important, and may explain why the nation's

opposition contenders for power, namely the PRI and PRD, have been so reluctant to come out decidedly against the government's ongoing public security efforts. Given that not only does a significant share of PANistas but also PRListas and PRDistas favor the government's efforts and prioritize crime prevention above other policy issues, outright rejection of the current PAN government's security project would be tantamount to alienating voters at the polls. This is nowhere better depicted than in Table 10 showing citizens' expected 2012 presidential vote and their views about the government's fight against narcotrafficking. Although 47% PANistas approve or mostly approve of the government's strategy, a startling 41% of PRListas and 32% PRDistas do, too.

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