



DOES CRIME UNDERMINE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY?

FINDINGS FROM THE CASE OF MEXICO

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"What is at stake today is not just the result of an election, but rather the future of democracy, of representative institutions," announced Mexican President Felipe Calderón shortly before midterm elections in July of 2009.¹ Declaring that Mexico was at an historical crossroads, President Calderón cautioned that the future of democracy depended quite heavily on the outcome of his government's fight against organized crime and corruption. Calderón's concerns have spilled beyond Mexico's borders. In the United States, officials have expressed alarm over the increasing tide of violence with a series of controversial statements that have angered Mexican officials. For example, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair charged that Mexican drug cartels "impede Mexico City's ability to govern parts of its territory and build effective democratic institutions" (Blair 2009: 30).² The media have prominently featured such statements, as the outbreak of violent crime in Mexico has dominated headlines in newspapers around the world. Such reports warn that the current crime wave is "the most serious crisis . . . faced since the 1910 Mexican Revolution and its immediate aftermath" (Krauze 2009). Indeed, since Calderón assumed office in December of 2006, over 47,000 people have died from violence related to the drug trade and organized crime.³

In Mexico, crime now shares the national limelight with economic issues. While the global economic crisis has exacerbated historic problems of poverty and inequality, national attention has increasingly focused on crime. When Mexicans were asked to name the most pressing problem facing their country in a recent national survey, crime ranked at the top of the list, together with unemployment and the economic crisis.⁴ In the week that Calderón gave his warning, the Mexican media coverage of crime dwarfed that of the economy, as reports on crime more than doubled those devoted to economic issues.⁵

Official statements warning that crime could completely destroy Mexico's democratic institutions are clearly exaggerated, but the current crime wave does highlight a question of growing importance throughout the developing world – what impact does crime have on democracy? To answer this question, this study examines the effects of crime on Mexican democracy, but from a different perspective than those of the headlines. The focus here is on the micro level political consequences of crime in Mexico, as this

