Theories of Democratic Consolidation: A Mexico-Germany Comparison

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This article seeks to examine and apply theories of democratic consolidation by comparing the democratisation process of West Germany after the Second World War with the current democratic transition in Mexico. Drawing on a number of general theories in this area, it proposes two lines of inquiry as a framework of comparison: political commitment and public commitment. This article also offers ‘public homogeneity’ as an important component of the latter. It examines the impact of a comparative approach among theories of democratic consolidation and transition. This article concludes that political commitment has been the instrumental factor in both cases, and that West Germany’s stronger political commitment was key to ensuring a smoother democratic consolidation than that which has taken place in Mexico.

Introduction

During the 1990s, Mexico slowly emerged from the grip of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had been the sole party in power since 1929. Despite relatively open elections from 1994 and onwards, the country continues to face obstacles on the road to democratic consolidation. In seeking to explain the underlying causes, this article compares the current democratic transition in Mexico to the democratisation process in West Germany after the Second World War. While there are great spatial and temporal differences between the two cases, these differences and the relative uniqueness of each country’s situation highlight the essential characteristics of the consolidation process. Looking at two dissimilar case studies also provides an opportunity to examine the general theories in this area to attempt to reconcile them within an overall comparative framework.

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This article begins with a brief overview of the theories and the main causes of democratic consolidation, and then proposes two lines of inquiry as a framework of comparison: political commitment and public commitment. Apart from the approaches outlined within the existing literature outlined below, this article proposes ‘public homogeneity’ as an important component of the latter, which becomes apparent when comparing the Mexican and German examples. The article concludes by making some general observations on the implications of the comparative approach within the field of democratic consolidation and transition theories. In relation to the two case studies, it concludes that political commitment has been the instrumental factor in both cases, and that West Germany’s stronger political commitment was key to ensuring a smoother democratic consolidation than that which has taken place in Mexico so far.

**Democratic Consolidation**

The necessary features of a consolidated democracy have been extensively discussed. In a quantitative study, Collier and Levitsky found that the political literature provides hundreds of examples of how to measure and label democracies (1997). One of the most prominent and commonly used definitions is the eight criteria set out by Robert Dahl in his seminal book *Polyarchy*: (1) the right to vote, (2) the right to be elected, (3) right of political leaders to compete for support, (4) free and fair elections, (5) freedom of expression, (6) alternative sources of information, (7) freedom of association, and (8) public policy institutions depending on votes and expressions of preference (1971: 3). This article seeks to establish the causes of consolidation, not when consolidation can be said to have occurred. Nevertheless, the two are clearly interlinked. If you are to establish the causes of a particular state of affairs, the state of affairs must first be adequately defined.

In the West German case, this article will borrow from Lijphart’s analysis, where he considers West Germany to be a proper democracy in 1949; relying, *inter alia*, on Dahl’s criteria as enunciated above (1999: 50). The analysis may be over-optimistic in assuming that sufficient consolidation had occurred after merely four years, but at least indicates that the West German democratic consolidation was relatively rapid, especially if compared to that of
Mexico. In 1999, for the first time, Freedom House\textsuperscript{2} rated Mexico as “free” in recognition of the forthcoming presidential election the following year (Smith 2012: 80-1), yet in 2011 Mexico was again downgraded to “partly free” (Freedom House 2011). Mexico continues to heavily restrain citizens’ rights. As Selee and Peschard note, the Mexican political regime is no longer authoritarian, but has instead transitioned into “an exclusionary democratic” regime (2010: 3).

Twenty years on from the first relatively open election in 1994, Mexico still struggles to fulfil Dahl’s eight criteria outlined above. In contrast, West Germany’s democratic consolidation seems to have been considerably smoother. Relying on general theories of democratic consolidation, this article seeks to offer an explanation for this discrepancy. In the following section, an attempt is made to review and synthesise the general theories in order to apply them comparatively.

Country-specific differences have a definite impact – the Mexican drug trade being a clear example. Yet by employing a general framework of analysis, comparison is possible and contributes not only to the understanding of the instant cases, but also to the understanding of the field of democratic consolidation as a whole.

\textbf{Causes of Democratic Consolidation}

Most of the post-war writings on democratic consolidation take a structural, deterministic approach to the growth of democracy, emphasising intricately linked socio-economic causes. Lerner established in \textit{The Passing of Traditional Society} a strong correlation between urbanisation and literacy (1958: 54-68), and argued that these factors, together with increased communication, lead to political development (\textit{Ibid}: 52-54, 398-412). Pye also emphasised communication as a driver of political development (1966: 153-171). Lipset argued in his seminal essay in 1959 that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (1959: 75), from which the Modernization School emerged, linking democracy and economic development. In another influential study, Almond and Verba examined the role of political values in achieving democratic consolidation, and also showed

\textsuperscript{2} Independent US-based watchdog dedicated to promoting freedom around the world. Since 1973 it has published an annual \textit{Freedom in the World} report, surveying political rights and civil liberties in the majority of the nations around the world. Their surveys are widely used and relied on by academic commentators.
strong linkages to levels of education (1963: 87). The thesis of such “civic cultural” values has been supported recently most notably by Inglehart, terming them “self-expression values” (Welzel et al 2003: 342).

These structural, deterministic causes, which include levels of education, communication, economic development and political culture, affect a country’s population as a whole. They will be included under the notion of public commitment, representing a ‘bottom-up’ approach to democratic consolidation.

However, these theories have been criticised for lacking elements of agency. Building on the modernisation debate, Przeworski and Limongi found that while “the chances for the survival of democracy are greater when the country is richer” (1997: 177), economic development is not a causal factor in areas where democracy has not already risen. With reference to O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), they further state that: “democracy is or is not established by political actors pursuing their goals” (1997: 177).

In order to accommodate a higher degree of agency, this article denotes political commitment as the willingness of a country’s political elite to consolidate democracy. Political commitment is sometimes driven by pressure from its public counterpart. If political commitment does not react to public pressure, this may ultimately result in uprising or revolution; with a successful revolution then resulting in a change of the political elite. However, this pressure can also be inversed. The elite can either seek to oppress or enhance democratic practice, representing a ‘top-down’ approach to consolidation.

The article now turns to consider each of these two strands of inquiry individually, first examining the degree of political commitment in each country.

**Political Commitment**

In their Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) emphasised the need for political will to instigate reform and the importance that the military abstain from interfering. In Mexico, due to the long-run stability and clientele system of the PRI party, the army has largely kept out of civilian affairs (Camp 2004: 367). It was the PRI that initiated political change and democratic transformation at the beginning of the 1990s, after being in
power since 1929. Yet it did so only reluctantly and in response to growing pressure from both local parties and international partners (Oelsner & Bain 2009: 293).

Allegations of voting fraud haunted both the 1988 and 1994 elections (McCann & Domínguez 1998: 483-484). The first election in which the PRI lost the Presidency was in 2000, to the National Action Party (PAN), which won again in 2006. In the most recent election in 2012, the PRI reclaimed power. While all of these elections have been marred by allegations of voting fraud, none of them seem to have been substantial (Economist 2012). It may be argued that widespread corruption\(^3\) indicates a poor democratic commitment among politicians, since it has a direct impact on transparency and the need for policy to be based on expressions of preference, as in Dahl’s eighth criteria. In addition, the involvement of international democracy organisations in the 1994 election, a pivotal time for the shaping of Mexican political culture, was surprisingly weak (Fox 2004: 494).

In contrast, West Germany experienced a unique situation following Germany’s defeat in the Second World War. Firstly, the three occupying powers (Britain, France and the United States) constituted a benevolent military dictatorship, with a clear commitment to instituting democracy in West Germany (Welzel 2009: 88). Secondly, on evaluating the failures of the Weimar Republic previous to the war, the mistakes of the past could be avoided. The democratic commitment among the political elite was therefore unusually strong, ushering in a democratic constitution and independent political institutions. Welzel lists West Germany as a typical example of “imposed democratization” (2009: 88). In addition, the allied powers were “committed to an extensive program of re-education designed to change German political values and attitudes so that the formal democratic institutions … would have widespread popular support” (Conradt 1989: 213). Mexico, on the other hand, has enjoyed no such top-down democratic enhancement. The difference is striking and will likely have had a decisive impact on the pace of consolidation.

This article has considered the first limb in the comparative framework and assessed the extent to which the political elite have sought to enhance democratic practice from a top-down perspective. It now shifts its focus to consider education, communication and participation, trust in government and institutions, economic development, and finally ‘public homogeneity’, under the heading of ‘public commitment’.

\(^3\) Mexico is ranked 106 out of 183 countries in the Corruptions Perception Index (Transparency International 2011:5).
Public Commitment

While West Germany expressed a high degree of political commitment, public commitment was considerably weaker. One reason, arguably, was the relatively low rate of education: in 1950 West Germany had only 0.042 second level education institutions per thousand inhabitants, while France and the United Kingdom had levels of 0.060 and 0.13 respectively (UNESCO 1966: 22, 171, 174).\(^4\) Mexico has also had a poor educational record. In 2007 national literacy rates were still below 93% (UNESCO 2007). The importance of education in consolidation was reaffirmed by a study which asked Mexicans if they believed that they could change their economic and political conditions by voting. 75% of those with university education responded positively, while 58% with only primary education responded negatively (Camp 2007: 86).

Concerning communication and the diffusion of ideas and information, in 1952, West Germany had a circulation of 242 newspapers per thousand inhabitants, below many other European countries with up to 500 newspapers per thousand inhabitants (UNESCO 1966: 33). In Mexico, 98% of the population is reached by radio transmissions and 92% by television broadcasts (UNESCO 2005). After the state Televisa network became more open and competition increased during the 1990s, the freedom of the Mexican media improved (Chappell 2004: 371-372).

Relative to the German process, the Mexican consolidation process is thus strengthened by much broader rights of access to information and communication, heightening the possibility for citizen participation. In addition, both nations suffer from comparatively low rates of education.

Another obstacle to democratic consolidation in Mexico is its relatively weak civil society (Olvera 2004: 403-439). In 2000, only 7% of the Mexican population had any affiliation to political organisations (Camp 2007: 57). The corresponding number in Germany was 3% in 1959, and only 7% of Germans reported national pride in governmental and political institutions (Almond & Verba 1963: 302). Thus Germans arguably lacked a strong value-

\(^4\) Unfortunately, literacy rates, which is arguably a better matrix and used in the Mexican example, is not available for the period sought.
based commitment to their current democratic government, and like the Mexico of today, exhibited low levels of political participation.

The trust in government in Mexico is equally meagre. In 2003, only 24% expressed confidence in Congress, 26% expressed confidence in political parties and only 26% had confidence in the law and judicial system (Camp 2007: 57, 66). In 2005, 23% still thought that their vote would not be respected (Camp 2007: 65). Asked about expectations of democracy itself, a majority of Mexicans gave primacy to economic improvement rather than liberty. The former could equally be provided by an authoritarian regime, and thus a deeper commitment to democracy itself may be lacking among Mexicans (Camp 2007: 161-162). This is worrisome, indicating that if Mexico’s political commitment wavers, then public opposition may not be strong enough to counter a deteriorating spiral.

Turning to economic development, in Mexico in 2000, half of the population was living in poverty on less than 2 dollars per day, and half of these in “absolute” poverty on less than 1 dollar per day (Camp 2011: 18). Mexico experienced a grave financial crisis with GDP contracting in 1995 and suffered again during the Global Recession in 2009, with negative GDP growth of 6.1 per cent (Camp 2007: 281; Global Finance 2010). Furthermore, economic growth and GDP per capita is far behind other Latin American countries, and while the North American Free Trade Agreement has helped to increase trade, it has not increased income distribution (Camp 2011: 24). In addition, the drug wars that have flared up in the north have further undermined confidence and participation in the political process, as well as being detrimental to the Mexican economy (Shirk 2011: 3-27).

By comparison, German economic development was radically different. Between 1950 and 1959, “GDP rose by nearly 8% per annum, faster than anywhere else in Europe” (Eichengreen & Ritschl 2009: 191). According to the Modernization School, as referred to above, such economic growth would have had a substantial impact on the public’s democratic commitment. This has been lacking in Mexico; economic growth is an area where the two nations exhibit radical differences.

This article finally proposes ‘public homogeneity’ as a cause for greater public commitment, something that becomes evident in the Mexican-German comparison. The indigenous populations of Mexico have often felt marginalised within the Mexican state, leading to demands for greater representation and the 1994 Zapatista uprising (Mattiace 1997: 32-71). While this sparked a strong growth in civil society organisations (Gilbreth & Otero 2001: 7-
26), these organisations have sought to address a problem that would never have arisen in Germany, a country with a population of a similar cultural-ethnic background. In a system of equal representation, public homogeneity arguably increases the legitimacy of public institutions and eases a democratic transition. Linz and Stepan make a similar point in arguing that “the greater the extent to which the population of a state is composed of a plurality of national, linguistic, religious, or cultural societies, the more complex politics becomes, since an agreement on the fundamentals of a democracy will be more difficult” (Linz & Stepan 1996: 24). Thus the West German consolidation process was arguably reinforced by greater levels of public homogeneity.

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a comparative framework for theories of democratic consolidation, and it has used this to examine why West Germany experienced a much smoother democratic consolidation after the Second World War than Mexico has more recently. As can be seen from the literature reviewed above, the dichotomy between structure and agency explanations has had a clear presence among the theoretical discussions in this field. This article opts for a middle ground by utilising two separate avenues of comparison: ‘political commitment’ and ‘public commitment’. It further adds to the literature by arguing that public commitment is assisted by a higher degree of ‘public homogeneity’, which then excludes the risk of minority opposition, exclusion and potential insurgency, as occurred in Mexico during the 1990s.

Neither Mexicans nor Germans expressed strong political values, impressive education rates or strong political participation, even though communications infrastructure and the availability of information in Mexico are relatively robust. Yet, in stark contrast to Mexico, Germany experienced strong economic growth and benefited from substantial public homogeneity, clearly strengthening its public commitment. Furthermore, the German political commitment far outweighs its Mexican counterpart, and the German political elite also sought to strengthen public opinion through re-education.

Thus, while both countries initially sustained lukewarm levels of public commitment, it is clear that the stronger political commitment ensured a solid and smooth consolidation process in Germany. This was arguably further eased by strong economic growth during the relevant
period. In Mexico, there should be a critical focus on strengthening the political commitment in the short term, ensuring that public commitment will follow in the long term. If the still-hesitant Mexican political commitment wavers and fails, public commitment may not be sufficiently strong to cushion it. If political commitment fails, so will Mexican democracy.

Political commitment seems to have played a pivotal role in both examples. To determine whether this is representative of a wider trend, a broad range of additional empirical studies are required. However, the intention of this article has not been to establish whether bottom-up or top-down consolidation has the greatest impact, but simply to synthesize the existing literature and research to provide a useful framework of analysis. It is believed that by using the criteria set forth in this article, such analysis is readily replicable, and can be used by both policy makers and academics to assess which measures are needed to improve democratic consolidation in other transitory states.
Bibliography


