

**Presidential Leadership as Strategic Action.
The cases of Felipe Calderon and Enrique Peña in Mexico and
Fernando Collor and Fernando Cardoso in Brazil**

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Introduction/Summary

The purpose of this text is to test the hypothesis that the level of policy results of a presidency is related to its level of strategic action. By doing that, it also aims at further developing a strategic view of political leadership, whereby it is conceived as getting important achievements due to a pertinent agenda and an effective political operation --in contrast to those views based on “vision” (Burns 1979), charisma (House 1976), juncture (Skowronek 1998) or presidential powers (Mayer 2001 and Howell 2003).

No doubt, these aims involve difficult analytical challenges. Identifying strategic action requires a clear definition of context and, even more challenging, of the appropriate match of action and context. In turn, evaluating the whole set of achievements and failures of a presidency often represents a daunting task. However, developing categories for these phenomena able to travel across cases, nationally and cross-nationally, is key for the adequate understanding of political processes and outcomes. Thus, based on previous groundbreaking research ((Riker 1986; Pfiffner 1988a and 1988b; Hargrove 1998 and 2007; Edwards 2009, 2012 and 2016), this text aims at further developing and systematizing these factors, especially to one this text aims at highlighting: Strategic action.¹

Two case comparisons are presented to test the abovementioned hypothesis, namely those of Enrique Peña´s (2012-2018) and Felipe Calderon´s (2006-2012) presidencies in Mexico and of Fernando Cardoso´s (1995-1998) and Fernando Collor´s (1990-1992) presidencies in Brazil. Both of these comparisons involve a most similar cases research design (George and Bennett 2005) as, despite acting within a very similar political framework as well as the same type of party and electoral system, in each of them one of the these presidents showed higher levels of both strategic action and policy results than the other.

The text is divided into three sections. In the first one, some theoretical elements are discussed regarding the dependent and independent variables --policy results and strategic action,

¹ I would like to thank Bert Rockman, B. Guy Peters, George C. Edwards III, and Robert Rotberg, as well as several colleagues at El Colegio de Mexico, for their comments to previous versions of this text. A first effort by the author to provide empirical evidence to its main hypothesis can be found in Jose-Luis Mendez (2018): “Presidents’ Strategic Action and Policy Change in Mexico: A Comparison of the Hydrocarbon Policy Reforms of Enrique Peña and Felipe Calderon”, **Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice**, volume 20, 2018.

respectively. Moreover, four levels of the former are linked to four combinations of the values of the latter on a two-dimensional table. The second section presents the Mexican cases while the third one the Brazilian ones, discussing first the features of the dependent variable and then those of the independent one for each case.² The conclusions discuss the findings of the two case comparisons made in the text.

I. Theoretical discussion

As it was said, from a strategic point of view, presidential leadership would mean getting significant achievements thanks to the strategic action by the presidency. At the same time, however, in contrast to views only considering the significance of transformations, I consider that the level of harm produced by the government's mistakes should also be taken into account. Achievement has been a variable more studied in political science and the policy sciences. For instance, Hall's (1993) and others have developed scales of policy change which can be useful when trying to define a level of achievement. Although the level of harm made by rulers has been less studied, as I will try to show in this text, it still can be evaluated based on some fact-based indicators.³

Thus, here a more nuanced view of policy results will be adopted based on these two elements. Policy results would be at his highest level when there are many achievements (understood as developing structural reforms and/or significantly "solving" key national problems), while "doing no harm" (Nye 2013; Mendez 2013). Conversely, they would be at their lowest when there are no achievements (in the aforementioned sense) and harm is high. In turn, several intermediate levels of policy results could be present when a presidency gets only some achievements producing some or no harm.

I also stated above that the main purpose of this text is to highlight the importance of strategic action for presidential leadership, compared to other variables such as "vision" (Burns 1979),

² It is worth noticing that although in this text I will often refer to the decisions and actions of the president, the overall object of study for each of these cases is the presidency, understood as the president, his advisors and ministers.

³ One of the main challenges of presidential and policy studies has to do with defining the level of achievement and/or harm produced by any given set of policies, as such definitions would almost inevitably be subject to some debate. However, relatively sound evaluations can still be developed based on previously developed scales (e.g. Hall's or other ones), objective indicators (such as the number of people living in poverty, the number of homicides, etcetera) or academic research in general.

charisma (House 1976), juncture (Skowronek 1998) or presidential powers (Mayer 2001 and Howell 2003).⁴ In contrast to the approaches based on these factors, there is in the social sciences a long theoretical tradition stressing the importance of agents' strategic action. Although it goes back to Machiavelli (1989) and Weber (1981, 2005), this perspective started to slowly reemerge after Arrow (1951) showed the instability of social choice (for instance in Schattschneider 1961, Bachrach and Baratz 1970 and Riker 1986). In the last decades several authors have shown how the choice of specific goals and political resources by powerful actors is key for the understanding of political outcomes, in regions such as the United States (Riker 1986; Pfiffner 1988a and 1988b; Hargrove 1998 and 2007; Rudalevige 2002; Edwards 2009, 2012, 2016) or Latin America (Chasquetti 2001; Mainwaring and Perez-Liñan 2013).

According to this strategic action perspective, equilibrium is not self-sustaining: It is kept by institutions, but also by the moves of its upholders against its opponents (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Baumgartner et al 2009; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). Likewise, institutional decline may encourage but cannot directly produce change, which requires the intervention of policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1984). Ideas may be floating around but it is actors who choose them (or not) to define the direction and intensity of change. Therefore, within institutional or ideological settings agents enjoy important "degrees of freedom" (Archer 1995). It should be noticed, however, that even if it claims that the influence of contextual factors is limited, the strategic approach takes into account that context frames action and that any strategic leveraging of resources is always contingent on it. Therefore, instead of conflating structure and agency and falling into one or other determinism (Archer 1995), the strategic perspective argues that institutions, ideologies, junctures, etc. are important, but that within them agents still have to choose among different options. It further argues that the specific way (strategic or not) they do so is a key factor precipitating or precluding certain political outcomes.

As it can be seen, several authors have already made important contributions for the development of the strategic approach. However, such contributions still do not offer a precise

⁴ Although this text does not aim at discussing extensively the limits of these perspectives, let me notice that a "grand vision" can be developed by a leader but actually result counterproductive for achievement and leadership (Edwards 2012). Something similar could be said about charisma: A president may have it, but it would not necessarily lead to achievement either (actually, it may even block strategic behavior, as it was the case for instance of some highly charismatic Latin American presidents, such as Alfonsín in Argentina, Fox in Mexico or Collor in Brazil). Likewise, a president who is not highly charismatic can reach high levels of presidential leadership, as it was the case of Brazilian president Cardoso.

and ordered enough set of traits of strategic action as to allow for more systematic (and fair) comparisons among presidencies (either nationally or cross-nationally). Thus, I would offer next some lines along which they can be more systematically developed in the realms of agenda-setting and governmental operation.

In the first realm, strategic action would have to do with a set of at least three elements: the type of agenda issues, the type of strategy used to promote them and the timing in which they are presented. Regarding the first of these elements, based on Edwards (2009; 2012), a highly strategic conduct can be said to occur when goals are set according to its context, for instance pursuing ambitious goals (a grand vision) when conditions are favorable and less ambitious ones in not so favorable circumstances. In other place (Mendez 2013), I have called this a *pertinent agenda*. In turn, agenda-setting strategic action would be low when ambitious goals are not set in favorable junctures or when they pursued in rather unfavorable ones.

Skowronek (1998) identified four types of circumstances that can be helpful to identify when a context is favorable or unfavorable for political leadership. A first one is “reconstruction times”, when conditions are the most favorable, as the president comes to power opposing the incumbent and the status quo is vulnerable to change. The opposed type of juncture is “articulation times”, when the regime is resilient and the president comes from the same party as the previous one. In turn, two situations where the conditions for leadership are not openly favorable or unfavorable are “preemptive times”, when there is an “opposition” president but the regime is resilient to change, and “disjointed times”, when the latter is vulnerable but the president is “affiliated”. Although this typology is a good starting point to develop a scale of presidential junctures, it should be complemented by at least three other elements: Presidential powers, reputation and legislative support. As I will show below, these latter elements are also important to adequately evaluate the contextual restrictions of presidential action.

As to the second element, that is, the type of strategy, I will argue that often strategic action would involve for instance using a “rifle” type of strategy (focusing in one bill) for most agreeable issues and a “shotgun” one (promoting several bills at the same time) for the more divisive issues (Pfiffner 1988a; Mendez 2018). Strategic action would in turn not be present when there is a mismatch of type of issue and type of strategy. Finally, in terms of timing, a highly strategic agenda often would involve winning first some initial battles in the most agreeable issues and

facing later the most divisive ones (Neustadt 1990), as well as promoting the core of the president's legislative agenda within the "honeymoon" period of executive-legislative relations (usually the first year of the administration). A non-strategic behavior would involve the opposite: jamming the presidential agenda by getting involved from the start in lingering debates over the most difficult issues (Edwards 1989).

In the realm of governmental operation, strategic behavior would involve carrying out actions that increase political power (which I have called *political leveraging*) (Mendez 2013) and avoid mistakes. In general, one way of doing so is by combining "hard" and "soft" political resources (Machiavelli 1989; Weber 2005), something Nye (2008) called "smart power" and Rockman (2008) "smart leadership". In general, however, there is evidence that the use of predominantly soft power resources to build and manage political coalitions tends to be more effective in democratic regimes than more forceful, plebiscitarian strategies (Chasquetti 2001; Edwards 2003) (which often end up producing various types of damage, either in institutional or social terms). It should be taken into account that, as we shall see below, a president's capacity at political maneuvering could affect the extent to which he or she can make the presidential agenda more or less ambitious. There can be other features of strategic operational behavior, such as avoiding any action that may damage the presidential reputation (from real or suspected corruption to policy mistakes), which, as Neustadt (1990) stated long ago, is a key tool of presidential power.⁵

Based on the previous discussion, Table 1 below presents two levels of strategic action in terms of both agenda setting and governmental operation, to build a four cell table involving four ordinal levels of overall policy results and, to that extent, of presidential leadership.⁶ First, when there is a low level of strategic action in both agenda setting (aims are not pertinent to the context) and

⁵ I would argue that focusing on the features of agenda-setting and governmental operation would allow us to define strategic action as a specific type of action and to measure it empirically, thus avoiding the usual endogenous argument where behavior is considered strategic just because it coincides with important accomplishments. As I will argue below, strategic behavior can in turn be considered as a dependent variable related to the presidents' decision-making style (Mendez 2013, 2014) -- although it could be also related to other factors such as their "pathways to power" (Siabelis and Morgenstern 2008) or personality traits (Barber 1977).

⁶ It should be noticed, however, that although policy results in general tend to be the result of the level of strategic action, they could also be affected by fortuitous events --what Machiavelli called *fortuna*--, as for instance an externally induced economic boom or depression. No doubt, when studying a presidency it would be important to identify to what extent this is the case.

governmental operation (there is an ineffective use of resources), there hardly would be any achievements, while producing a high level of harm would be quite probable. This would involve a null level of presidential leadership (cell 1). In turn, when agenda setting is highly strategic, and thus some feasible and important goals are set, but governmental operation does not allow to fully reach them, only some achievements, as well as some harm, could be expected, thus leading to a low level of presidential leadership (cell 2). Thirdly, when agenda setting is not quite pertinent (e.g. aims are over or under-ambitious) but operation is effective, harm would be unlikely but only some achievements would be reached. Hence, we would have a medium level of presidential leadership (cell 3). Finally, when strategic action in both agenda setting and governmental operation is high, many achievements can be expected and doing harm would be rather unlikely. In this case, there would be a high level of presidential leadership (cell 4).

As it was said, this table assumes that there is a relationship between the levels of strategic action and policy results, which in turn would involve different levels of presidential leadership. Table 1 also shows the cell in which each the four cases here studied would fall. Their discussion in the following sections aims at offering empirical evidence, within a most similar cases research design, of how both of these variables relate to each other, as well as showing the way the levels of strategic action and policy results in a given presidency can be measured.⁷ Of course, specifying how strategic action relates to an overall level of policy results not necessarily would be an easy task either. It is not expected either that all presidencies would fit into one of these four cells. Even then, this table could serve as a good point of departure to develop a more nuanced evaluations of particular presidencies, within a framework that would allow its more systematic comparison with other ones.

⁷ In this regard, see also Mendez 2018.

Table 1

Strategic Action, Policy Results and Level of Presidential Leadership

		Operational Strategic Action	
		High	Low
Agenda Setting Strategic Action	High	<p>4. High Level of Presidential Leadership. <i>Many Achievements/No Harm.</i> F. Cardoso</p>	<p>2.Low Level of Presidential Leadership. <i>Some Achievements/Some Harm.</i> F. Collor E. Peña</p>
	Low	<p>3.Medium Level of Presidential Leadership. <i>Some Achievements/No Harm.</i></p>	<p>1.Null Level of Presidential Leadership. <i>No achievements/High Harm.</i> F. Calderon</p>

Source: Own elaboration

II. Strategic action, policy results and presidential leadership in Mexico

A. Felipe Calderon (2006-2012)

Overall background and context

Since 1917, when a new constitution was enacted, Mexico has been a democratic and federal republic. Since then, the government has had the usual three branches of power. From 1930 on, elections had been held every six years for the presidency and the Senate and every three years for the Chamber of Representatives. Up to 1996, the presidency, congress and the majority of states were dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). This fact made the Mexican

president a quite powerful one during that period. However, in fact the Mexican presidency has been one of the weakest in Latin America in terms of constitutional powers. For instance, it has lacked the capacity to issue decrees as well as many of the other political tools available to presidents (Stein et al 2006). Thus, given the fact that from 1997 to 2018 the president's party did not held majorities in either one or both houses of congress, the Mexican president has been a rather weak one. As to the party system, between the 1990s and the 2010s in addition to the PRI there were two other somewhat strong parties: The rightist Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the leftist Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) (plus a few smaller ones). Beginning in the 2010s the partisan strength of the latter began to shift to another party on the left, the National Regeneration Party (MORENA). However, the electoral and party regimes did not change much.

In 2000, after about 70 years of PRI rule, Vicente Fox from PAN won the presidential elections. He was succeeded in 2006 by Felipe Calderon. In general terms, we could say that this latter president would face a somewhat favorable context for leadership (although not completely advantageous): Although he was also from PAN and thus, according to Skowronek, an "affiliated" type of president, on the other hand Fox had failed to achieve any significant reforms and thus the regime still was quite vulnerable to change. Furthermore, Calderon had a 64% approval rate (quite good for Mexican standards) (Consulta Mitofsky 2012). Although his party did not have a majority in either chamber, PAN had 206 out of 500 representatives and of 52 out of 128 senators. Thus, forming a legislative coalition was a reachable option, at least with the center-oriented PRI, which had 106 representatives and 35 senators.

Policy results

In 2007, Calderon's administration achieved some incremental reforms, namely a reform to the federal government's pension system, a fiscal reform and an electoral reform. The first one promoted the individualization of pension accounts, but in the years following its approval only about 20% of those entitled moved to the new individualized regime. In turn, in September a tax reform establishing a Business Flat Tax (IETU) and a Tax on Cash Deposits (IDE) were approved. However, the impact of these new taxes on total revenue was rather low (less than one percentage point of GDP), and thus it did not involve any significant change in the very

limited GDP proportion of tax revenue in Mexico (slightly below 10%) (Castellanos, Suarez and Montalvo 2011).

In 2008, Calderon got congress to approve two additional reforms. First, in March congress approved the security and justice reform. It gave the Attorney's Office greater capacities and initiated a transition from an inquisitorial legal system to an adversarial one, although several of the changes involved were to be implemented over the following eight years (Aguilera, Merino and Hernandez 2009). Furthermore, an energy reform was approved by congress in October. It gave greater autonomy to the state oil enterprise, PEMEX, and established new "performance" contracts to facilitate oil exploration (Farfan and Garcia 2011). Unfortunately, these changes did not succeed in significantly increasing investment in this industry over the next years. In 2009, the president would propose an ample political reform, but congress will approve only a few of its proposals two years later.

In addition to only getting rather light reforms, Calderon would fail at the main goal of its agenda, namely reducing organized crime. Although drug trafficking remained at about the same levels, during his administration there was a significant rise in homicides and other organized crime offences (Hope 2013), such as extortion and kidnapping. While the amount of average violent homicides by year in the country had remained stable in the previous years, they grew 100% from 2007 to 2012, from 9.3 over 100,000 people to 18.3 (Macedo 2017). And although somewhat decreased in 2013-2015, they would increase again from 2016 on. Thus, it would be fair to say that in regard to the key issue of public security, instead of solving a problem, Calderon created one.

In short, in the case of Calderon's administration, achieving only a few incremental policy reforms plus the acute worsening of public security, involved getting no real achievements (thus no leadership) and causing a considerable harm. Calderon's failure started to affect his administration as early as 2009, when in the midterm congressional elections his party (PAN) lost 59 representatives. Furthermore, from mid-2009 until 2012, his approval ratings showed a gradual but consistent decline and he would end up with ratings rather low for Mexican standards, namely a 48.7% annual average (Consulta Mitofsky 2012), down from the 64% at the start of his administration. The consequences of Calderon's failure were devastating for his political party: the PAN's candidate in the 2012 presidential elections, Josefina Vazquez, lost by

an ample margin. Furthermore, that year the PAN lost several state elections and got its lowest percentage of seats in the Chamber of Representatives since 1994. In the following years, a new group would take control of the party and block the attempt of Calderon's wife to be the 2018 presidential candidate.

Understanding Calderon's policy results and level of presidential leadership

From the beginning of his government, Calderon made it clear that fighting drug trafficking was to be the central issue of his administration. On top of that, the president framed this goal as a "war" to "defeat" the "enemy" of organized crime. However, this was an objective extremely difficult to achieve. Fighting organized crime in a country of the size and location of Mexico involves getting into a sort of "guerrilla war": First, it is hard to find the enemy and, second, when finally it is found and "defeated", it soon rearticulates or is replaced by some other drug trafficking group (given the constant demand for drugs from the United States). Winning this war was also quite difficult because of the highly inefficient Mexican judiciary, the rather corrupt local police, the limited intelligence infrastructure and the lack of support from governors and mayors (which in part was due to Calderon's plebiscitarian style). Fighting drug trafficking was obviously a goal Calderon had to pursue. Betting so hard on showing quick results on a badly framed objective was however a clear agenda-setting strategic mistake.

Calderon's governmental agenda included other goals (Interviews 07 and 08), as the abovementioned federal government's pension, fiscal, electoral and energy reforms. However, since the status quo was rather vulnerable, he had good acceptance ratings and a fair amount of representatives of his own party, he could have developed a more ambitious change agenda in terms of both range and depth. However, despite the fact that reforms in education and telecommunications, among others, had been a social demand for years, he did not promote any significant changes in these respects (Reyes 2012, Sanchez 2013 and Valdes 2012). In terms of depth, he could have promoted more radical reforms in the pension, fiscal and energy areas, but he did not either. In the instances were at the beginning he tried to promote a more radical reform, as in energy, the lack of an efficient political operation gradually limited the objectives the reform could reach (Mendez 2018). In short, Calderon's action in agenda setting was rather far from being strategic.

Regarding political maneuvering, in September 2006 Calderon stated that if inviting PRI members to the cabinet would help to form a majority in congress he would probably do so (El Universal, September 8, 2006). However, in December, 2006, all appointed ministers were his former close associates and most of them were members of his party. Pushing for his reforms involved active negotiations with congress (Hernandez, del Tronco and Sanchez 2011). However, lacking a governmental coalition and a shared legislative agenda, Calderon predominantly relied on a rather “hard” power, plebiscitarian type of strategy, in which he constantly criticized legislators, governors and mayors and called on the population to pressure them to approve his reforms. However, as I already stressed, the effectiveness of this strategy in presidential regimes tends to be rather weak (Edwards 2003), as it puts most of the credit of reforms on the president instead of congress. In any case, it was clearly a wrong strategy in Mexico, where the constitution did not allow for the reelection of any of the abovementioned officers. The president made also some other strategic mistakes, such as promoting the highly divisive energy bill out of the executive-legislative “honeymoon period” and, even worse, with a “rifle” type of strategy, something that kept him from being able to exchange concessions on bills with the opposition parties.⁸

As to drug trafficking, during 2007 joint military operations were launched in Baja California, Guerrero, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, Veracruz and Chihuahua, accompanied by strong speeches against crime and constant announcements of captured drug traffickers (Interviews 07 and 08). However, in addition to the abovementioned low feasibility of the public security policy goal, the strategies devised to reach it were inadequate. For instance, authors such as Guerrero (2011 and 2012) have pointed out that Calderon’s punitive, widespread and upfront offensive campaign against the heads of the cartels was a mistake, as in addition to not reducing drug-trafficking promoted violent clashes among the criminal groups. Guerrero argues in this respect that it would have been more effective --and less costly-- to implement a “deterrent” strategy, that is, focusing on specific areas --for example those were the most violent cartels were operating-- as well as on attacking the military and money laundry branches of the cartels. A more comprehensive approach was also required, based on crime prevention programs aimed

⁸ Calderon’s political strategies are more precisely described and documented in Mendez 2014 and 2018.

at reducing poverty and restoring the social fabric in the communities subject to the influence of organized crime.

In short, it can be argued that Calderon's lack of policy results was to a great extent the result of not acting strategically, that is, developing non-pertinent goals and wrong agenda-setting moves as well as relying on only one of the various possible types of political resources. Thus, this case showed a low level in strategic behavior in both agenda-setting and political operation, which led to reaching no real achievements while producing a high level of harm, and thus meant a null level of presidential leadership (cell 1).

B. Enrique Peña (2012-2018)

Overall background and context

On December 1, 2012, Enrique Peña took power as the new president of Mexico. He was backed by an electoral coalition of his party, the PRI, and two other small ones, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) and the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL). According to Skowronek's classification, he would face a "reconstruction" political time, since he came to power as an "opposition" president and the regime was still vulnerable (as we saw, during Calderon's administration only minor reforms were achieved in a few areas). Furthermore, the PRI won 212 representatives out of 500, which together with the PRI allied parties, allowed Peña's governmental coalition to have a 251 representatives majority in the lower chamber; thus it was in better position than Calderon's. However, Peña's coalition did not have a majority in the Senate (the PRI won only 52 seats out of 128) and neither the two thirds majority in both chambers needed to pass constitutional amendments. He had the same limited presidential powers than the previous president and, by the time of his inauguration in December, 2012, he had only 54% of approval (Consulta Mitofsky 2014) (ten points below Calderon at his beginning). In this way, although being an opposition president facing a yet vulnerable regime and having a majority in the Chamber of Representatives would locate Peña's administration at a political time close to a reconstruction one, his limited presidential powers, lower approval and lack of control of the senate would mean that in fact --just as Calderon-- he faced only a somewhat favorable context for leadership.

Policy results

In his first two years, Peña was able to get congressional approval of three “paradigmatic” policy reforms, according to the definition of Hall (1993). To begin with, in December, 2012, a basic education bill was passed by Congress, which changed the central goal of such policy from favoring the welfare of the teachers and the power of their union to increasing the quality of education. In 2013, important bills in telecommunications and energy were passed. The first one broke the duopoly of open television in the country, while the second reform broke the monopoly of the state oil company, PEMEX, shifting the goal of hydrocarbon policy from being a source of state revenue to bringing efficiency, investment and growth to this industry. In this year, two other quite significant reforms were passed in the fiscal and electoral fields. The first involved several new taxes, which would mean an important increase in state fiscal income (of about 2.5 percentage points), while by the second reform the reelection of legislators and mayors was approved –a radical change in Mexican politics-- and the Federal Electoral Institute was given powers to also organize state elections.

At the end of Peña’s second year, however, several crises would stun the nation. On September 26, 2014, 43 students went missing in the town of Iguala, Guerrero. Investigations showed that they were detained by the local police under the orders of the city’s mayor, Jose Abarca, and handed over to the local crime syndicate, which killed them. This mass kidnapping and killing led to nationwide protests and international condemnation during the following days, and thus Abarca quickly resigned and escaped. This tragedy would remain a central national issue until the end of Peña’s administration in 2018.

Furthermore, in November, 2014, the press revealed a conflict of interest by the first lady (Veronica Rivera) in the acquisition of a 7 million dollars house in Mexico City, which was registered under the name of one of the main contractors of Peña’s administration when he was governor of the state of Mexico. It was also revealed that, once Peña became president, a subsidiary of the same company had been awarded in mid-2014 a substantial part of a huge contract to build a high-speed train from Mexico City to Querétaro (which was cancelled when the news of the house were about to be publicly known). This was not the only corruption scandal Peña would face during his administration: In the following years, several PRI state former governors were put in jail or prosecuted on charges of misappropriation. To make things even worse, in July, 2015, the country’s most notorious drug lord, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman,

escaped from a maximum security prison. Although both the Iguala mayor and “El Chapo” were recaptured within a short period of time, Peña’s administration was hardly hit by these escapes.

On top of all that, we should add a sluggish overall economic growth (at an average of 2% in the first three years of the administration) and a devaluation of the Mexican peso of more than 50% against the dollar between 2012 and 2018. Furthermore, after diminishing between 2012 and 2015, in 2016 and 2017 public insecurity raise again (actually, the latter year was the most violent year since 1997) (Observatorio 2018). By the end of 2018 the implementation of the education reform and the energy reform had advanced significantly, but their effects on the levels of public education or economic growth were still not very significant.

In summary, while getting several quite significant reforms approved involved several achievements by the Peña’s presidency, such reforms could not be quickly implemented and did not produce prompt improvements on their respective policy areas. On the other, that was combined with the Iguala massacre, corruption scandals, escapes of notorious criminals and the rise in public insecurity (not to mention the low economic growth and the peso devaluation). This meant that this president attained only some achievements while also contributing to generate some harm. This mixed performance led to the president’s party (PRI) losing 9 seats in the mid-term 2015 legislative elections (although his governmental legislative coalition was able to keep a 260 seats majority in the lower chamber), but most notably to the sharp decline in the president’s approval ratings (from around 50% on average in his first year-and-a-half in office to 24% in November, 2018, the lowest rate ever at the end of a presidency in the thirty years approval rates have been measured in Mexico) (Consulta Mitofsky 2018). Furthermore, the candidate of his party (Jose Antonio Meade from the PRI) lost by an ample margin in the July, 2019, presidential elections against Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, from MORENA.

Understanding Peña’s policy results and level of presidential leadership

As we just saw, Peña faced a juncture involving a vulnerable regime but a divided government, in principle not favorable for a highly ambitious agenda. However, a few months before the start of his administration, he accepted and further promoted a proposal from some members of the PRD to develop an agreement among the three main political parties around a common reformist agenda. In this way, on December 2, 2012, right the next day after the presidential inauguration,

a “Pact for Mexico” was signed by the president and the heads of the three main political parties –PRI, PAN and PRD. The Pact included reform proposals in many policy areas, among them education, telecommunications, energy, taxes, finance, etc., thus making feasible what otherwise would have been overambitious goals. Based on this pact, the new president put at the central place of his agenda constitutional reforms in the fields of education, telecommunications, taxation and energy.

In addition to using this rather “soft power” type of political strategy, Peña also differentiated himself from Calderon in the legislative strategies he used to promote bills. On the one hand, all the key structural reforms were introduced and approved within the honeymoon (first year) period of Executive-Legislative relations. Furthermore, Peña introduced first the most agreeable bills, such as the education and telecommunications reforms, for which he used a “rifle” type of strategy. As to the education bill, by presenting it during the December, 2012, holiday season, the government first preempted the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of teachers by the leader of the powerful teacher’s union (SNTE), Elba Esther Gordillo. Besides, when in January this leader arguably was about to set a national movement to block the implementation of the education bill, she was detained, accused of illegal use of union funds. As she was widely considered a highly corrupt union leader⁹, Peña’s tour de force was seen favorably by most people in the country. In any case, by putting her in prison, the president showed that, in addition to soft power type of strategies like the Pact for Mexico, he would also made use of the legitimate coercive tools of the state.

Once these reforms were approved, he introduced the most divisive ones, such as the energy bill, for which he rather used a “shotgun” type of strategy. Thus, the energy, fiscal and political reform bills were all presented and negotiated together in the fall of 2013, which allowed the administration, mostly interested in the first of these reforms, to exchange concessions with the PRD, interested in the second one, and the PAN, interested in the third one (Mendez 2018).

However, regarding the presidential agenda, it should also be said that probably Peña made the opposite mistake of Calderon: He did not pay enough attention to the issue of organized crime and public insecurity, which by the time of his inauguration remained an acute national problem.

⁹ Several reports have presented evidence of tens of houses and apartments owned by this union leader, scattered around several Mexican and U.S. states, plus a private jet (Cano and Aguirre 2009; Gil 2013; Gutierrez and Nolasco 2016).

Quite likely, for instance, a greater attention to this issue could have preempted the Iguala crisis¹⁰ or the escape of El Chapo. Peña did not pay enough attention either to the issue of corruption. Although at the beginning of his government he proposed to create a National Anti-corruption Commission, he would rather relegate the issue. For instance, not only he could have kept his wife from buying the aforesaid mansion, but could have preempted also the PRI governors' corruption cases.¹¹

Furthermore, in 2014 Peña would make several operational mistakes. Regarding the Iguala killings, he took action only ten days after they had happened, thus allowing for the tampering with the crime's evidence and the escape of the city's mayor (at first, it was argued that the case was under the jurisdiction of local authorities). After that, his administration mismanaged and tried to close the case too quickly, which only made things worst. The case was so badly mishandled that in 2018 a regional court highlighted several important wrongdoings and called for the establishment of a truth commission.

As to the first lady mansion –the so-called Mexican “White House”--, instead of directly addressing the issue and recognizing the mistake, the president made his wife record and broadcast a video in which she referred to the accusations as lies and calumnies, only adding to the national aggravation. In yet another misstep, Peña appointed a new head of the Ministry of the Public Function and asked him to start an investigation, but as the new minister lacked any autonomy, criticisms increased. In 2016, Peña admitted the purchase of this house was a mistake and apologized for it; he also promoted an anti-corruption reform in congress (which was approved but could not be completely implemented). However, this would not be enough to fix the strong damage already done to Peña's reputation and the confidence in government. There were also other factors, but no doubt the White House affair and the Iguala killings contributed to the PAN and PRD leaving the “Pact for Mexico” at the end of 2014.

Furthermore, Peña's measures to fight organized crime and public insecurity in 2015 and 2016 basically followed the same failed strategies Calderon had implemented and thus ended up

¹⁰ The president could have taken action against the city's mayor's before the tragedy, as there was previous evidence of his connections with the local crime syndicate.

¹¹ In several of them --as for instance that of the governor of the state of Veracruz, Javier Duarte-- there were as well clear indicators of wrongdoings well before these cases became national scandals.

being clearly insufficient. Thus, as it was said, 2017 was the most violent year since 1994. To that we should yet add some notable foreign policy mistakes. For instance, inviting Trump to visit the presidential residence in Mexico City in 2017, a move that, given his previous verbal aggressions against Mexico, was clearly rejected by the majority of Mexicans --and which was of no great help once Trump became president.

In summary, on the one hand, while passing Peña's structural reforms involved some important achievements produced by strategic moves in agenda-setting and political maneuvering, their implementation was problematic and produced no tangible, short-term effects. On the other, a lack of strategic behavior allowed violence and corruption to increase. The end result was a higher than Calderon's, but still low level of presidential leadership (cell 2).

III. Presidential Leadership and Strategic Action in Brazil

A. Fernando Collor (1990-1992)

Overall background and context

As Mexico in the last decades, Brazil has been also a democratic, federal republic. The government has had the usual three branches of power and elections have been held regularly since the early 1980s, after a long period of military rule. Contrary to Mexico, though, the constitution passed in 1988 made of the Brazilian presidency one of the most powerful in Latin America, among other things because it gave it strong decree powers (*medidas provisórias*) (Stein and Tomassi 2006). Thanks to them, in some areas the president can sign a law that will be into effect for thirty days if not approved by congress, and which, up to 2001, could be ratified by the president indefinitely. The president also can send to congress an "urgent law", which has to be considered within 45 days. Besides, Brazilian presidents can make budgetary allocations to specific projects or programs, a power that has been often used to gain the support of key legislators. These powers allow the president great control over the congressional agenda (Figueiredo and Limongi 2000). However, they have limits too, as it has been rather difficult for the executive to confirm decrees through time without the political backing of a majority in congress. Thus, even if it is within his powers to sign them, presidents often negotiate decrees with the legislature. Besides, constitutional changes cannot be made through these decrees. For

that, three fifths of members of both the representatives´ chamber and the senate are required, in repeated votes, article by article.

From the early 1980s, candidates from different Brazilian parties have won the presidency. That is because, due to a mix of proportional voting and lack of election threshold, party politics has been rather fragmented. Among the biggest parties there are the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB). With the possible exception of the PT, party loyalty has been rather weak. On the other hand, despite the fact that parties are somewhat inclined to form part of the governmental coalition, presidents still have to get their support in congress, what makes them subject to the budgetary and political pressure of legislators (the so called *fisiologismo*). To be able to balance this, presidents should remain strong but can only do so through mostly non-partisan means, such as popularity or policy success (Cardoso 2006: 245).

In 1989, Fernando Collor, from the Partido da Reconstrução Nacional (PRN), defeated PT´s candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in a controversial two-round presidential race. In this way, he became the first Brazilian president elected by the people in almost 30 years, after the end of the Brazilian military government and several transitional presidencies. Collor was an opposition president, as he ran a campaign against his predecessor, José Sarney. On the other hand, the regime was quite vulnerable, mainly because the country was suffering from hyperinflation, which at times had reached rates of 25% per month, but also because there were pending reforms in many policy areas. His acceptance rate was quite high, in part because since his times as governor he had forged an image of an energetic “maharaja fighter”, who opposed the super-salaries of public servants. In this way, despite the fact that Collor belonged to the small PRN party, his popularity, the presidential strong constitutional powers and the nature of Brazilian party system facilitated the formation of a broad legislative coalition. In short, it could be argued that he faced a reconstruction-like and quite favorable political time for leadership.

Policy results

When Collor took power the most urgent national problem was hyperinflation, which was then at 84 percent per month, and growing. Thus, right after his inauguration in March, 1990, he launched the *Plano Collor I*, led by finance minister Zélia Cardoso. The Plan attempted to reduce

the money supply by forcibly converting large portions of consumer bank accounts into non-cashable government bonds. In this way, through an executive decree, all accounts over 50,000 Cruzeiros were frozen for 18 months. Although many people felt these radical measures were necessary and supported them, they also caused great discontent. Moreover, the president promoted major cuts in government spending as well as freezes in wages and prices.

It could be said that in several respects Collor's government got several achievements (at least according to its plans and ideology). For instance, it privatized 18 state companies, opened the economy to free trade, eliminated monetary exchange controls, reduced the deficit, the public debt and public subsidies, eliminated several state ministries and agencies and sold many houses, planes and cars owned by the state. It also encouraged industrial modernization and balanced the public debt. Although they were polemic because also caused unemployment, these measures were the start of a new agenda for the modernization and efficiency of the state and the economy and created the basis for the success of later economic plans. The president also signed a decree creating new instruments to prevent fraud and privileges in the federal government as well as an Anti-Corruption Law, which included severe sanctions and the obligation for civil servants to declare personal assets prior to appointment.

Despite these accomplishments, Collor would fail in solving the most important problem facing Brazil, namely hyperinflation. Although yearly inflation went down from rates of around 80 percent in the first months of 1990 to rates of 15 and 7 percent in April and May of that year, in June they started to grow again and by January, 1991, they were back at 20 percent per month. The failure of the first economic plan led in this latter month to *Plano Collor II* as well as Zelia Cardoso's substitution by Marcilio Moreira in May. At first, this second plan managed to bring inflation rates down, but by September they were back at levels approaching 30 percent. From then up to the end of the government in October, 1992, they were between 20 and 25 percent per month.¹²

Furthermore, in May, 1992, the president was accused by his brother, Pedro Collor, of condoning an influence peddling scheme run by his campaign treasurer, Paulo Farias. Thus, in July a Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry was formed. While the investigation was in progress, the

¹² <http://www.ibge.gov.br/home>, visited January 16, 2016.

president went on national television to ask the people to protest against "coup" forces. Instead, in August thousands of students protested against his government on the streets. Although evidence was not entirely clear (in fact, he would be acquitted years later), at the end of that month the congressional commission concluded that there was proof that Collor had personal expenses paid illegally and thus, in September, he was impeached by the Chamber of Deputies. The trial process continued in the Senate and, in December, facing almost certain removal from office, the president resigned and congress swear-in Vice-President Itamar Franco. According to Datafolha (1995) surveys, Collor started with approval rates at about 40% --comparatively high in Brazil-- which however quickly started a declining trend and ended below 15%.

In summary, in the case of Collor's administration, advancing a privatization program, opening the economy to free trade, reducing the deficit, the public debt and public subsidies, together with a persisting hyperinflation, the freezing of personal bank accounts and a corruption scandal that led to his resignation, involved reaching several policy achievements together with inflicting some harm to Brazil's society and political institutions.

Understanding Collor's policy results and level of presidential leadership

As noticed, Collor's agenda had three main components: First, reducing inflation; second, modernizing the country through privatization, macroeconomic adjustment, reduction of public subsidies and state expenditures, opening of the economy, free exchange rate, etc.; and, third, fighting civil servants privileges and corruption. Overall, this can be considered as an ample reformist agenda, pertinent for the reconstructive type of political times faced by the presidency at the start of the 1990s. Furthermore, the president acted fast to implement it (*Veja*, April 25 and June 20, 1990).

Collor's strategic mistakes were thus not related to agenda-setting but to the realm of political maneuvering and the management of his personal finances. First, as to coalition building, in addition to his own party, the PRN, with only 2 senators out of 81 and 40 representatives out of 513, Collor's coalition had mainly the support of Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL) and other three parties (PDS, PTB and PL). However, probably trusting in his high popularity, the president did not care to include in his coalition the PMDB, which had the greatest legislative group in the Chamber of Representatives and in the Senate. In 1991, he tried to bring along the PSDB, but

it was too late and he failed in that purpose. Thus, although it was a reachable goal, he did not develop an ample enough legislative coalition to support his policies.

In a similar way to Calderon, authors coincide in that Collor tried to govern by a plebiscitarian approach based in a direct relation with people through mass media, especially television, rather than trying to persuade and negotiate with congress and social groups.¹³ However, although on the one hand at first it allowed to further his reforms, on the other hand the president's eluding of Congress through executive decrees (in his first 60 days he enacted 37 of them) would made the legislature an enemy (as it also happened with Calderon), something that would facilitate the impeachment process. In February, 1991, Collor reduced the number of decrees and increased negotiations with Congress (Sallum and Casaroes 2011). In May he revamped his cabinet, but never shared it as to really be in the possibility of bringing additional parties to the governmental coalition. In this way, Collor's presidency over-relied on "hard power" political resources, such as decrees and public pressure through the "bully pulpit".

Furthermore, several mistakes in macroeconomic policy were made. First, the president appointed as Finance Minister an economist close to him but quite unexperienced (Leitao 2011). Second, *Plano Collor I* failed because it did not act on other aspects of macroeconomic policy (such as controlling the printing of bills) and because Collor basically tried to impose the freezes on accounts, prices and wages (involving even the imprisonment of supermarkets' managers) (Bresser 1991; Reid 2014). His efforts at negotiating and persuading political and social actors of the necessity to act together to defeat hyperinflation were often perceived more as theatrical than real (Veja, March 20, 1991). As in the case of Calderon's war against drug trafficking, for the most part he assumed that the rest of political actors –in this case, unions and business-- should accept strong measures just because they were being proposed by the president. Sallum and Casaroes (2011) as well as Weyland (1993) have argued that this strategy could not possibly work in the Brazil's transitional conditions of the time. And despite the fact that by the end of his first year it was clear that the plebiscitarian strategy was not working, Collor could have changed it but he did not. As to the issue of corruption, he did not care to keep an austere lifestyle (Weyland 1993; Reid 2014) nor to refrain several highly suspicious activities from taking

¹³ See for instance Bresser 1991; Lamounier 1991 and 2005; Ribeiro 1994; Yamautl 1998; Skidmore 1999; Leitao 2011; Weyland 1993; Melo 2007; and Tavares 1998.

place during his government, something which no doubt contributed to the corruption scandal which would lead to his fall.¹⁴

In short, I would argue that the Collor's presidency attained some achievements but at the same time caused harm to the welfare of the people and the confidence in government in Brazil. That can be associated to his developing a pertinent agenda but failing in the way he operated in the political realm as well as in the way he managed his personal expenses and life-style. Thus, it is a case of low presidential leadership (cell 2).

B. Fernando Cardoso (1994-1998)

Overall background and context

In January, 1995, running again against Lula da Silva, PSDB candidate Fernando H. Cardoso won the presidential elections, with the support of a heterodox alliance of his party and two right-wing parties --the Liberal Front Party (PFL) and the Brazilian Labour Party (PTB). On the one hand, in addition to also being backed by a small party (the PSDB had less than 20% of all representatives in congress), Cardoso had been finance minister of the previous government (Itamar Franco, 1992-1995) and ran a campaign defending its successes, which made him an affiliated president. On the other hand, this president would face a still vulnerable regime, as Brazil was just starting to overcome the long period of exorbitant inflation rates (Leitao 2011). He enjoyed the same strong presidential powers and high approval rates Collor did at the start of his mandate. Besides, Brazilian presidents' significant constitutional powers combined with a rather fragmented party system facilitate the formation of legislative coalitions. Thus, it could be said that, although not completely advantageous, Cardoso faced somewhat favorable times for leadership.

Policy results

In the first two years of his administration, Cardoso proposed 11 main legislative initiatives (Fleischer 1998): A telecommunications constitutional reform, in order to allow for the privatization of some state companies); an electricity and gas constitutional reforms, in order to

¹⁴ As we saw, in the case of Peña, the same type of behavior contributed to the strong drop in his acceptance rates and the clear defeat of his party in the 2018 presidential elections.

break the state monopoly in these fields; a public services concession reform, as to allow for private sub-contracting in the provision of these services; a coastal shipping constitutional reform, in order to allow foreign vessels to operate in Brazil; a foreign investment reform, so that foreign capital had the same treatment as national one; a budgetary reform, to increase flexibility in this realm; a social tax reform, to increase the pool of resources available for education and health; an administrative reform, aimed at increasing personnel flexibility and reducing public personal benefits compared to private sector workers; a social security reform, in order to reduce benefits and make the regimes more sustainable in the long run; and a fiscal reform, in order to increase overall fiscal resources.

Of these 11 reforms, the first 8 passed more or less swiftly in 1995 and 1996 (Power 1998). However, the administrative reform was not really approved (Gaetani 2002; Bresser Pereira 2003), the reform on social security passed but severely watered down and the tax reform had to be withdrawn. In other matters, economic growth rates were low and public debt increased significantly during his period. Education spending went down, although important progresses were achieved in health. While this president started several anti-poverty programs (Bolsa Escola, Auxilio Gas, Bolsa Alimentacao and Cartao Alimentacao), they were rather small.

On the other hand, Cardoso finally succeeded where the previous presidents had failed: He finally was able to control inflation, which went from about 1,000% in 1994 to less than 50% at the end of 1995 (Leitao 2011). Furthermore, he deepened Collor's privatization program, and thus several state-owned enterprises in areas such as roads, banking, steel milling, telecommunications and mining (such as *Telebras* and *Companhia Vale do Rio Doce*) were sold to the private sector. Although it had some public debt reduction effects, the most positive effects of these privatizations were extending some basic services such as telecommunications and energy. It should be noticed, however, that they took place amidst a polarized political debate, in which there were some criticisms of favoritism, corruption and under-valuation of state enterprises.

All in all, taking into account that 8 out of 11 reforms passed (plus a watered down one) --some of which were constitutional reforms quite difficult to achieve in Brazil--, plus finally defeating hyperinflation and the extensive privatization program, it would be fair to say that Cardoso got outstanding achievements. On the other hand, he managed to avoid producing significant harm

in terms of corruption or the worsening of any important public problem. Thanks to that, Cardoso's approval rate stayed at around 40% for most of his 1994-1998 mandate. They went down to around 30% in June, 1996, but went up to almost 50% in December of the same year (Datafolha 2002). These approval rates are quite significant if we compared them with those of Collor at the height of his administration, which were of about 40%. (Datafolha 1995). In this way, Cardoso was able to defeat Lula again in the presidential elections of 1998 and kept the presidency for a second term.

Understanding Cardoso's policy results and level of presidential leadership

If we consider that Cardoso was an affiliated president initially backed by a small party, an agenda composed of 11 reforms, several of them constitutional, plus an extensive privatization program and fighting inflation, probably could be seen as somewhat overambitious. On the other hand, however, he faced a vulnerable regime and thus had to propose important changes in different respects. Furthermore, in the case of Cardoso, the evaluation of his governmental agenda has to consider the way his actions in the operational realm made it more feasible.

In this sense, in contrast to Collor, Cardoso formed from the beginning an ample coalitional government by appointing members of other parties in several ministries. The alliance was formed by his own party, the PSDB, his two electoral allies --the PFL and the PTB--, Brazil's largest party (the centrist PMDB), as well as the right-wing Brazilian Progressive Party (PPB). In this way, while appointing a highly experienced economist such as Pedro Malan in Finance, he also appointed Nelson Jobim, from the PMDB, in the Justice Ministry. It could be said that the existence of this coalition gave greater plausibility to what otherwise would have been an overambitious agenda. Even more, according to Leitao (2011), Cardoso moved quite fast in presenting and bargaining his reforms and followed a strategy of presenting first the ones that had more chances of being approved (something he explicitly recognizes in his memoirs) (Cardoso 2006: 449).

Cardoso not only cared for maintaining from the start his multiparty coalition (Cardoso 2006), but in addition to that he actively used other soft power resources, such as actively bargaining with legislators and persuading social actors, while avoiding the use of any plebiscitarian type of approach. Thus, rather than attacking congress in the media, he made sure that direct

negotiations were conducted with members of congress, either by himself or his staff (Interviews 01 and 02; Cardoso 2006). To defeat inflation, instead of just trying to impose the required anti-inflationary measures, he engaged in intense persuasion and bargaining efforts with political and social actors and directly coordinated macroeconomic policy (DaMatta 2010; Leita0 2011:211; Diniz and Boschi 2007; D Avila 2013; Santos and Vilarouca 2008; Cardoso 2006). Several interviewees gave several specific examples of how in the process of policy implementation he combined budgetary concessions for legislators' projects with threats of withdrawing such support (Interviews 03 and 04). Furthermore, it should be noticed that deputies and senators belonging to the parties in the coalition would not always vote with the government and, despite the existence of the ample coalition, there still were important groups opposing the reforms (Peixoto 2008). Thus, when he had to, Cardoso also made use of the more "hard power" tool of legislative decrees. In short, Cardoso clearly exercised a more effective political leveraging.

In this way, it can be argued that the approval of an impressive set of structural reforms, finally defeating hyperinflation and implementing an extensive privatization program, without doing any harm in the way, can be associated with Cardoso's high level of strategic action in both the agenda-setting and political maneuvering realms. The end result was a high level of presidential leadership (cell 1).¹⁵

Conclusions

In this text I have presented the policy results and actions of the presidencies of Felipe Calderon and Enrique Peña in Mexico and of Fernando Collor and Fernando Cardoso in Brazil. It was shown how in Mexico Peña's administration presented somewhat higher levels of both policy results and strategic action than Calderon's, even when they acted within very similar institutional and political contexts, while in Brazil the Cardoso's administration presented much higher levels of both of these variables than Collor's, even when they also shared quite similar contexts. According to these differences, the ensuing place of each president is shown in table 1.

In this way, while Peña's reached some achievements (passing five important reforms) but produced some harm (especially in terms of the Mexican corruption levels), thus attaining a low

¹⁵ Whitehead (2009) considered Cardoso's success at presidential leadership as product of *astuzia fortunata*.

level of presidential leadership, Calderon reached no achievements (he only was able to promote rather incremental reforms) and caused great harm (mainly because he clearly worsened the public security problem), and hence it was a case of null presidential leadership. As both of these presidents governed under a similar political and institutional framework, it was argued that the difference in policy results was to a great extent due to variations in strategic behavior: Peña behaved highly strategically in the agenda setting realm (aiming at ambitious goals pertinent to his favorable political times), even if that was less the case in the governmental operation one (where, although combined soft and hard power resources to achieve some of this goals, he was not able to preempt the corruption and violence related crises that developed in the country during his presidency). In contrast, Calderon did not develop a pertinent agenda at all, while also developing strategically wrong strategies (namely, plebiscitarian approaches towards political actors and predominantly punitive approaches towards organized crime).

In Brazil, the value differences between the cases are even more contrasting: While Cardoso reached 8 important reforms and finally defeated hyper-inflation, producing no harm in the way and thus attaining a high level of presidential leadership, Collor reached only some achievements, causing at the same time some harm (mainly in the legitimacy of Brazilian democratic institutions), hence attaining a low level of leadership. As with the Mexican cases, since both of these presidents governed under a similar political and institutional framework, it was argued that the difference in policy results was to a great extent due to variations in strategic behavior: Cardoso developed a pertinent agenda and combined both soft and hard power types of political resources, while, although developing a pertinent agenda, Collor basically relied on a wrong, hard power, plebiscitarian type of strategy.

It is worth noticing that, given these results, Cardoso ended up with high acceptance rates and managed to get reelected, while Collor became quite unpopular and had to resign when he was about to be impeached. As to the Mexican presidents, they also ended up with significantly diminished acceptance rates and the presidential candidates of their respective parties openly lost in the following elections.

Of course, these conclusions are not free of caveats. For instance, in comparative studies such as this full control for other variables is not possible, as despite being quite similar political and institutional contexts are not exactly the same. However, this is the case in almost all of the most

similar cases research designs, which despite this weakness still allow to reach methodologically sound conclusions (George and Bennett 2005). Furthermore, as Hall (1993) has argued, policy learning is obviously likely to affect reform outcomes (especially in successive administrations). Indeed, it could be argued that to some extent Cardoso learned from Collor's mistakes just as Peña could have learnt from Calderon's ones. Nevertheless, it should be warned that while learning from past policy failures may help to better know what not to do, it does not necessarily lead to knowing what to do, and, even less, making it happen. Consequently, I would argue that strategic action remains as a key variable for the understanding of policy results, which can be differentiated and systematically measured.

Hence, based on these most similar case comparisons, it is possible to support the view that political leaders have important "degrees of freedom" within their institutional frameworks or historical junctures. In this sense, it is particularly interesting to note that while Collor enjoyed a juncture much more favorable than Cardoso, the first failed while the latter succeeded in reaching a high level of presidential leadership. This shows how, just as institutional frameworks, political junctures do not determine policy results and political leadership either. Political leaders can act strategically and attain important achievements despite not too favorable conditions as well as fail to do so in more favorable ones.

In other words, while institutions, ideologies, junctures or charisma can be important because they may block or facilitate change as well as frame or induce political behavior, agents' strategic action is essential for the understanding of political processes and outcomes. As strategic presidents would tend to more effectively provide the public goods citizens expect from the state, highlighting this variable is also important for sustaining the strength of both consolidated and consolidating democracies.

Interviews

01. Former head of the presidential staff at the Fernando H. Cardoso presidency, May, 2011, Sao Paulo.
02. Former presidential staff member of Fernando H. Cardoso presidency, May, 2011, Sao Paulo.

03. Former head of the presidential staff at the Fernando H. Cardoso presidency, April, 2011, Brasilia.
04. Fernando H. Cardoso, former president of Brazil, May, 2011, Sao Paulo.
05. Former presidential staff member of the Fernando Cardoso presidency, April, 2011, Brasilia.
06. Former presidential staff member of Fernando H. Cardoso presidency, May, 2011, Sao Paulo.
07. Former presidential staff member of Felipe Calderon, November, 2010, Mexico City.
08. Former presidential staff member of Felipe Calderon, November, 2010, Mexico City.
09. Presidential staff member of Enrique Peña, June, 2014
10. Presidential staff member of Enrique Peña, July, 2014.

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