

# An Analysis of Mayoral Assassinations in Mexico, 2000-17

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# An Analysis of Mayoral Assassinations in Mexico, 2000-17

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Mexico has seen elevated violence years, with roughly 300,000 people murdered since 2000 and over 28,000 registered homicides in 2017 alone. One special characteristic of this violence is the increased number of targeted killings against local authorities, perhaps most noticeably mayors, former mayors, and mayoral candidates, group has been killed since 2004. This paper examines the problem of violence targeting mayors, former mayors, and mayoral candidates in order to provide a better understanding of the new violence wave the country is experiencing.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Mexico has seen elevated violence with roughly 300,000 people murdered since 2000 and more than 28,000 homicides in 2017 alone, the worst year on record. One special characteristic of Mexico's recent violence is the increased number of targeted killings against local authorities, perhaps most noticeably mayors, former mayors, and mayoral candidates, group that has been killed since 2000 (Justice in Mexico, 2017). While there has been a substantial amount of research on the problem of violence against other special populations—such as journalists and women—there has been comparatively less attention to the high rate of assassinations targeting Mexico's mayors. This paper examines the problem of violence targeting aspiring, current, and former mayors in order

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to provide a better understanding of recent patterns of violence and the fight against organized crime in Mexico.

The Mexican Constitution establishes a federal system in which there are independently elected national, state, and local government officials serving in an executive or legislative capacity. At the local level, executive functions are assigned to a mayor or “municipal president” (*presidente municipal* or *alcalde*) who is selected through at-large elections to administer the local government or municipality (*municipio*) along with a slate of city council members (*regidores*) who serve with the mayor in the local legislative body (*ayuntamiento*). As of 2017, there were more than 2,400 mayors serving in municipalities in Mexico’s 31 states.<sup>1</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, there were no recorded cases of mayoral assassinations in Mexico. The first known case of an aspiring, current, or former mayor being assassinated in recent decades occurred in 2002, when former-mayor Federico Mendoza Fuerte from Mendez, Tamaulipas was killed by four gunshot wounds inflicted by a gunman in a passing car. Since then, at least 150 mayors, mayoral candidates, and former mayors were killed through 2017, with an average of 10 victims per year and a peak of 20 assassinations in 2010, as illustrated in Figure 1. By comparison, mayors have been killed at a much higher rate—over 25 times greater—than Mexico’s homicide rate for the general population, and possibly much higher than the rate of journalists’ killings in Mexico (See Figure 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Mexico City operates as an autonomous federal district, which has local delegations (*delegaciones*) instead of municipalities.

Figure 1: Number of Assassinations of Mayors, Mayoral Candidates, and Former Mayors, by Year

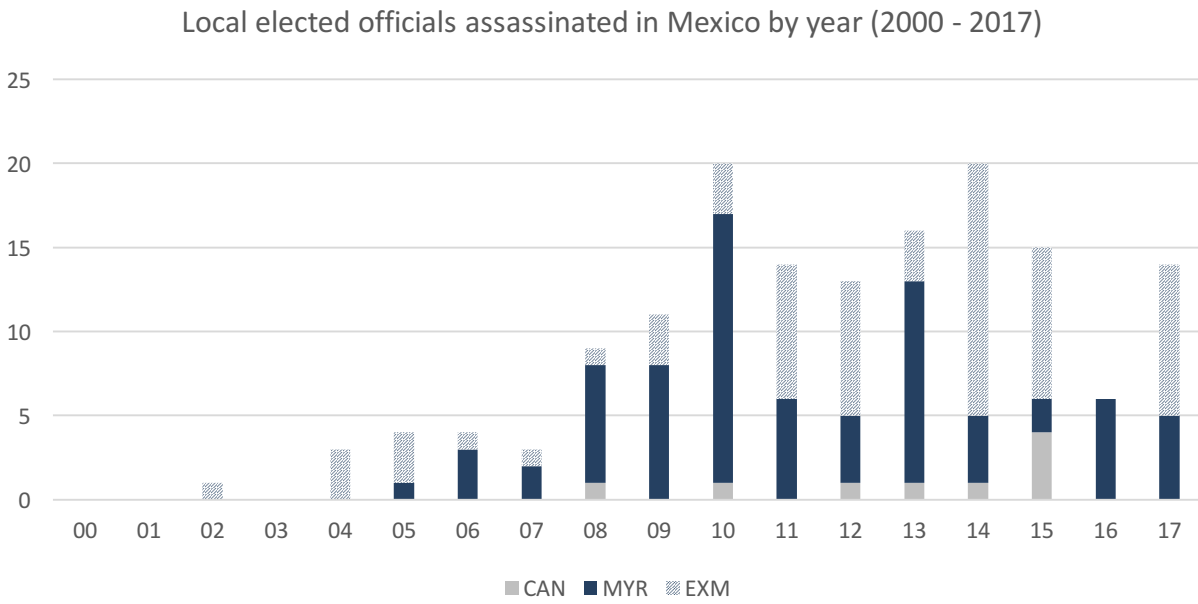
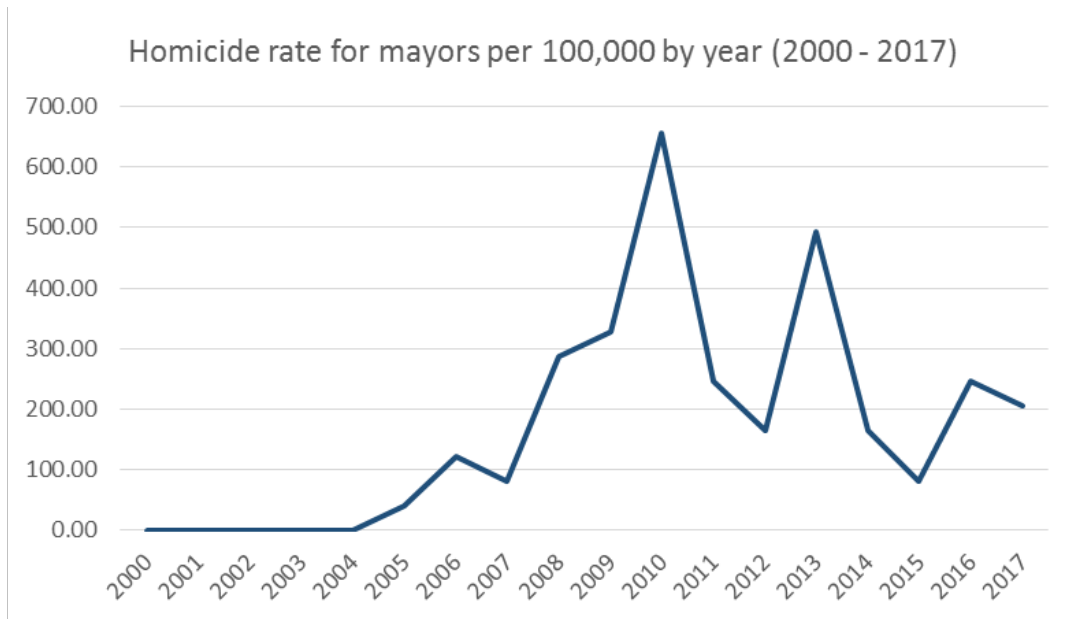
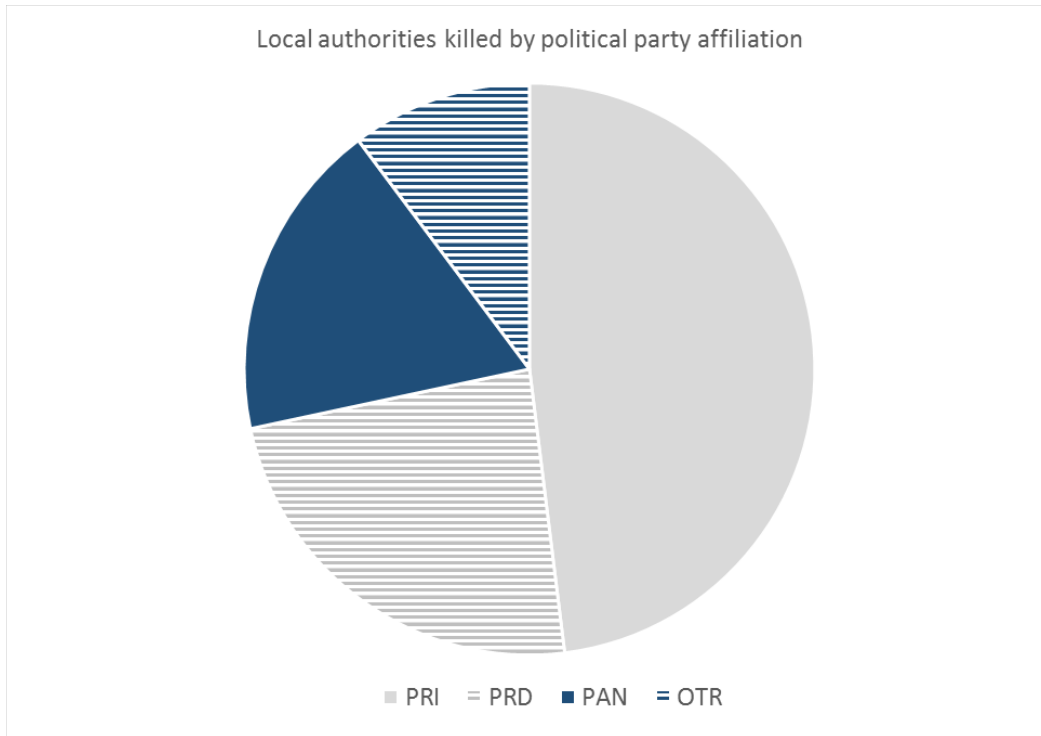


Figure 2: Rate of Assassinations of Mayors (per 100,000) and Compared to Mexico's National Homicide Rate (per 100,000), by Year



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Figure 3: Number of Mayors, Mayoral Candidates, and Former Mayors Killed by Political Party Affiliation



Despite the large number of mayoral assassinations that have occurred over the last several years, relatively little attention has been given to this topic. A handful of scholarly and journalistic accounts have attempted to address the problem, and the issue has received far less attention than the assassinations of journalists in Mexico (Rios, 2012; Shirk, Wood & Olson, 2014; Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). This working paper constitutes a preliminary attempt to gauge the magnitude of the problem of mayoral assassinations in Mexico, and the vital question of why these elected officials are being targeted for violence. In doing so, the paper helps to provide a better understanding of the wave of violence that Mexico experiences since the mid-2000s.

Numerous scholars have argued that Mexico's political opening in the 1990s and 2000s contributed to increased violence in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Astorga & Shirk, 2010; Trejo & Ley, 2017). Such scholars assert that the advent of free and fair electoral processes and greater political alternation interrupted illicit ties and clandestine agreements among corrupt Mexican government officials and organized crime groups. This, in turn, contributed to an increase in the number of direct confrontations between the Mexican government and organized crime groups, as well as competition among organized crime groups vying for illicit protection from corrupt officials. At the same time, decentralization of political power to state and local authorities, increased the extent to which such officials played a key role in either combatting or colluding with organized crime groups.

As a result of these changes, the disputes among drug trafficking networks have become increasingly localized. Rather than bribing high level government officials, organized crime groups have increasingly pressured local authorities to obtain tolerance or protection for their illicit activities. Using quantitative data on mayoral assassinations, I argue that the way in which disputes among local organized crime groups have played out is heavily dependent on timing and geography. This paper helps to document the elevated level of violence targeting local government officials in recent years and identify some of the factors that have contributed to this trend.

The paper is divided into six sections. First, I provide an overview of organized crime and violence trends in Mexico over the last several years, with additional data on the number of mayors killed. Next, I provide a more detailed analysis of the various scholarly explanations for Mexico's elevated levels of violence, including theories

that emphasize Mexico's democratization, kingpin strategy, narco-insurgency, narco-terrorism and local fights for plazas<sup>1</sup>. All of these theories implicitly or explicitly have a direct relevance to the violence targeting elected officials, yet few scholarly works have attempted to pinpoint the underlying dynamics that have led to the surge in mayoral assassinations in recent years. Next I provide an overview of my methodology for identifying the primary factors associated with mayoral assassinations, which consisted of compiling a unique dataset of based on open source information reported by reliable news outlets in Mexico. Using this dataset, I test several competing hypotheses to isolate the variables that appear to best explain the dramatic increase in assassinations of Mexico's mayors. I provide further discussion of my findings and their implications before offering my final conclusions and recommendations.

## **2. Background**

Since 2006, over 200,000 people have been victims of homicide in Mexico, with an estimated 170,000 people killed in circumstances appearing to involve organized crime (Angel, 2017). In earlier years, this kind of violence had been largely absent in Mexico. Occasional outbreaks of violence were typically concentrated in strategic locations for organized crime, such as drug production zones in Pacific Coast states and trafficking hubs along the border region. However, violence erupted dramatically in these and other places starting in 2008, when intentional homicides saw an increase of 57% in one year alone (Shirk & Wallman, 2010).



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Organized crime often targets particular segments of the population, based on the goals of a given criminal enterprise. For instance, according to data collected by Justice in Mexico, 142 journalists and media workers have died from 2000 to 2016 in incidents that have characteristics particular to organized crime groups. Journalists and media workers are common targets of criminal organizations because the press often exposes their illicit activities (Edmonds-Poli, 2014). In addition, journalists and media workers often work to expose corrupt ties between government officials and organized crime members. Other particular social groups that play key roles in civil society—priests, political activists, and students, for example—have also been targets of organized crime groups for a variety of reasons.

At the same time, criminal organizations have also directly targeted government officials. While such instances often involve violence against police, prosecutors, and other law enforcement, what is somewhat surprising is the dramatic increase in the number of local elected officials (as well as local candidates for public office) that have been killed in recent years. Indeed, according to data compiled by the Justice in Mexico program, there have been at least 151 mayors, former mayors or candidates killed in Mexico, averaging about ten per year, from 2002 to 2017.<sup>2</sup> This is a remarkable number of assassinations of government officials, particularly for a country that is not formally

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<sup>2</sup> MEMORIA is a unique database compiled by the Justice in Mexico program that compiles organized crime deaths in Mexico, based on reliable, open-source Mexican and American news outlets. The database records information about each victim such as name, occupation, date of death, cause of death, etc.

engaged in an internal civil war or other military conflict. By comparison, there is no country in Latin America that has had so many assassinations since the year 2000, and there are few other countries around the world that have seen a similar number of deadly attacks on democratically elected officials.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, Mexico's criminal violence has begun to have significant consequences not only for local politics, but for democratic governance. Strong, autonomous municipal governance was one of the founding principles of the modern Mexican political system, being the first link between the people and the federal government. Municipal autonomy was a battle cry in the 1910 Mexican Revolution and became enshrined in Article 115 of the country's 1917 Constitution. However, due to highly centralized, single party rule, the actual fiscal and political authority of municipalities was extremely limited during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until a series of reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, that the federal government began to decentralize political authority to grant municipalities a greater control over fiscal revenues and their own financial affairs, as determined by the mayor and city council members (*regidores*).

Municipalities also gained the power to claim territories, draft local laws, and have the final decision over other administrative matters, becoming autonomous and independent from the state as long as they did not violate state legislature. With these

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<sup>3</sup> See "Cronología de asesinatos a concejales, alcaldes y dirigentes en Caqueta" and "Horror en Brasil: 15 alcaldes asesinados en los últimos 9 meses" for more information.

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reforms municipalities also acquired the power to pull down resources directly from the federal government through transfers, making it easier for them to start amassing greater revenue.

That said, there are enormous demographic and economic disparities between Mexico's largest and smallest municipalities. The largest 295 municipalities have populations of 50,000 or more inhabitants. They account for 57% of the country's total population (Fuentes, 2014) and 80% of the country's GDP. The next largest 276 municipalities have populations of more than 15,000 inhabitants, and the remaining 1,867 municipalities have less than 15,000 inhabitants. At least half of those living in municipalities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants live in extreme poverty, and the levels of social marginalization in these municipalities have tended to grow over time. Given these circumstances, the vast majority of Mexican municipalities exhibit a significant lack of resources, infrastructure, and services (Merino, 2007). These circumstances create opportunities for organized crime groups, which are able to operate with minimal government interference since local officials have limited capacity to provide effective law enforcement and, in many cases, are easily corruptible.

Considering the increase of violence in Mexico, there are different theories that provide alternative explanations for the nature of heightened violence. However, there are only a few that specifically address the underlying reasons for mayoral assassinations in the country. In the following pages, there is a brief description of the most relevant literature addressing the increased violence in Mexico, especially since the mid-2000s.

### 3. Explanations for Increased Violence in Mexico

In this section, I examine some of the major factors that experts have identified in attempting to explain Mexico's recent violence. Specifically, I describe three major categories of explanations: 1. Studies that focus on democratization and the related political changes Mexico has experienced over the last three decades; 2. Studies that focus on Mexican government counter-drug strategies that focus on "kingpin removal" or leadership disruption; 3. Studies that attribute Mexico's recent security challenges to the rise of hyper-violent trans-national criminal organizations that have tendencies similar to insurgent and terrorist groups; and 4. Studies that focus on disputes among organized crime groups trying to monopolize local territories (*plazas*) used for the production or transit for illicit drugs.

#### 3.1 Political Change

There are three major political forces in Mexico that have been leading politics in the last couple of decades: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), the National Action Party (Partido Accion Nacional, PAN), and the Democratic Revolution Party (Partido de la Revolucion Democratica, PRD). The PRI is a political party originally situated to the central-left of the political spectrum and held Mexico's presidency for 71 years uninterrupted. Its mandate was characterized by a monopoly of public and private enterprises, centralized power, and a very strong hierarchy within its own structure. With these characteristics, the PRI created a favorable

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setting for organized crime groups to operate and flourish, benefitting some criminal networks with government protection to deter competing rivals. In addition, the PRI cultivated a longstanding reputation for having entrenched corruption ties, especially during the term of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. During President Salinas' term, Mexico experienced great economic growth and NAFTA was negotiated, however, soon after his term ended, Mexico was sunk in an economic depression and he decided to impose an exile on himself to retire to Ireland. Salinas was also involved in a scandal about his brother Raul, where he was accused of having strong ties with drug trafficking organizations who were helping him amass a fortune of millions of dollars that he kept in bank accounts in Switzerland. Raul Salinas was ultimately arrested and later on released but former President Carlos Salinas never had a good reputation, and rumors about the PRI being accomplice of certain drug organizations (especially the Sinaloa cartel) grew stronger.

After President Salinas' fiasco and a not-so-popular PRI successor for the next term (1994-2000), the year 2000 was supposed to bring hope to Mexico: a country that was led by the same political party at the Presidential level for 71 years was finally liberated when an opposition party won the national elections in July, 2000. With 42.52% of the vote (Larrosa) candidate Vicente Fox Quezada from PAN became president of Mexico, bringing the first alternation of power at the federal level to replace the PRI. With this change, Mexico expected to join the democratization wave and become a flourishing democracy, free of corruption, able to compete in the free market, and finally get rid of its reputation of just being a drug bridge to supply the United States.

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At first, President Fox decided not to focus much on Mexico's problem with narcotics, –which had been growing from the late 1980's after the demise of the Colombian cartels– but because he wanted to improve U.S.-Mexican relations and increase direct foreign investment, he soon yielded to United States' pressure to address the issue. Cooperation between both countries began to improve when the Fox administration showed its commitment through the arrest and killing of several major kingpins, among which were the two Arellano Felix cartel leaders: brothers Benjamin and Ramon (arrested and killed, respectively). With the United States as an ally, President Fox then decided to deploy military and federal police forces to key hotspots to dismantle drug organizations since local police forces were not enough anymore.

During the Fox administration, there was not much of the promised change: homicide rates in Mexico saw small increments each year, average economic growth was at 2.3%, and drug cartels –though deeply concerned about the administration change– continued business almost as usual (Ornelas, 2007). One can start talking about more tangible changes with his successor, former President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, the second representative from the PAN. President Calderón was elected in July, 2006 in a much more contested election than that of 2000. Still, he became President and since his first day he made it very clear that his priority was to combat drug cartels. It was in December 11, 2006 when he officially declared a Mexican War on Drugs, launching Operation Michoacan, a military strategy similar to Fox's but in a larger scale. He would deploy military and federal police forces as well but in significantly larger quantities and better equipped in order to recover public spaces that had been taken away from citizens

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by organized crime starting with his natal state and major violence spot: Michoacán (Calderón, 2006). This strategy consisted in a series of apprehensions, dismantling drug selling points, highway checkpoints, destruction of drug crops, search warrants, etc. Operation Michoacan was the starting point for a nation-wide military strategy that characterized Calderon's administration in Mexico from 2006 to 2012.

Alternation at the federal level however, would not have been possible without the push from the local level first. To understand the level of importance of local governments, it is important to highlight that the alternation process in Mexico started way before the year 2000 at the municipal and state level. Officially, it was in 1989<sup>3</sup> when the first governor from the PAN, Ernesto Ruffo Appel was elected, that the liberalization process started to build up in the country. Ruffo's election in Baja California was one of the first determining factors for the slow decay of the PRI's monopoly strategy, which resulted in the party's loss of over 55% of all municipalities by 2000 (Merino, 2007) and finally the party's loss of the presidential elections of 2000 and 2006. The election of Governor Ernesto Ruffo Appel from the PAN in Baja California in 1989 was the first state-level alternation of power recognized by the PRI. Up until this moment, the PRI was only willing to concede certain low-level municipalities to its "loyal opposition" the PAN in order to ensure its legitimacy and protect its continuity at the presidential level (Cornelius, Eisenstadt & Hindley, 1999). This strategy was also used by the PRI and the PAN to fight away the leftist PRD who was perceived as a threat for the country's stability.

With the 2000 Presidential alternation, the political structure in Mexico along with the drug trafficking structure suffered a strong earthquake, shaking the country altogether

and having to re-arrange what had been agreed for many years. Even when local authorities experienced alternation before 2000, they were still subordinate to the PRI's highly centralized monopoly over security so drug trafficking operations were able to remain virtually unaffected. However, when national leadership changed, political connections were disrupted and organized crime groups who benefited from advantageous agreements with the past regime had to adapt to the new government's approach to promote transparency, good governance, and a stricter policy toward drug cartels (Astorga & Shirk, 2010). As a result, drug trafficking organizations grew concerned and started fighting a fragmented State where their immunity could no longer be secured. In addition, drug trafficking organizations created their own defense forces to be able to "defend themselves from rival groups and from incoming opposition authorities" (Trejo & Ley, 2017). With the increase in their resources coming from drug and activity diversification, organized crime groups became stronger and started to surpass local governments both in power and resources, resulting in direct confrontations over security institutions and territories (Astorga, 2009).

Some scholars argue that with the power transition corruption networks between government officials and drug cartels broke, having corruption leaving with the PRI. However, there is evidence to prove that no political party is completely free of corruption. As Astorga and Shirk point out, at the local level there were several major drug corridors governed by opposition parties who also had agreements with their own drug cartels, just at a lower scale. It is important to emphasize then, the difference between broken and fragmented corruption networks. The relationship between organized crime



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groups was not entirely broken when the PAN won the Presidency, what happened was, in fact, that the relationship got fragmented, heightening the political relevance of mayors (Rios, 2011). As a side effect, drug trafficking organizations started targeting locally elected authorities to deter unfriendly candidates, blackmail non-cooperative officials, buy-in collaboration, and ultimately show the reach of their power.

### **3.2 Kingpin Strategy**

In December 11, 2006 President Felipe Calderon launched his military approach for the War on Drugs. This approach was in some degree an extension of President Fox's approach to drug trafficking but larger and stronger. It also included to make a target of major drug kingpins at the time, including Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera, the United States' most wanted person in 2015, valued \$5 million USD for any information that could lead to his arrest<sup>4</sup>. The rationale behind the kingpin strategy was simple: if you are able to capture the main leader, hopefully you can significantly thwart the cartel's operations, get crucial intelligence about its management and ultimately dismantle it in its entirety.

At first the operation seemed reasonable, especially for cartels that were thought to have centralized authority and hierarchical structures. However, it was soon proved that the kingpin strategy provoked a series of unintended sanguine consequences. First, there was the problem of the "Balloon Effect." Let's take the Colombia-Mexico example. When the United States decided to intervene in Colombia to eradicate cocaine cartels that were

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supplying the United States through Miami, instead of eliminating the problem, it caused the problem to move up to Mexico, where eventually Mexican cartels took over production of cocaine and other “hard” drugs to stock the United States’ demand: you pressure the balloon at the bottom and the air makes its way to the top. The same case happened with the kingpin strategy in Mexico. Calderon was inflicting so much pressure on certain geographic areas (Michoacán, Guerrero, Chihuahua, etc.), that it caused drug trafficking organizations to move to other regions to avoid the military operations. In consequence, violence that used to be concentrated in five cities throughout Mexico became a nationwide problem, turning otherwise peaceful cities such as Manzanillo, Colima in violent hotspots in a matter of months.

A second problem was the proliferation of numerous drug trafficking organizations, resulting from the wars of succession. When a kingpin was arrested, a war to find the next leader was unleashed. The clearest example for this case is the last arrest of “El Chapo” which happened on January 8, 2016<sup>5</sup>. After Guzman’s arrest the Sinaloa cartel lost its head literally and figuratively: “El Chapo,” the main leader, founding father<sup>10</sup>, and director of the organization is gone and the organization is facing internal disputes for who’s qualified or worthy enough to be his successor. Within the Sinaloa cartel there are now two factions: one led by Ismael “Mayo” Zambada and Guzman’s sons called “Los Chapitos;” and one led by Damaso Lopez Nunez “El Licenciado” called “Los Damasos”. What was once a single, unified and centralized –not to mention the most powerful– drug trafficking organization in Mexico, became two, fragmented, volatile and extremely violent factions. Both go under the name of Sinaloa cartel and are willing to cooperate

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when needed at least in paper, the problem is, they often fight each other over territory and, of course, leadership. With Guzman currently waiting for trial in New York City and arguably out of the picture, the future of the Sinaloa cartel is uncertain, but violence in Mexico keeps escalating while factions of cartels keep emerging as a result of more removed kingpins. Whatever the case, Sinaloa cartel looks far from being completely dismantled.

A third problem is that as Astorga and Shirk point out (2010), there is evidence to show that in regions where the government intervened more, there were more violent incidents related to organized crime.<sup>4</sup> This is especially relevant because it was also shown that there is a high probability for spillover to close neighbors in a considerably short time span mainly if those municipalities are connected to the narcotics transportation network. This argument is conflictive though because there is also evidence that shows that resident organized crime groups can actually be significantly weakened by coordinated government activity at least when the municipality and the presidential are from the same opposition party (PAN). The question is how much the government is willing to sacrifice in order to weaken a drug cartel if it is also known that retaliation is bound to happen.

### **3.3 Narco-insurgency or Narco-terrorism?**

Some scholars have gone as far as to compare Mexican drug trafficking

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<sup>4</sup> See Ahrens, J.M. for more information on El Chapo's last arrest.

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organizations to criminal insurgencies. Based on Merriam-Webster's definition that an insurgent is a "person who revolts against civil authority or an established government," (Grillo, 2015) Ioan Grillo proposes the possibility of analyzing Mexican cartels through a lens that establishes that they are revolting against the State, represented by local authorities. Grillo complements his analysis arguing that organized crime groups have terrorist characteristics and since terrorism is one of the major insurgency groups known in political science, they can be considered into the category of an insurgent group.

With the escalation of power, increase in resources, and diversification in activities that drug trafficking organizations experienced in Mexico in the early 2000's, they also acquired a new approach for their "operations." Mass executions became more popular, public displays of beheadings, bodies hanging from bridges, tortured and dismembered corpses appeared in public areas, and narco-messages became a form of communication used by cartels. All of these to expose their power, send messages to the public and deter rivals from intervening in their claimed territories. This trend of public display of exacerbated violence and cruelty was allegedly started by Ramon Arellano Felix, one of the co-founders of the Tijuana cartel and a highly-feared character in the drug world during his prime time. Ramon Arellano Felix did not only use to recruit extremely sanguine gang members as killers (sicarios), he also pioneered the method of dissolving bodies in acid both to get rid of evidence and to psychologically torture families. This trend of extreme violence is now continued by newer cartels such as the Jalisco New Generation cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion, CJNG), that uses many of the terror tactics implemented by Arellano Felix along with new ones such as YouTube videos

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of group executions and live transmissions of narco-messages.

Similar to Grillo's argument, scholar Robert Bunker proposes a "Threat Continuum" for studying drug cartel scenarios for Mexico. This continuum includes two parts relevant to this section: Terrorism studies and Insurgency studies. Bunker explains it is common for scholars to go from one area of study to the other because of their similarities, and acknowledges the fact that terrorism is commonly seen as an insurgency technique, however he still distinguishes one from another based on their main focus. Terrorism studies focus on groups that conduct "destructive attacks that generate 'terror'... to change governmental policies" (Bunker, 2011). This may result in a cartel-local government alliance that works along the federal government if they are willing to make concessions to let them continue with their illicit business. In this sense, narco-terrorism uses terror tactics as the ones mentioned above to promote its criminal objectives. In some weaker municipalities, it goes as far as creating sorts of mini governments that make their own taxes, control people's displacement, and charge a tariff (cobro de piso) in order to be either protected or not kidnapped by an organized crime group. Similarly, insurgency studies focuses on the actual political change and the revolutionary forces that can lead to a seizure of the government through non-military intervention which may result in the creation of a parallel shadow government. This has not happened yet in Mexico but it is, as Bunker discusses, a not-so-far possibility.

The problem with considering drug trafficking organizations insurgencies or terrorist groups is that it gives them a single political character that most Mexican drug cartels lack. For example, to be an insurgency, it is necessary to have some sort of

identification such as a uniform and to have a single ideology that you are defending and fighting for. Insurgencies also have a formal dimension that protects their human rights based on the ideologies they defend. In the case of organized crime, only the Gulf Cartel during its early years used to use uniforms to be distinguished as a para-military organization but it is no longer the case. In addition, there is no cartel that identifies with a single ideology other than creating profit for their enterprises and creating a market for their products, either in the United States or outside the continent. As for the terrorist aspect, it is true that some of the measures taken by drug cartels in Mexico cause terror and panic within the public, but there is little evidence that those activities are conducted in support of a greater cause, such as taking over the State or creating a parallel government. Even when Mexican organized crime groups supplant government at the local level, their primary objective is not to govern, but to be ungoverned.

### **3.4 Disputes Over Territorial Control**

Another theory revolving the increased drug related violence crisis in Mexico focuses mainly on local political interactions. In this sense, Professor Carlos Resa Nestares argues that organized crime related violence in Mexico saw an increase as a result of the alternation of presidential power in part but in larger part due to the local struggles between public and private security forces (Rodriguez, 2016). During the PRI's rule there was only one type of policing, public police, controlled from above and unquestioned. With the emergence of pluralism, criminal organizations created networks of private security forces for themselves in order to protect their activities in response to the lack of

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government protection, lost when the PRI was out of national power. These new security forces were made up of sanguine gang members and hitmen that were willing to protect the drug trafficking organization's structure and operations, but who were also in charge of collecting payments for private protection, extortions, kidnappings, and other activities that became highly profitable for these organizations. With the emergence of a private and criminal source of protection, competition arose, bringing massive shootings between organized crime members and police and military forces; but also bringing a rise in locally elected government officials' killings, because as Professor Resa states, killing a mayor is a straightforward and visual way to deter competition and intimidate local police forces (Rodriguez, 2016) who are usually not properly trained nor equipped anyways. Killing mayors serves as a deterrent for police forces because they are subordinate to local governments, so if they are willing to kill the highest authority in a municipality, it sends them the message that they are stateless and they would not have any issues destroying lower officers.

In addition, targeting local officials became a way for drug trafficking organizations to use their forces to introduce less severe mayors, individuals who would favor their activities and provide the protection that was lost at the Presidential level. In this sense, drug related violence is seen in a much local manner, with organized crime groups acting to benefit their activities and without any political drive or major nation-wide expansion purposes.

Scholars Trejo and Ley also defend the theory of local disputes to explain the rise of organized crime violence in Mexico in recent years, especially targeting mayors.

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According to their study, gaining control of municipalities became a major priority for drug trafficking organizations because it made it possible for them to extract resources from the government and allowed them to commit other illicit activities like extortion and kidnapping using official local institutions (Trejo & Ley, 2015). To do so, organized crime groups started to threaten, murder, or disappear any local official who would oppose their mandate, making local authorities a mayor political target.

These local disputes however, also gave rise to local rivalries between organized crime groups. Because violence is a result of local struggles, drug cartels often fight each other over the control of certain more profitable plaza. In the earlier days of drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, the “original” cartels divided up the nation into their territories and the violent episodes were sporadic and not as gruesome as the ones experienced after 2000. However, with the proliferation of numerous factions from the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels, added to the emergence of an extremely sanguine new cartel (i.e. CJNG), many territories became disputed and violence went down an unprecedented path.

### **4. Methodology**

To address the question of why are elected officials in Mexico being a target of organized crime violence, a few hypotheses were tested through a series of quantitative data gathering and statistical analyses focusing on two main dimensions: timing and geography. Some of the independent variables used were state population, urban/rural



municipality, population density, distance to the border, date and time of killing, corruption index, etc. For the dependent variable, the research focused on elected officials killed and homicide rates of mayors and in general.

#### **4.1 Hypotheses**

Since elected officials being assassinated have not been representatives of a particular political party, the first hypothesis to be tested is that political party identification does not determine a mayor's level of corruptibility, hence determining his or her level of vulnerability to violent crime. This is relevant to the argument presented because municipal authorities who tend to be more corrupt are less prone to be perceived as a threat by organized crime groups because of the possibility of having them as allies in exchange for a bribe. In contrast, municipal authorities who are less corrupt are more prone to be seen as imminent threats to drug trafficking organizations not only because of their inability to buy their cooperation and silence but also because of the possibility of prosecutorial efforts against the group.

The second hypothesis presented by this paper is that organized crime related violence trends in Mexico are expressed more in terms of geography, depending on variables such as state location, cartel domination, and in what part of the drug trafficking process they are involved in (i.e. production or transit). For the purposes of this project, the last point will be evaluated in terms of whether the state in question is considered a producer state where drug cartels have their crops and/or labs, or a transit state used by

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drug cartels to transport their products to their final destinations. These facts are relevant because violence has shown to be highly focalized, having most of the homicides against municipal elected officials concentrated in three states. All three states are either producers or transit states in terms of drug trafficking activities. An additional hypothesis related to this point is that states where cartels have a monopoly of power, present lower levels of violence than contested states, or states where two or more cartels are fighting the plaza.

The last hypothesis to be tested is that mayors are more likely to be targeted in rural areas with smaller populations. This may be attributable to two main factors: the first one is that the distant relationship between the federal and the local government of a remote, rural municipality allows the local cartels to outgrow their governments in resources and capabilities, ultimately exceeding the local government's capability to fight them or even to defend itself; the second one is that by being more distant, municipal authorities can ally with organized crime groups more easily without the federal being able to do anything about it. This second reason may seem like an advantage because of the potential protection that a drug trafficking organization could provide, however, it ends up being more dangerous in contested states because rival groups then have the possibility of perceiving that alliance as a threat and make local authorities target of their violent crimes, the most extreme one: homicide.

To test these hypotheses, I compiled and analyzed a dataset containing mayors, candidates, former mayors, and substitute mayors victims of organized crime killings used to run statistical analyses over a series of isolated variables. For example, to test the first

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hypothesis a map generated by Milenio was analyzed in order to determine the dominant political party at each state and then compared to a poll conducted by INEGI on corruption victims at each state to find correlations between the most corrupt states and their dominant political parties. In addition, to test the municipal level, the political party of each elected official killed was taken with the homicide rate of mayors to run a regression in order to look for correlation strength and significance.

To test the second hypothesis, four variables were taken into account. Geographic distribution of the states and drug production and laboratories were analyzed along with cartel presence as reported by the National Center for Planning, Analysis and Information to Combat Crime (Centro Nacional de Planeacion, Analisis e Informacion para el Combate a la Delincuencia, CENAPI), mayors' killings and mayor's homicide rates. This is where Chihuahua, Michoacan, and Guerrero became a case study because of the similarities of trends and the fact that they hold almost one third of all mayor's killings in the country.

Lastly, to test the third hypothesis the population of Michoacán, Chihuahua, and Guerrero was compared to their mayoral homicide rate in order to determine if there was a strong correlation or significance. Furthermore, descriptive statistics were used to determine which municipalities from each state had the most victims, using the National Institute for Statistics and Geography's data to divide them into rural and metropolitan cities.

## 4.2 Data gathering and data limitations

Data gathering efforts were a main activity during this research, mainly due to the limited amount of quantitative research and documented cases publicly available on the topic at hand. In order to analyze trends on organized crime killings against Mexican elected officials, a unique dataset was compiled with all the documented and verifiable cases of mayoral killings identifying a series of relevant variables such as position (mayor, former mayor, mayoral candidate), date of homicide, cause of death, weapon used, etc.<sup>5</sup> based primarily on public information from reliable Mexican and American media sources. Through these efforts, it was possible to identify the mentioned 151 victims who were categorized under elected officials killed in Mexico in incidents characteristic of organized crime. In addition, the data was analyzed through a series of descriptive methods to identify the most targeted political party, most common time of day when they were killed, most violent time of the year, total number of mayors killed by state and municipality, homicide rates for mayors, among other relevant statistic measures.<sup>6</sup>

The data used to produce this paper was mostly quantitative. The main limitation with relying on data for this study is the virtual inexistence of it. Mayoral homicides in Mexico did not officially exist until 2002 because there is no written documentation of them. The first case was documented in 2002 with only one reliable source to verify it. This does not necessarily mean there were no mayors, former mayors, or candidates killed

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<sup>5</sup> Data gathering efforts were possible thanks to the collaboration with the Justice in Mexico program.

<sup>6</sup> Homicide rate calculated based on the 2,438 municipalities in Mexico using a per 100,000 inhabitants rate.

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before 2002 but there is a major information gap when it comes to homicide counting in Mexico even for high profile officials.

Another problem worth noting is that there is no official record documenting the total number of journalists and media workers active in Mexico, making it extremely difficult to calculate a comparable homicide rate to that of the mayors produced in this research which was intended to be used as a comparative measure to provide a better understanding on the degree of danger that municipal elected officials are currently facing in Mexico.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1 Political Party**

From the total number of victims, 40% were representing the PRI, 20% the PRD, 15% PAN, and 8% other parties, leading to an initial reaction to think that PRI representatives are more likely to be targeted by organized crime. This thought can be a result of two assumptions: one is the historical relationship between this political party with corruption and organized crime groups; the second one is that the PRI still holds a majority of Mexico's municipal governments. In order to determine how much political party affects corruption, data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography in Mexico on corruption victims were used as dependent variables at the state level compared to the governing political party. On that analysis, the states with higher rates of

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corruption victims are: Morelos (20,092 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Sinaloa (18,144 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Chihuahua (17,621 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Michoacan (16,321 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Ciudad de Mexico (16,167 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Hidalgo (14,728 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Jalisco (14,351 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), Durango (14,292 victims per 100,000 inhabitants), and Baja California (14,127 victims per 100,000 inhabitants). From this list, 4 states are governed by the PRI, 3 by the PRD, 1 by the PAN and 1 by an alliance between the PAN and the PRD, meaning that corruption is present in every political party to some extent and is not a phenomenon exclusive of the PRI. In addition, when running a regression using state political party as independent variable and corruption victim rate as dependent variable, the analysis shows that political party only accounts for less than a 1% change in corruption victim rate changes, which leads to infer that corruption is not strictly correlated to political party affiliation at least at the state level in Mexico.

To test this at the local level, when running a regression between the political party affiliation of each victim and mayoral homicide rate the results were still accountable for less than a 1% change. Both tests serve to prove two things: first, that corruption is not exclusive of a single political party in Mexico; and second, that political party is not a determinant factor for mayoral killings at least taken by itself.

### 5.2 Timing

Timing plays a protagonist role in the assassination of mayors in Mexico in four significant ways: first, it is important to consider long-term periods of time generally

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determined by presidential terms, starting by one milestone that arguably started the alternation process in Mexico (i.e. Governor Ruffo's election); second, there is a significant difference between the point at their career when mayors are most likely to be killed, as candidates, as actual mayors, or as former mayors; third, throughout the year there are identifiable patterns that make months more or less violent; lastly, timing is also determinant in terms of hours of the day when mayors are more likely to be assassinated.

According to Justice in Mexico's MEMORIA database, 71 mayors, 68 former mayors, 8 mayor candidates, and 4 mayor substitutes have been assassinated from 2002 to October, 2017. From those victims, 9 died during the Fox administration, 64 during the Calderon administration, and 78 under the current administration of Pena Nieto. Before 2002, there is no documented case for individual mayoral victims. As mentioned before, the great majority of the victims were PRI representatives with 48%, this may be attributable to the fact that 1,510 municipalities in Mexico are still under the PRI's domain which represents 62% of the national territory (Federacion Nacional de Municipios de Mexico, 2017). What is interesting though is that the next major political force in Mexican municipalities now is the PAN, but PAN victims are actually in third place after the PRD with 18% and 24% of the victims respectively. This phenomenon may actually be a result of federal and municipal collaboration since most of the cases documented are from the Fox and Calderon administrations combined, in addition to the lack of collaboration between the PRI and the PRD signaled in the early 90's may still be present in contemporary Mexican politics.

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Turning to patterns in the year, based on the dataset collected April and October are the most violent months for elected officials with 16 documented cases from 2002 each. However, the most violent season is the fall, comprising the months of September, October, and November, with a total of 40 cases from 2002 to 2017. In contrast, the least violent season is the spring, comprising the months of March, April, and May, with a total of 35 cases. This gains relevance considering crop season starts in March for drugs like marihuana in many points of Mexico. The interesting part is that the homicide wave reaches its peak right after crop season starts only after hitting its lowest point right on March, remaining almost constant for the rest of the months until it peaks again in October. If the information is disaggregated even more, the most dangerous month for mayors specifically tends to be June, right after crop season is over, followed by October and November. For former mayors, there is a tie between October, November, and December with 8 former candidates killed. Finally, for candidates the most violent month is May, and interestingly enough, the majority of the cases –3 out of 4– happened in May, 2015. One point worth highlighting is the fact that there seems to be a pattern to peak every four months starting in February as in a cycle. February, June and October (apart from April, already mentioned) all have the highest numbers during the year and are 4 months apart, the same time it takes a drug producer to cultivate and crop poppy seed for example.

In terms of time of the day, there were 45 cases committed at night anywhere between 9:00PM and 4:00AM; 44 committed in the afternoon between 1:00PM and 8:00PM; 36 committed in the morning between 5:00PM and 12:00PM; and 14 cases that



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did not have verifiable information about the hour. Because of the proximity between the number of cases committed at night and in the afternoon, it is not safe to make certain assumptions but the hypotheses with either case were as follows: if the clear majority of cases were committed at night, it could be determined that organized crime groups were still operating undercover and had no intention of being public about their criminal endeavors; on the contrary, if the clear majority of cases were committed at daylight (either afternoon or morning), it could be determined that organized crime groups were less concerned about being public, potentially having more terroristic aims to cause panic amongst citizenry and sending power messages in a more overt manner.

### 5.3 Geography

Almost one third of the documented cases from 2002 to 2017 were situated in three major states in Mexico: Michoacan, Guerrero, and Chihuahua.<sup>7</sup> It is important to highlight three shared characteristics of these three states: first, they were strategic points of Calderon's War on Drugs, facing strong militarization from 2006 onwards; second, they are identified as major drug producers by the Mexican National Secretariat of Defense; and third, they are known as "contested states," meaning they have the presence of more than one drug trafficking organization within their territories. Furthermore, when studying organized crime violence in Mexico, one can identify distinct kinds of trends developing

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<sup>7</sup> A significant proportion of the victims were also located in Oaxaca. Given the purposes of this research Oaxaca was left out of the tested sample because the roots of the violence experienced in that southern state are arguably different than those of Michoacan, Guerrero, and Chihuahua.

in the country all at the same time: in some states political violence prevails, in some others narco violence prevails, and in some others it is a complex mixture of both.

In the case of the three states at study, the combination of political party and cartel presence in the state account for a 12% change in mayor killings.<sup>8</sup> What this means is that increasing the number for political party, which in this research means moving away from the PRI, and increasing the number of cartels present in a territory has a direct impact in mayoral killings, reducing them by 12%. Now, when the regression was run only with political party, the correlation dropped to only 6% change in mayor killings for the three states, which means political party is not necessarily relevant until cartel presence is also taken into account.

From that finding, there is one aspect worth analyzing further: cartel presence. Since there is no record of cartel dominance by municipality, the best data available was at the state level, thus this research focused on the case studies. For Guerrero, there was identified presence of 3 major cartels; for Michoacan 2; and for Chihuahua also 2. This is important because it signals the case of a contested territory where no single cartel has entire dominance, tending to have violent encounters over plaza dominance. In addition, there is significant drug presence in the three states as they are identified as major drug producers. Currently, Guerrero is the number one producer of poppy in Mexico; Chihuahua is identified for producing poppy, smaller quantities of marihuana (Molina,

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<sup>8</sup> To make political party quantifiable, a coding system had to be developed. PRI=1, PAN=2, PRD=3, and MORENA=4. These parties were the only ones represented in the three states considered.

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2016), and having significant quantities of laboratories as reported by the National Secretariat of Defense (Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional, SEDENA); and Michoacan has a long history with marihuana production and laboratories, in the early days for methamphetamines, now most likely for heroine.

To continue to test the significance of geography a correlation between state population, mayor killings, and cartel presence was analyzed in order to test the hypothesis that contested states tend to have more killings and that rural (also less populated) areas tend to suffer of more drug related violence. After running the correlation, it was found that population and mayor killings were correlated in 45% of the cases meaning that as population decreases, mayor killings in fact increase. In addition, cartel presence does also affect mayor killings in an incremental manner with a 28% correlation, proving that contested states with two or more cartels in the area tend to have more elected officials assassinated.

Interestingly enough, when a descriptive analysis was done to determine what percentage of the killings happened in urban areas versus in rural areas of the three case studies, Chihuahua showed the most surprising results, having 54% of its documented cases happening in urban municipalities, Juarez being the most recurrent one. In sharp contrast and confirming the hypothesis presented earlier, Michoacán showed 95% of its cases in rural municipalities and Guerrero had 100% of its mayor victims killed in rural areas.

## **6. Analysis**

After running multiple regressions looking for strong correlations between political parties and homicides against elected officials in Mexico both at the national level and in specific geographic locations, there were no significant trends detected targeting one single political party, leading to the conclusion that the fact that the PRI has the majority of victims may be more likely attributed to the fact that they still hold the majority of municipalities. In addition, the fact that the PRD is the second biggest target is more likely a result of its larger presence in rural and less metropolitan communities in comparison to the PAN, who is more prominent in the northern, more populated municipalities of the country which tend to have lower mayor killings but not directly related to political party. Furthermore, there is enough evidence as to say that corruption is not exclusive to a single political party, meaning there is no substantial basis to target one political party over the other under the assumption that they tend to be more corruptible and bought by organized crime groups.

In regards to mayoral victims, there was a significant relation between the general homicide rate and the homicide rate against mayors which was predictable. However, the increase for the mayor homicide rate is unnatural and the percentage change accounts for only half of the cases, meaning there is something else affecting the trend that is as significant as the national homicide trend. One significant factor detected by this research was state population which affects 45% of mayor killings inversely, meaning that states with lower populations are more likely to have higher numbers of mayoral victims. This is

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true for rural municipalities in Michoacán and Guerrero, which saw more than 95% of their states' killings of elected officials. Chihuahua on the other hand is an interesting exception of the rule and is worth analyzing because most of its cases happened in two of its biggest cities and one of its urban metropolitan regions.

The one differentiator of Chihuahua compared to Michoacán and Guerrero is its proximity to the border, especially its urban metropolitan city called Juarez which borders United States' city El Paso, Texas and has been historically used as a major bridge to transit drugs into the United States. This factor may be playing a role to make Juarez an exception to the relationship between population and mayor killings in Mexico because of its drug transit character. Being a major transit zone, with producing zones close-by, and allocated in a known contested state makes Juarez a prime location for mayors to become targets of drug trafficking violence. This, however must not be generalized since not all transit cities with these characteristics have high rates of municipal elected official killings.

In terms of timing, it is remarkable that the most targeted victims in Mexico are elected officials when they are serving as mayors. This is no surprise given the power they hold when they are actually in the position as described earlier. For a mayor, it is crucial to be aware of the surroundings: what state they live in, what municipality they are governing in, and what criminal organizations are present among them. In this sense, it becomes relevant to know the importance of a monopolized state versus a contested state. If a mayor governs in a monopolized state in terms of organized crime, it is less likely that he will become a target, not because the criminal organization would not like his collaboration, but because they do not see an imminent threat to their operations from a

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rival group. The problem arises when a mayor is governing in a contested state with the presence of two or more cartels fighting over plazas, because there will not only be sanguine disputes in his own territory but most likely one (or both) organization will attempt to corrupt him for protection and/or collaboration. This will automatically trigger a state of alert for the other criminal organization who will perceive the mayor as a threat and then he or she will become a target and if the official does not collaborate with the rival group, homicide will be the most likely ending of the fighting.

The alternative scenario is that the elected official is not liked by either cartel from the beginning because they already had a candidate in mind so the process for them becomes simpler. They start threatening the officer until he or she resigns, and if the mayor refuses, there are two alternative endings: the drug organizations try to win the officer over or the story ends sooner. In either scenario mayors are vulnerable and their resources are sharply outweighed by those of drug trafficking organizations. A logical solution would be to request protection from the state and federal authorities, but even when this protection had been granted in some high-profile cases, victims are not guaranteed their safety. The reason is that the protection granted by higher authorities is often not adequately equipped and are easily outnumbered by organized crime once they are settled on their purpose. At other times, organized crime groups just wait out until higher authorities get tired and retire their security to act almost immediately after they leave. For this reason, it is important to identify trends on timing like most violent months, most recurrent time of killing, etc. and disaggregate them for special populations in order

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to prepare better security strategies for mayors, former mayors, mayor candidates, and other elected officials vulnerable to organized crime groups in Mexico and elsewhere.

## **7. Conclusion**

As scholar Edgardo Buscaglia argues, it is not possible nor desirable for Mexico to go back to the old PRI monopoly of power seeking for an authoritarian control over organized crime in order to reduce criminality (2013). Even though this may have sounded logical with the return of the PRI to power, this idea is problematic because it gives organized crime the power to determine when and under what conditions to act or react based on treatment by the State, meaning that the State becomes subordinate to an organized crime group. Another problem with this scenario is that there is high potential for increased violence when new powerful organizations try to challenge the authority of established drug cartels, as is the case of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in Western Mexico.

Based on the information gathered, a main priority for countries like Mexico should be creating some leverage for states and municipalities, since this disparity is, aside from creating greater social inequalities, contributing to greater violence levels also against elected officials. As suggested by this research, the hypothesis that rural areas are more likely to have higher numbers of mayoral victims is supported by statistical evidence. It is important to keep fostering metropolitan areas, but it is as important to promote the formation of new ones and a better distribution of resources to reduce disparities and make it harder for drug trafficking organizations to outweigh a municipality's resources. It

would also be helpful to teach municipalities how to properly manage their budgets and create their own assets, designing administration and budgeting trainings for elected officials to better allocate their municipalities' resources. As Merino commented on his book, municipalities were given capabilities, but no one taught them how to implement and manage those capabilities. Trainings and workshops based on success stories may be useful for municipalities that may not be doing so well in managing their budgets (both with federal funds and own) taking into account the differences in conditions and the wide diversity of municipalities in Mexico. In addition, self-defense trainings and even the creation of a special police force to protect mayors may provide a helpful resource for elected officials to ensure their security at least while they serve their terms.

Regarding the hypothesis where drug producing states tend to have more violence against local officials –and in general, really— the creation of agricultural incentives is a good policy measure to pursue. However, the methods to do so should be carefully implemented, acknowledging for the grave narcotics problem that the country is undergoing and the long history with illegal crops that Mexico has experienced. Agricultural incentives should be given to move away from illegal plantations, since many of the people dedicated to these see their crops as any other plant and are in the business because they need a steady form of employment, and given the weather conditions illicit crops flourish in their terrains. This issue could also be helped with the first recommendation to foster the development of metropolitan areas and a better distribution of resources, allowing access for people to alternative sources of employment.



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In regards to the issue of how much should the government act to thwart cartel operations in order to avoid spillover under the kingpin strategy, I took the time to run a regression using drug seizures in three major categories as my independent variables: seizure of opioids, seizure of cocaine, and seizure of marihuana with percentage change in mayor killings as my dependent variable in order to determine if there was any correlation directly affecting this sector of the population. The result was promising: for the seizures of opioids, the correlation was negative, meaning that as seizures increase, killings of mayors will decrease, representing a change of 79%. For cocaine seizures, the correlation was stronger with a 97% and a positive relationship, meaning that government measures need to be more cautious because as seizures increase, killings will continue to increase. For marihuana, the correlation was at 67% and the relation was also positive, meaning whatever policy is taken, must also be cautious in order to protect the integrity of municipal officials. For immediate action, it seems like opioid seizures are the most likely to protect violence spillovers against municipal elected officials, reducing mayoral killings significantly after the seizure occurs.

Lastly, there is one piece of the research that calls for further analysis and that is the portion of targeting former mayors. Former mayors represented 43% of the total victims from 2002 to 2017, and the first documented victim was actually a former mayor, yet the reasons why former mayors are being targeted are still unclear, since they do not hold the same amount of political pull that mayors do, or that they did when they were mayors. For some, they were still involved in the political arena in their states, however the reasons for their executions were still unclear. Having a better grasp on time and geography trends for

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elected official killings in Mexico provides a basis for informed security strategies in order to reduce homicide rates, targeting the major hotspots where mayors are at higher risk. In addition, it allows for a better understanding of the drug violence wave that the country is undergoing showing a relationship between drug production, transit, and violence presence in certain crucial states for the old War on Drugs.

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