Most scholars believe that elections make democracy possible by providing mechanisms for popular control, policy responsiveness, or government accountability. Some argue that elections are the only reliable means to these ends and that, accordingly, competitive elections are a sufficient condition for political democracy.¹ But recent research has begun to cast doubt on the ability of elections to produce what most of us think of as “democratic” outcomes in all cases and at all times.² Biased electoral rules, principal-agent problems, pervasive clientelism, and authoritarian political cultures have all been identified as factors that might limit or impede the ability of elections—even free and fair elections—to produce responsive, accountable, or participatory regimes.³ These problems are almost certainly more severe in unconsolidated and new democracies, where electoral rules and other democratic institutions are less firmly established and where the commitment to democratic procedures is weaker among both citizens and elites.⁴

There is no doubt that elections are a useful tool, and often the best tool, for producing democratic responsiveness. But their usefulness varies across institutional, social, and political settings. In addition, elections are far from the only “instrument of democracy” that most
citizens have at their disposal. Responsive government may depend on a citizenry’s ability to articulate demands and pressure government through a wide range of political action beyond voting, such as protest, public speech, lobbying, collective action, or direct contact with government officials. While some scholars view these participatory strategies as complementary to electoral accountability, others imply that participation influences responsiveness directly, even in the absence of competitive elections (Hirschman 1970; Mueller 1992, 1999; Putnam 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Considerations like these have given rise to an immense amount of scholarship in political science. One line of research studies how electoral competition alters the behavior of representatives and influences political outcomes (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Mayhew 1974; Powell 2000; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). Another focuses on alternative strategies for democratic influence, such as protest, petitioning, and civic participation (Hirschman 1970; Putnam 1993; Tarrow 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Yet each instrument of democracy is typically studied in isolation. We still lack an integrated approach to democratic responsiveness, which simultaneously evaluates several instruments of democracy and attempts to determine the conditions under which one or more of them can help to increase responsiveness, in the sense of making government actions more congruent with public preferences. Thus a voluminous literature has not yet offered complete answers to the following series of questions, questions that are central to contemporary democratic theory and practice:

- Under what conditions should we expect elections to contribute to democratic governance? That is, when will elections enhance the correspondence between public preferences and government output? When will they fail in this regard?
- Do nonelectoral forms of political participation help to produce good government, even when elections fail?
- When should we expect these two forms of democratic influence to interact? Are they more powerful tools when used in combination?

In this book I provide answers to these questions by studying the causes of government responsiveness during Mexico’s protracted tran-
position to democracy (roughly from 1980 to 2000). The evidence indicates that, at least in Mexico, electoral competition has had no measurable effect on democratic responsiveness. But responsiveness does improve in the parts of the country where citizens make greater use of nonelectoral strategies of political participation to influence, inform, and pressure those who govern. I argue that the roots of Mexico’s participatory transformation can be located in the late 1970s, when independent social movements became more powerful and Mexico’s corporatist system of interest representation began to weaken. In turn, this participatory transformation gave rise to the increased level of electoral competition that is now common in most of Mexico. In sum, this book suggests that the sources of democratic responsiveness in Mexico are to be found largely outside the electoral realm and that even though elections are severely constrained as mechanisms of accountability Mexican citizens can and do make use of other strategies of political influence that force their government to be more responsive to public interests.

The Dominance of Electoral Approaches to the Study of Democracy

From 1929 to 2000, Mexico was governed by a single political party whose candidates won thirteen consecutive presidential elections. During the first five decades of this dominant-party regime, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI) controlled virtually every important political office in the country, to such an extent that it was difficult to distinguish between the party and the state. In contrast to most authoritarian regimes of the time, Mexico had a well-established electoral system that played an important role in legitimizing the regime and the party’s place within it. Elections were always held on time and were formally free and fair (though often fraudulent in practice). The principle of no reelection was firmly established and was not violated. Opposition parties always existed and competed, at least where they could field candidates. But election outcomes were invariably lopsided toward the PRI, and the party ruled virtually unchecked.
Scholars typically think about Mexican democratization against this backdrop, and we measure its progress by the extent to which the electoral scene differs from this depiction of PRI dominance. Seen in this way, the process of democratization began in the early 1980s, when some elections became more competitive. Opposition parties won a few mayoral races in important cities in 1983, and throughout the 1980s they gradually increased their representation in the federal legislature. In 1988 Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a leading figure in the PRI, split from the party and ran for president under the banner of an opposition party. The following year Cárdenas helped to establish the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD), which has been the main political force on the electoral left ever since. Opposition parties went on to win several governorships, majorities in many state legislatures, and the mayorship of Mexico City’s federal district in the 1990s. Finally, in the year 2000, Vicente Fox won the presidential election as a member of the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN), ending the PRI’s seventy-year hold on the office. Thus, in the eyes of most scholars, did Mexico become a democracy (see chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion).

This account of democratization in Mexico parallels the way we identify and evaluate democratization across the globe. Free and fair elections are the primary, and sometimes the only, indicator that scholars use to determine whether a given regime deserves to be called democratic. This conception is also common in policy and political circles. Adherence to electoral norms has been an important facet of “good governance” programs advocated by international development organizations since the early 1990s, particularly at U.S.-based agencies (Carothers 1995). And the Bush administration repeatedly placed elections at the forefront of its efforts to promote “the expansion of freedom in all the world,” as the former president stated in his Second Inaugural.

The equation of electoral competition and democracy is one reason for the focus on elections. Another important reason is that scholars and politicians have a habit of attributing any positive social outcome in a democracy to the workings of electoral institutions. In this view, electoral competition is desirable not only because it is evidence of democracy but also because it solves all kinds of social and political problems.
Table 1.1 offers a representative (though partial) list of such claims. According to this body of research, competitive elections give citizens influence over government policy; improve economic performance; provide an alternative to violent rebellion or civil war; contribute to interstate peace; promote respect for human rights; protect the environment; control population growth; and the list goes on. As we will see, students of Mexican politics frequently draw on arguments like these when explaining changes in political outcomes over the past twenty or thirty years.

Table 1.1. Selected Social Science Hypotheses about the Effects of Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Literature / Citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Improve government performance/policy responsiveness</td>
<td>Accountability theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Improve representation</td>
<td>“Seats and votes” literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ames (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reduce clientelism</td>
<td>Kitschelt et al. (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Foster environmental stewardship</td>
<td>Diamond (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baum and Lake (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beer and Mitchell (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Alleviate pressure for rebellion/civil war/ethnic conflict</td>
<td>Diamond (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cleary (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Prevent interstate war</td>
<td>Democratic peace theory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I suspect that many claims like the ones listed in table 1.1 have not yet been held to the proper level of theoretical and empirical scrutiny and that scholars have not sufficiently explored the ways in which competition can produce perverse outcomes such as electoral fraud, clientelist mobilization, logrolling among legislators, or other behavior that cuts against democratic responsiveness. Still, this new focus on elections as instruments of democracy—as mechanisms for democratic change, rather than as the end point of a transition to democracy—represents an important advance in the study of democratization. Putting electoral competition on the other side of the causal arrow, so to speak, allows us to ask questions about the types of effects elections can generate (see Powell 2000). Given how frequently elections are used, it makes sense to ask how well they work and what they can achieve. These are exactly the types of questions I pursue in this book.

Thus this book represents a new approach to studying the links between electoral competition and democracy by critically evaluating elections as a source of democratic responsiveness in Mexico. But the study of elections as a factor influencing the quality of government is hampered by three major difficulties that this book aspires to overcome. The first is empirical complexity. It is often exceedingly difficult to measure government output in such a way that governments can be ranked according to their “level of responsiveness” or some other performance index. Most studies focus on just one issue at a time: democracies are found to have stronger economies, or cleaner environments. But given that governments are charged with many tasks, and often with contradictory ones, even simple rank orderings can be difficult. We might easily agree that a government that fosters a strong economy and a clean environment is a good government. But is it better to have a strong economy and a weak environmental record, or the reverse? Even without the problem of multiple issues, quantification can be daunting. Is a city government performing well by raising taxes and investing millions of dollars in a sports stadium, or is it wasting money on a special-interest boondoggle? Given that economic analyses have not arrived at a consensus on such issues (see Noll and Zimbalist 1997), we might be tempted to conclude that government responsiveness in certain cases is just not measurable in practice.
The second weakness of the current literature on electoral competition as an independent variable is that most studies do not adequately address alternative explanations. Since our normative priors favor elections so strongly, it is understandable that some scholars are tempted to attribute all favorable outcomes in democracies to electoral institutions. But we also know that the existence of competitive elections closely correlates with several other factors, including wealth, education, urbanization, trade openness, and so on. Too often, we attribute political outcomes to elections (or worse, to “democracy,” which is broadly or ambiguously defined), without considering the possibility that some other factor is the true cause. The potential for confounds and spurious findings is enormous. Is it really true that elections improve human rights records, under the theory that abusive regimes would lose electoral support? Or might it be that wealth improves human rights records, by easing the economic tensions that are likely to trigger subversive challenges to state authority? Or might an educated citizenry be better able to prevent human rights abuses through the dissemination of information, more effective lobbying against such practices, inculcation of norms, or some other means? Given that wealth, education, and electoral competition are closely correlated across countries, we should be suspicious of any study that attributes human rights protections to any one of these factors unless it also evaluates the causal impact of the other two.

This discussion suggests a third problem with the study of elections as independent variables, which is a failure to develop theoretical explanations that have clear causal mechanisms. We must have a concise causal story to distinguish between correlations and true causal factors; development of these mechanisms also helps us adjudicate among competing explanations, as discussed above. As I show in great detail in chapter 2, clear causal mechanisms are especially critical in applying electoral theories of control to the Mexican case. The basic proposition derived from electoral approaches to democratic theory, and used to explain so many of the empirical findings related to elections, is that electoral competition affects the calculations and actions of self-interested politicians. This basic idea is beyond dispute. But knowing whether, when, and how they will react is far more difficult. So, for the theory
to develop from a plausible idea to an empirically supported explanation, we need to know how voters, politicians, and parties perceive the electoral threat; when politicians and parties might have incentives to react to electoral pressures in ways that obstruct accountability or weaken government responsiveness; whether electoral institutions are designed in ways that make them effective tools of control for voters; and much more.

The research strategies I employ are designed to address all three of these potential weaknesses, though I encourage readers to decide for themselves whether I have done so successfully. To ameliorate the problems caused by empirical complexity, I use large-\textit{N} comparisons, multiple measures of the key concepts, and careful specification of econometric models. These strategies help to resolve inferential problems such as multicollinearity (by distinguishing the independent effect of closely related factors) and the direction of causality (when used to test temporally specific models). Large-\textit{N} methods are particularly useful for pitting alternative explanations against each other, which is a central aim of the analysis. In addition, by carefully treating the theoretical mechanisms through which elections and other means of political influence are thought to have an effect on government performance, I specify the extent to which we can be confident that statistical relationships support our causal conjectures. Qualitative and case-based evidence informs this effort by helping to illustrate the plausibility of the causal mechanisms I propose in chapters 2 and 3 and by speaking directly to my evaluation of the central hypotheses, primarily in chapter 6.

The research reported here draws on a large body of empirical evidence that I have generated and compiled via multiple methods, measures, and techniques of comparison. The sum total of this evidence suggests unequivocally that electoral competition in Mexican municipalities does not function to improve government responsiveness. I argue, and present evidence to suggest, that institutional features—some specific to Mexico (like term limits) but also some that are inherent in any electoral system (like informational asymmetries)—are the primary obstacles to democratic responsiveness in Mexican municipalities. At the same time, much of the evidence suggests that nonelectoral forms of participation can have a positive impact on responsiveness. The evidence on this point is less decisive and may be open to interpretation,
but it supports my conclusion that participation can improve the responsiveness of local governments because it provides citizens with meaningful ways to communicate their preferences and to exert pressure for a response on those who govern.

The Importance of the Mexican Case

Mexico has long been an object of public and scholarly interest in the United States and elsewhere. The country’s close economic and demographic links to the United States serve to keep it in the headlines and on the minds of many Americans. Among political scientists, Mexico has generated large bodies of scholarship devoted to examining its tumultuous presidential elections, its frequent and intense economic crises, its rebellions and their occasionally violent repression, its massive out-migration, and much more. But neither the inherent importance of the country nor the allure of recent events serves as the central motivation for this book’s focus on Mexico. The underlying goal of my research is to improve our understanding of how democracy works and how electoral competition, nonelectoral participation, and other types of democratic political behavior affect the quality of democracy. The Mexican case offers several pragmatic and methodological advantages that, in combination, constitute an excellent opportunity to pursue this goal and to rigorously test alternative explanations of democratic responsiveness. For current purposes, then, the Mexican case is important because it can teach us things about democracy that we would not be likely to learn elsewhere.

I employ a subnational comparative research design, which provides a novel way to test causal explanations of democratic responsiveness by increasing the number of observations while controlling for many factors that vary in unknown ways cross-nationally. Specifically, while holding constant (with minor exceptions) the institutional structure, electoral rules, and national-level political and economic conditions, I am able to track changes in electoral competition, political participation, and government responsiveness across almost two thousand Mexican municipalities. Mexico is not the only country in which such a design is possible—indeed, in the concluding chapter I suggest that
my approach can and should be attempted elsewhere—but the contours of the Mexican case confer several advantages.

For example, there is a good deal of cross-sectional and temporal variation, across municipalities, in the level of electoral competition and other indicators related to democracy and democratic responsiveness. This should be no news to scholars of Mexico, who have long recognized that democracy seems to vary subnationally. Wayne Cornelius (1999, 3) reported that “subnational authoritarian enclaves” remained strong in several Mexican states, “even in an era of much-intensified interparty competition.” Jonathan Fox (1994a, 157) found subnational variation in modes of interest representation and reported that “persistent authoritarian clientelism can coexist with new enclaves of pluralist tolerance.” Caroline Beer (2001, 2003) investigated variation in the level of legislative influence and independence among three state legislatures in Mexico. Alfonso Hernández-Valdez (2000) found state-level differences in electoral competitiveness and civil liberties. And Alain de Remes (2000b) documented wide variation in the competitiveness of municipal elections across Mexico from 1980 to 1998. Variation is just as strong on other important dimensions, like political engagement, wealth, education and other socioeconomic resources, and government responsiveness.

Importantly, all of this variation exists in the context of a protracted transition to democracy, which allows us to analyze the potential causal impact of electoral competition and participation in ways that cannot readily be done in studies of the advanced industrial democracies. In established democracies low levels of electoral competition are often best interpreted as high levels of satisfaction with the incumbent government, thus making competition endogenous to performance. But in Mexico’s transitional atmosphere this interpretation can be dismissed on its face, since subnational units with low levels of competition have typically never evinced multiparty competition. The proposition that good performance is responsible for the lack of competition in these places is implausible. The data presented in chapters 4 and 5 clearly indicate that, even if the relationship between competition and performance is weak overall, noncompetitive municipalities are invariably among the worst-performing municipalities in the country. This allows us to clearly separate areas where elections have been liberalized from
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those in which elections remain effectively closed affairs that do not re-

ally determine who rules.

The usefulness of subnational variation across several important di-

mensions in Mexico is enhanced by the fact that it is relatively well
documented. Compilations of electoral data such as de Remes (2000a)
and Banamex (2001) offer the official electoral returns for virtually every
election in Mexico, at federal, state, and municipal levels, over the past
twenty to thirty years. The Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, Geografía
e Informática (INEGI), Mexico’s census and statistics bureau, collects
and publicizes comprehensive demographic, economic, and social indica-
tors. Most importantly, INEGI has collected data on public service
provision and municipal financial characteristics that are direct indica-
tors of municipal government performance and that I use as concrete
measures of government responsiveness. In addition, recent trends in
decentralization have led to a burgeoning Mexican literature on mu-
nicipal governance and local public policy. The result is that this book
can draw on a rich case-study literature that addresses the successes and
failures of municipal policies and local governments, as well as an in-
creasingly sophisticated literature on the effects of electoral competition
and political participation in the Mexican political arena.

The advantages of the subnational comparative design discussed here
help in a number of ways to address the three difficulties common to
studies of elections as causal variables (empirical complexity, adjudica-
tion among alternative explanations, and identification of causal mech-

anisms). In comparison to cross-national studies, empirical complexity
is rendered manageable because the key variables are more easily and
accurately measured. For example, government responsiveness is com-
paratively easy to measure in Mexico because “clarity of responsibility”
(Powell 2000) is relatively high in municipal governments, where policy
responsibilities are well known and power is concentrated in the office
of the municipal president. The federal government has collected data
on these municipal services and responsibilities for several decades.

In addition, the Mexican case is almost uniquely positioned for eval-
uation of hypotheses about nonelectoral means of influence. The rise of
electoral competition was caused, at least in part, by underlying socio-
economic changes such as a growing middle class, improved levels of
education, and the turn toward a more urban, industrial economy
The Sources of Democratic Responsiveness in Mexico (Hernández-Valdez 2000; Chand 2001). These same factors are often thought to be closely linked to nonelectoral forms of political participation, such as protest, direct contacting of government officials (or what Cornelius [1974] calls “political demand making”), social movement formation, and so on. So this book investigates the relationship between changes in development and electoral competition over time. The goal is to determine, among other things, whether elections directly improve government performance or whether elections and improved performance are both products of exogenous socioeconomic changes. In chapter 6 I offer evidence in favor of the latter interpretation.

Finally, the established literatures on electoral competition, party behavior, and municipal public policy provide an excellent starting point for the development of clear causal arguments that generate testable implications. Arguably, causal mechanisms with respect to government performance are easier to identify at the local level, where the functioning of street-level bureaucracy and the political behavior of individual citizens are more directly observable, suggesting relatively clear, transparent, and testable causal explanations. We can check, for example, whether the observed behavior of voters, politicians, and parties conforms to the assumptions of accountability theories. Subjecting these assumptions to direct examination will help us determine whether any statistical link between electoral competition and government performance is a mere correlation or whether it supports causal claims.

**Government Performance in Mexico: Electoral Competition or Voice?**

The evidence presented throughout this book demonstrates that good government in Mexico is most often found in areas that also seem to be the most democratic. On this point, my research supports the conventional wisdom about democracy. But I also depart radically from the conventional approach to studying democracy by critically assessing the underlying causal logic according to which democracy is supposed to have the effect that so many scholars have observed. Instead of being satisfied that improved government performance is the result of “democracy,” broadly understood, I examine the different means by which
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Democratic regimes are purported to produce good government, and I test these causal hypotheses simultaneously, to determine which among them are the actual sources of the observed democratic responsiveness. (For a similar approach, see Fox 2007, especially chapter 1.)

Several theories claim to explain this democratic effect. Most scholars favor the theory of electoral accountability, according to which democracy promotes good government because voters can use electoral rewards and punishments to influence the behavior of politicians (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). Others argue that good government can result from an electoral selection mechanism, according to which democratic government is better because (or insofar as) citizens are able to select leaders according to their platform proposals, personal qualities such as competence or integrity, or some other useful criteria (Downs 1957; A. Campbell et al. 1960). Both of these ideas, but especially the first, are common explanations of improved governance in Mexico over the past twenty-five years. But less attention has been paid to a third explanation, which posits that democracy produces good government because it allows citizens broader opportunities to participate: to protest, to petition, to assemble, and to complain. To use Albert Hirschman’s (1970) term, we might argue that democracy improves government performance because it gives citizens the opportunity to use voice.

To understand how these theories might account for variation in the quality of government, and to put the Mexican case in a broader context, let us examine some basic data on the quality of service provision in Latin America. Measuring government responsiveness can be contentious and complicated, and I offer a detailed justification of the measures I use in chapters 4 and 5. But for now, let me simply equate responsiveness with public utility services. The provision of water and sanitation are among the central responsibilities of municipal governments in Mexico, and access to these utilities (or the lack thereof) is a common source of local contestation.

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show the rates of coverage for water and sanitation in Mexico, compared to the average of twenty-one Latin American countries. Figure 1.1 shows that Mexico has made significant improvements in water provision, even while many of its Latin American counterparts have stagnated or had only modest gains. According to data
from the World Bank, 95 percent of Mexicans had access to potable water in 1995, up from fewer than two-thirds of the population twenty years earlier. Figure 1.2, which shows improvements in sanitation coverage between 1985 and 1995, tells a similar story. The average improvement for these twenty-one countries, over the course of a decade, was just over 7 percent. Mexico increased its coverage by 19 percent, moving from about two points below the average to ten points above it. During the same time period, Mexican GDP growth and federal government revenue were both generally consistent with regional averages, meaning that improved coverage cannot be attributed to any sort of economic boom or funding windfall. While this is a crude comparison, the data do give the impression that local government in Mexico has become more attentive to the public interest, at least with regard to utility services.

But the situation becomes even more interesting when we observe variation in public service provision within Mexico. The general picture

*Figure 1.1. Changes in Water Provision, Mexico and Latin America, 1975–95*

![Figure 1.1](image)

*Source: World Bank (1999).*
of municipal water and sewer provision resembles the trends shown in figures 1.1 and 1.2, with most municipalities steadily increasing their rates of coverage over time. But there is wide variation among municipalities. By 1990, the top quartile of municipalities already had water coverage rates of 87 percent or better. But the bottom quartile all covered fewer than half of the households within their jurisdictions. These wide disparities coincide with widely different trajectories over time. Among the low-scoring quartile in 1990, just under half showed no real improvement in coverage rates between 1990 and 2000; but many improved significantly, with almost a quarter of the group improving their coverage by twenty percentage points or more. The municipal profiles for sanitation reveal the same trend. The bottom line is that some Mexican municipalities showed great improvements over the course of the 1990s, whereas others improved very little.
It is well known that electoral competition was on the rise during this period. Furthermore, we know that the process was uneven, with elections in some municipalities becoming very competitive and others remaining noncompetitive. Thus the improvements relative to other Latin American countries, as well as the patterns of subnational variation, both give a certain prima facie plausibility to the argument that electoral mechanisms explain improvements in government performance. But other changes were taking place in Mexico as well. Social movements arose and became more assertive in many areas of the country. Unions and other popular organizations gained increasing independence from the PRI’s corporatist structures, fundamentally altering the relationship between labor and the state. Industrial enterprises flourished in many parts of the country, particularly in the *maquila* sector concentrated along the northern border. Relatedly, Mexicans continued to leave the countryside in massive numbers, migrating either to Mexican cities or to the United States in search of work. By 1995, Mexico was a far more urban, industrial, and literate country than it had been in 1985 or 1975. The data presented in later chapters allow us to disentangle the possible effects of economic development, political democratization, and other competing explanations of local service provision in Mexico.

Most importantly, I develop and test a theory according to which government performance in Mexico is a function of political participation. Citizens can make government responsive, I argue, not only by threatening to remove incumbents from power when they perform badly but also by petitioning, pressuring, or cajoling incumbents while they are in office. Mexican citizens exhibit a number of behaviors that seem to favor this explanation, and local governments even encourage participatory behaviors on occasion as a way of gaining information about public needs and demands. For example, contact between citizens and public officials has become more common in many municipalities. It has also changed qualitatively—the image of the poor *campesino* approaching the beneficent *señor* with his hat in his hand has been replaced in many parts of the country by a more assertive style of contact, in which citizens remind officials that they are public servants with obligations toward the public. At the same time, many local governments have begun to make their officials more accessible to the public, and
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some have taken to forming citizen governance groups, in which public committees are given formal authority for deciding spending priorities or development plans within their localities. I argue that these forms of citizen engagement and participation are more effective causes of improved government performance in Mexico. The data strongly favor this interpretation, thus casting doubt on the widely held belief that electoral competition is the single most important political change in Mexico’s ongoing democratic transition.

In fact, some of the evidence presented in the coming chapters suggests that voice can influence government performance even when elections are not competitive and where the incumbent party does not perceive any significant electoral threat to its continued tenure. In other words, voice may influence government performance even in authoritarian regimes. Thus my findings may expand on and qualify those of Brown and Hunter (1999), who note that authoritarian regimes in Latin America are responsive to the needs of their citizens in many ways, even if they are less responsive than democratic governments and more tightly constrained by economic downturns.

What Can We Learn from Mexican Democratization?

The available evidence indicates that the commitment to democracy in Latin America and most of the developing world, among both elites and publics, is often instrumental at best. If democratic governments in these countries do not deliver, they will stagnate and maybe even perish. Therefore it is critical to understand the components of a well-functioning democracy, especially in countries like Mexico that (arguably) have not fully consolidated their democratic institutions and practices. I address this question head-on by rejecting the simplistic conflation of democracy and electoral competition. Instead, I critically assess how competition and other modes of contestation may (or may not) interact to produce democratic outcomes. In the process, this research suggests that democratic practice, and the consolidation of democratic institutions, may depend on factors other than the repetition of free and fair elections. Most importantly, I argue that democratic
tendencies are most apparent in Mexico when and where citizens are able to make use of nonelectoral means of political influence, such as participation in local councils or assemblies, personal lobbying of local officials, and the free expression of political opinions.

But the ability to understand democratic responsiveness in Mexico is not the only justification for the current endeavor. Mexico also presents students of democracy with a rare set of problems and conditions that can help answer questions not answered by studies of the advanced industrial democracies. For example, Powell (2000, 238) concludes his study of “elections as instruments of democracy,” based on a comparison of twenty established democracies, by telling us that all is well in the electoral world: because of electoral competition, he writes, “democracies generally, if imperfectly, deliver the goods they promise.” Would Powell have been able to offer such a sanguine appraisal of electoral politics if he had been studying Mexico, Venezuela, and Indonesia?

The Mexican case allows studies like Powell’s to be challenged by situations that cannot be found in Europe and the United States. For all of its progress toward meaningful democracy, Mexico has a long (and continuing) history of authoritarianism, clientelism, severe poverty, illiteracy, biased electoral rules, and weak electoral institutions. Fortunately, it also has a decades-long, well-documented experience with elections, as well as high-quality data relevant to the quality of government output. Mexico thus provides an opportunity to study the effects of elections in the context of a developing, transitional democracy. Furthermore, it provides a chance to pit theories of electoral accountability against other explanations of the quality of government performance. The remainder of this book takes full advantage of the analytical opportunities provided by the case to explore hypotheses about the sources of improved, responsive, democratic government.

Plan of the Book

The next two chapters review and develop the two main theoretical arguments under consideration in this book. Chapter 2 offers a critical assessment of electoral accountability theory, both in general and with respect to the Mexican case. It also shows preliminary evidence that
casts doubt on the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in Mexico. Chapter 3 presents an alternative theoretical explanation of democratic responsiveness, based on the employment of nonelectoral strategies for democratic influence. Chapters 4 and 5 offer statistical tests of hypotheses that I derive from the electoral and participatory theories. Chapter 6 expands the empirical reach of the book on several fronts, most notably by analyzing the interplay between changes in participation, competition, and government responsiveness over time. In the concluding chapter 7, I offer a general evaluation of how electoral competition and participation have influenced the quality of government in Mexico, and I suggest a framework for the analysis of democratic responsiveness in other countries.