

Research note: State party in power and violence in 2007-2012 (reassessing evidence from Trejo and Ley 2020)

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Summary

In chapters 4 and 5 of their book *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Sandra Ley and Guillermo Trejo argue that the federal government's interventions in cartel conflict hotspots was shaped by partisan considerations. Owing to a bitter rivalry with the leftist opposition PRD party, they write, President Calderón of the conservative PAN party oversaw poorly executed federal interventions and publicly blamed or smeared local PRD officials. Trejo and Ley argue that federal interventions thus exacerbated violence in PRD-governed states, whereas in PAN-governed states or those governed by the PRI, a not-quite-so-bitter political rival, federal interventions were more cooperative and effective. They present three pieces of evidence for the claim that the PRD fared worse than other parties under the Calderón presidency: regressions showing that municipalities in PRD states were more violent than those in non-PRD states; case studies comparing federal interventions across states governed by different parties; and a comparison of a cluster of municipalities, of which one half was in a PRD-governed state and the other was in a PAN-governed state. Contrary to what the authors conclude, I find scant evidence that states governed by the PRD did worse under Calderón than did other states with cartel conflicts. I find that support in their case studies of states is driven by a single PRD state (Guerrero) but not by others, including their core case of Michoacán; and reach the opposite conclusion as they do in their cross-border comparison of Michoacán municipalities (under PRD governor) and Jalisco municipalities (under PAN governor).

Introduction

In a comprehensive book on the politics behind criminal group conflict and behavior in Mexico, Trejo and Ley (2020) trace the origins of inter-cartel wars in Mexico to subnational political alternation in the late 20th and early 21st century, which disrupted existing arrangements under the old regime and created unacceptable uncertainty for cartels about whether the state security apparatuses would continue to protect them. Through interviews with some of the first opposition governors and statistical analysis using original data on inter-cartel violence, they link the arrival of opposition governors both to the creation of cartel's private armies and to inter-cartel violence. They identify the replacement of the heads of state police and prosecutor's offices as the key changes that triggered these changes in DTO behavior. That, along with what they call Mexico's thin transition to (illiberal) democracy with no major security reform to dismantle networks of collusion between state repressive agents and criminal groups, explain the state of cartels and conflict in Mexico in 2006: with simmering conflicts in different parts of the country and an intact yet unreformed repressive apparatus. It is important work that both documents inter-cartel conflict as having begun and intensified years before Felipe Calderón came to office and explains why cartels were already willing and able to carry out large-scale warfare soon thereafter. And I have only summarized the first part of this rich book, which next aims to explain subnational variation in the spikes of violence that occurred in Mexico after 2007, and finally documents and explains the expansion of criminal violence to local politics. As a growing body of research on Mexico sought to explain the timing of the post-2007 explosion of violence in Mexico, Sandra Ley and Guillermo Trejo have, in a way, filled many of the gaps in our understanding of what came before and what occurred afterwards.

This research note is a narrow reassessment of the evidence presented in one part of this book: an analysis of the federal response to increasingly visible cartel-linked violence in 2006 and a spike in nationwide homicide rates starting in 2008. (My focus on this segment is motivated by my dissertation, which studies how state responses to criminal group conflict shaped those conflicts and the prospects for post-conflict recovery.) In Chapter 4, the authors argue that government efforts to quell violence were influenced by partisan motivations, which in turn influenced whether responses to violence are effective or exacerbating. They argue that partisan rivalry in a period of high political polarization made the Calderón government intervene differently across territories for reasons beyond a simple ability to coordinate. Rather, they argue, his administration made deliberate attempts to favor political allies and damage rivals. In territories where his bitter political rivals (the PRD) were in government, they write, President Calderón launched federal interventions that were unilateral, uncooperative, and quickly abandoned, and responded to the failure of those interventions by running smear campaigns against the local authorities. This hurt the

territories in two ways: by providing ineffective aid and thus failing to “deactivate violence epidemics”, and by signaling that PRD local governments were unprotected, making criminal groups bolder and more aggressive in those areas. They contrast such interventions with strong and cooperative federal interventions in states or cities with co-partisans or non-PRD opposition, with efforts taken to avoid scandal or punishment of local politicians.

To support their theory and assess the consequences of the differential behavior they described, the authors carry out three empirical exercises. In Chapter 4, they run regression models and show that, from 2006 to 2012, municipalities with opposition (non-PAN) governors suffered higher homicide rates than did municipalities with PAN governors, but that the difference was much starker for municipalities with PRD governors (and any opposition party). In that same chapter, they next compare 14 municipalities in the Michoacán–Jalisco border area, half on one side governed by a PRD governor and half on the other under a PAN governor. Finding a higher number of homicides on the Michoacán side, they conclude that the difference owed to their theoretical claims: that the Michoacán municipalities were abandoned by the federal government while the Jalisco ones enjoyed solid federal support. Finally, in Chapter 5 they provide a set of case studies of federal government behavior and cartel conflict outcomes across eight states, describing more or less supportive behavior from the government depending on the party in power at the state and local level.

From those three exercises in chapters 4 and 5, I reassess two of them: the cross-border municipal comparison and the comparison across selected states. More specifically, **I analyze the outcome of interest, patterns of lethal criminal violence, to determine whether they were, in fact, consistent with the arguments of Ley and Trejo. I find that they were not.** From the cross-border comparison, I find that the Jalisco municipalities did comparatively *worse*, not better, than the Michoacán municipalities; a key missing part of the analysis, I argue, was the inclusion of prior levels of violence. From the cross-state comparisons, I find that violence outcomes were not systematically related to the party in power at the state level. Compared with cases of “helpful” federal interventions, their core case of PRD-led Michoacán did much less badly under the Calderón years. An argument that PRD states fared worse in 2006–2012 relies entirely on the state of Guerrero. I conclude the same from a broader comparison of states. From these results, I conclude that neither federal–state partisan alignment nor a specific PAN-PRD combination are predictive of actual lethal violence outcomes. This does not mean that there was no difference in how the federal government behaved in leftist-governed states compared with others or that there were subtler but important consequences of this behavior. However, it does mean that any consequences of such behavior were not observable in the stark subnational variation in homicide rates that we do observe.

Comparison of Jalisco–Michoacán border municipalities

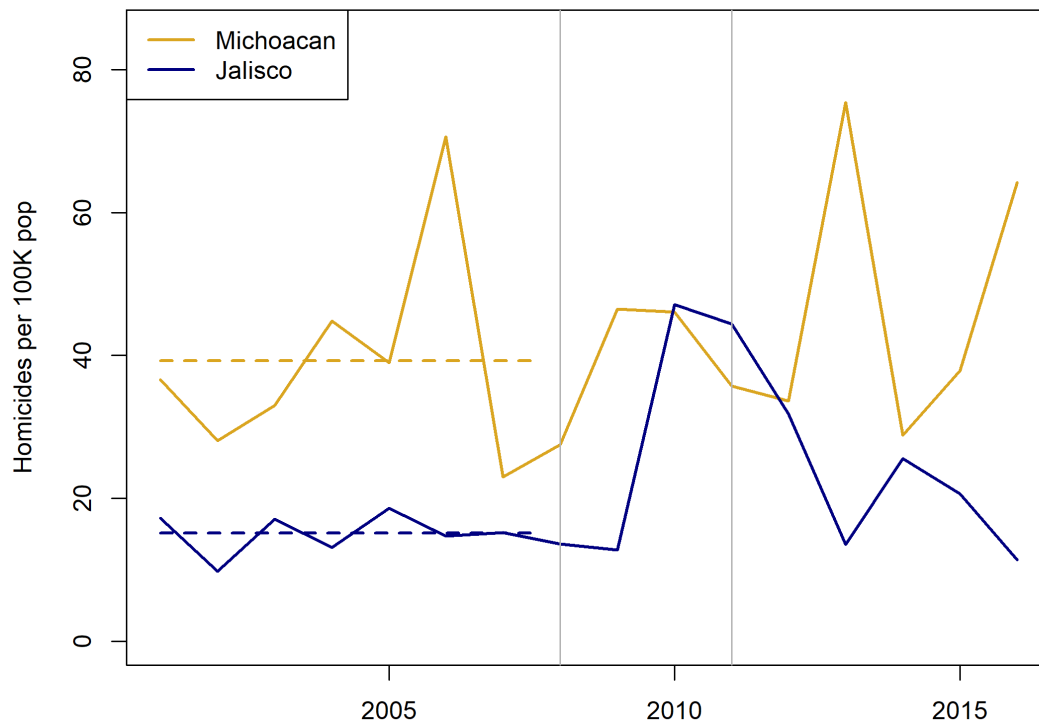
Chapter 4 (pages 174-177) and Appendix E

As one quantitative test of their theory, in Chapter 4, the authors compare a cluster of 14 municipalities on the border of Jalisco and Michoacán, seven on each side. From 2008 to 2011, those municipalities differed in the governor in power: those in Jalisco had a PAN governor whereas those in Michoacán had a PRD governor. The authors observe that, during those years, the Michoacán side had a higher absolute level and per capita rate of cartel-related murders, and conclude that the difference must have owed to the different governor (authorities on one side received genuine support from President Calderón, while those on the other side were abandoned and smeared).

They called this a "natural experiment". I don't know in what sense the comparison of these municipalities constitutes a natural experiment—this is why I am not using the term. Each state had been ruled by the same party since 2002 (PRD in Michoacán) or earlier (PAN in Jalisco). As I note below, at the municipal level the parties in power were different, as were drug production activities. There was no exogenous change to these municipalities starting in 2008. Though that is the year that Leonel Godoy began his term as PRD governor of Michoacán, he replaced another PRD governor. Perhaps the implicit exogenous shock is that of the Calderón presidency, which they argue resulted in different government interventions across states. In that case, however, it's unclear why the "experimental period" begins in 2008 and not 2007. Regardless, we may continue with the comparison to see whether outcomes were worse on the Michoacán side than on the Jalisco side.

The authors compare several variables to conclude that the municipalities on each side of the border "constitute a homogeneous region". I note that the Jalisco municipalities had mostly non-PRD mayors and the Michoacán ones had mostly non-PAN mayors; the authors do not treat this as an important underlying difference, since their main concern in this exercise is the difference in relationships between the federal administration and state governors. I also note that their appendix E shows that the Michoacán side appeared to have much more intense drug production; the authors wave this off by arguing that the Jalisco side must have been at least as valuable for trafficking the drugs, which I can believe. **The major difference that they left out, however, was baseline levels of violence on each side. And it turns out that they are crucial.** Consider Figure 1 below, with blue for Jalisco, gold for Michoacán, and the 2008-2011 period between vertical gray lines. The "otherwise-identical" Jalisco municipalities historically had lower levels of violence, so the 2008-2011 period was actually very violent by their standards—and also, in their two worst years, worse than the Michoacán side in absolute terms.

Figure 1. Homicide rates in 14 municipalities on the Michoacan–Jalisco border (2001–2018)



The graph makes my case quickly: it was the Jalisco municipalities, not the Michoacán ones, which suffered the worse spike during the Calderón administration. The Jalisco set's rate increased 92% in 2008-2011 compared with the previous four-year period, whereas the Michoacan set's rate *decreased* by 12%. (Results are almost identical when comparing with 2001-2006 average.) Not only did the Jalisco side suffer a higher increase of violence per capita, but their worst year in the period of interest (rate of 47) was as high as the worst year on the Michoacan side (46)—in fact, if uncounted deaths from likely forced disappearances were counted, the Jalisco side would fare even worse: a maximum death rate of 56, compared with 47 on the Michoacan side.

Additional notes:

- The authors emphasize the difference in absolute homicide levels: "We attribute the a *two-fold* difference in the absolute number of attacks between these two border regions to partisan intergovernmental conflict between Left and Right" (pg 177, emphasis added by the authors). However, the appropriate comparable indicator is one weighted by population.
- On the Michoacán side, Apatzingán accounted for most of the difference in absolute homicide levels. It is also significantly different from other municipalities on both sides: its 2010 population was 124,000, compared with the next highest Buenavista (42,000, also in Michoacan) and Tamazula (38,000, the largest one on the Jalisco side). Without Apatzingán, the other Michoacán municipalities would have looked even better in comparison with the Jalisco municipalities.
- The authors are using their own dataset of cartel-related murders (CVM Dataset), whereas I am using total murders from the national

statistics office (Inegi). (I also referred to a different lethal violence number that adds disappearances, from the government's database of missing or disappeared people. I prefer this as a more complete count of total lethal violence, especially in these years in which many DTO-related disappearances took place.) It is possible that their own database shows that baseline DTO-related murders were actually similar and that this form of violence was in fact proportionally higher in the Michoacán municipalities, though I would be very surprised if it did, and it would mean that non-DTO murders mysteriously spiked in Jalisco.

- The book's appendix table appears to have the wrong population for the Michoacan set, though it does not appear that this affected their murder rate calculation.

Comparison of states

Chapter 5 (especially pages 186–206)

Trejo and Ley walk through eight cases of states with different configurations of partisan alignment and intergovernmental coordination during the Calderón period 2007–2012, bringing rich qualitative evidence (as they do elsewhere in the book) to illustrate the concepts and mechanisms at play. To summarize, they conclude from these cases that federal interventions (or lack thereof) were most effective in states with PAN governors (and mayors), most hurtful in PRD states, and somewhere in between in PRI states. However, I find that, both in their core cases and elsewhere in Mexico, federal-state partisan configurations were not at all predictive of violence outcomes in this period.

Initial doubts

I will arrive to my main order of business, a comparison of the outcome of interest across these states, in the next subsection. First, in the following paragraphs I describe two reasons for initial doubt that motivated my more thorough reassessment.

One was that, when comparing federal government responses to violence in Michoacán and other PRD-governed states versus in other cities and states, the authors mostly evaded the fact that homicide rates in Michoacán were much lower than in some of the comparison cases, both before and after federal interventions. The explosion of violence was much lower in Michoacán than it was in Chihuahua and Baja California in both absolute and per capita rates. In fact, the explosion in Michoacán occurred in 2006, before Calderón, when the total lethal violence rate reached 25 (this is the sum of homicides and disappearances per 100,000 population). With the beginning of Calderón's term and the joint campaign launched in Michoacán, the rate fell to 14–16 in 2007–2008. It shot up again in 2009, to 24, but then fluctuated below that level through 2012, and remained at or below 27 through 2015. (Michoacán's worst

spike would begin in 2016, well into a PRI governorship and PRI presidency.) In contrast, some of the worst years of the comparison cases such as Baja California, Chihuahua, and Nuevo León, where the authors deem Calderón to have made a greater effort, occurred during the Calderón administration and were much more violent. The difference in federal government efforts may thus have been driven by the urgency of the crises in those northern places, where there happened not to be any PRD governors.

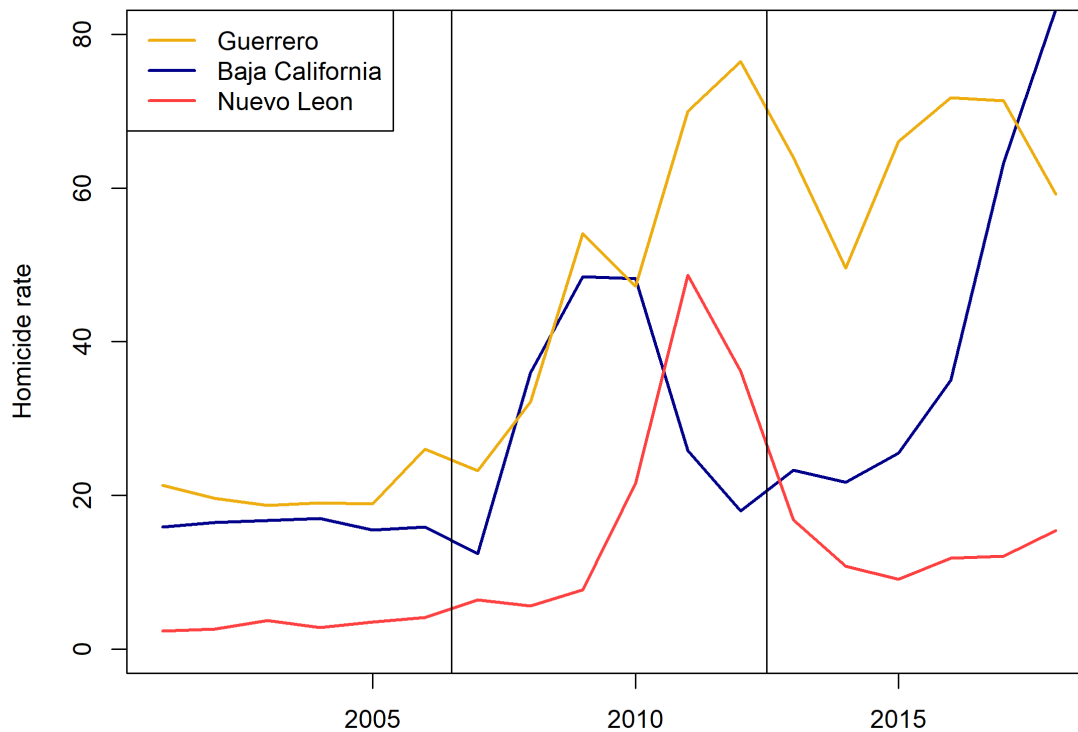
A second and related red flag was the authors' description of events in Tijuana, where the governor and mayor were both PAN. There, the authors write that "the renovation and coordination of police forces in Baja California limited the opportunities for the Sinaloa Cartel to effectively contest the control of Tijuana. Aligned partisan authorities working together encouraged rival cartels to leave the city and the state and avoid further turf wars. Between 2009 and 2011, drug-related murders in Tijuana decreased by 24 percent" (page 189). I find this assessment of events to be incomplete. The following account is based on my case study and supporting references from Chapter 5 of my dissertation. As the authors write, the federal intervention in Tijuana began in early 2007 with the deployment of over 2,000 troops despite there not having been any uptick in total murders in the city, though violent crime was perceived to be on the rise and cartel-related murders specifically may have been, too. Though this deployment and the beginning of an anti-cartel campaign was accompanied by stable or even falling homicide rates in 2007, it may have led to the 2008 Tijuana Cartel's split between the main group (associated with the Arellano Felix clan) and a renegade faction led by a man nicknamed "El Teo". This motivated the Sinaloa Cartel to enter the fray later that year. The military-led federal intervention and a well-coordinated security apparatus attempted to quell violence in part by purging local police, who were seen as complicit with local criminal groups, and focusing on the ultra-violent "El Teo". However, for several months, violence only spiked. In my dissertation, I attribute the spike in violence to the fact that the federal government first exacerbated tensions within the Tijuana Cartel and provided an opportunity to the Sinaloa Cartel to contest control of criminal markets, and then, perhaps inadvertently, weakened the incumbent criminal groups the most, allowing an outside competitor to contest control of the territory. While relatively well-coordinated authorities were able to eventually realign the security apparatus and take out the "El Teo" faction, a move which was followed by plunging violence, there is ample evidence that restored order in criminal markets was driven largely by an arrangement between the remaining criminal groups that the Sinaloa Cartel was able to impose thanks to its new dominant position. Drug trafficking activity, however, was as strong as ever. This is a much different account than offered by Trejo and Ley, in which El Teo is absent, the Sinaloa Cartel is prevented from contesting control of Tijuana, and the government intervention is characterized as

successful based on the second half of the intervention period, when violence was falling, but not on the first part, when violence was rising.

Homicide rates in groups of states (by party of governor under Felipe Calderón administration)

Figure 2 makes the best case for Trejo and Ley (2020) that partisanship explains significant variation in subnational trajectories of violence after 2006, using their own examples. It shows the PRD-governed state of Guerrero (yellow), the PAN-governed state of Baja California (blue), and the PRI-governed state of Nuevo León (red). Baja California and Guerrero begin at similar pre-Calderón rates of violence. Violence spiked in all three states starting in 2008 (less noticeable in Nuevo León given its low base and even worse future outcomes), and the federal government intervened in all three early in the Calderón administration. A key difference explaining their divergent outcomes, according to the authors, was the party of the governor. In the state with a PAN governor, violence was suppressed and did not worsen again until after Calderón left office. In the state with a PRI governor, it was also (eventually) suppressed and subsequently remained at relatively low levels. But in the state with a PRD governor, violence was exacerbated, and the state never recovered. The authors attribute these different post-intervention outcomes to partisan-motivated differences in the quality of the Calderón administration's interventions. Guerrero was one of the cases of PRD-led states that experienced "partisan fragmentation, intergovernmental conflict, and growing inter-cartel violence", where "federal forces did not coordinate their actions with the state and municipal security forces of Guerrero and Acapulco" and where the federal government ran a "smear campaign" against local authorities in the state's most important (and violent) city, Acapulco (pp 198–199). In Baja California and Nuevo León, by contrast, partisan interests motivated the Calderón administration to provide either enthusiastic or contingent support to subnational authorities that led to "deactivation of violence epidemics".

Figure 2. Homicide rates in Guerrero, Baja California, and Nuevo León (2001–2018)



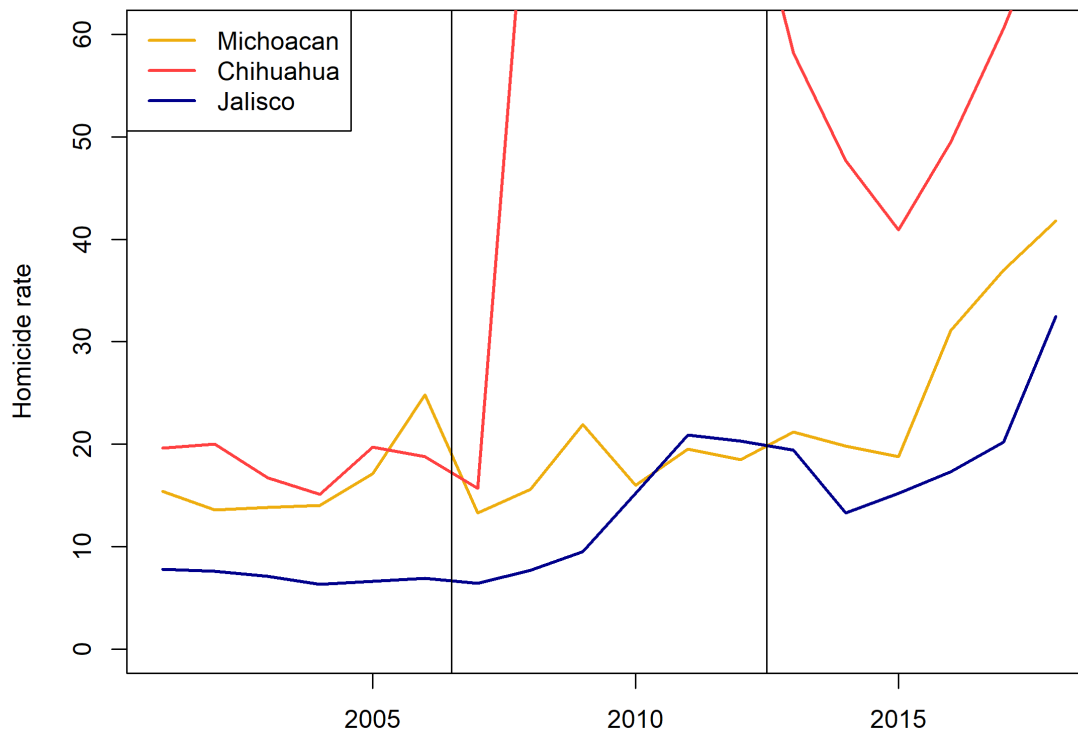
Note: Black vertical lines mark the beginning and end of the Calderón administration (Dec 2006 – Nov 2012).

Of course, those are but three cases, and their different outcomes can be at least partly explained by non-partisan factors—some that the authors mention themselves. For example, the authors trace the start of inter-cartel wars in Guerrero to 2005 and 2006, when the PRD governor first came to power and unwittingly disrupted existing corrupt arrangements. And they explain the intensification in 2008 and future years as the result of increasing fragmentation of the criminal landscape. That fragmentation can be linked to federal government actions, such as the decapitation of criminal groups, but the authors do not claim that the relevant decapitations (occurring mostly outside of Guerrero) were somehow linked to partisan considerations.[1] In Baja California, I have already raised major caveats about key explanations for the rise and fall of violence in the state. Similarly, the case of Nuevo León is one of successful intervention after three years of federal deployments that were evidently unsuccessful. The authors touch upon this, and also emphasize the important fact that local, non-partisan conditions (i.e. an active and cohesive private sector) provided the impetus for federal and state authorities to finally work successfully and bring criminal groups and violence under control. In fact, they credit Calderón with sending his national security advisor and pushing Nuevo León's governor to cooperate and work with the private sector (though my own research on this case finds that the private sector and state governments also took the initiative, and the national security advisor himself says that it was business leaders, one of who he worked for, who sent him to Calderón, not the other way around). Moreover, separate work by Sandra Ley highlights the role of Monterrey's private sector and civil society in facilitating successful government responses to cartel violence and also

explains the lack of similar actions in Acapulco, Guerrero, as the result of a fractured business community (Ley and Guzmán 2019).

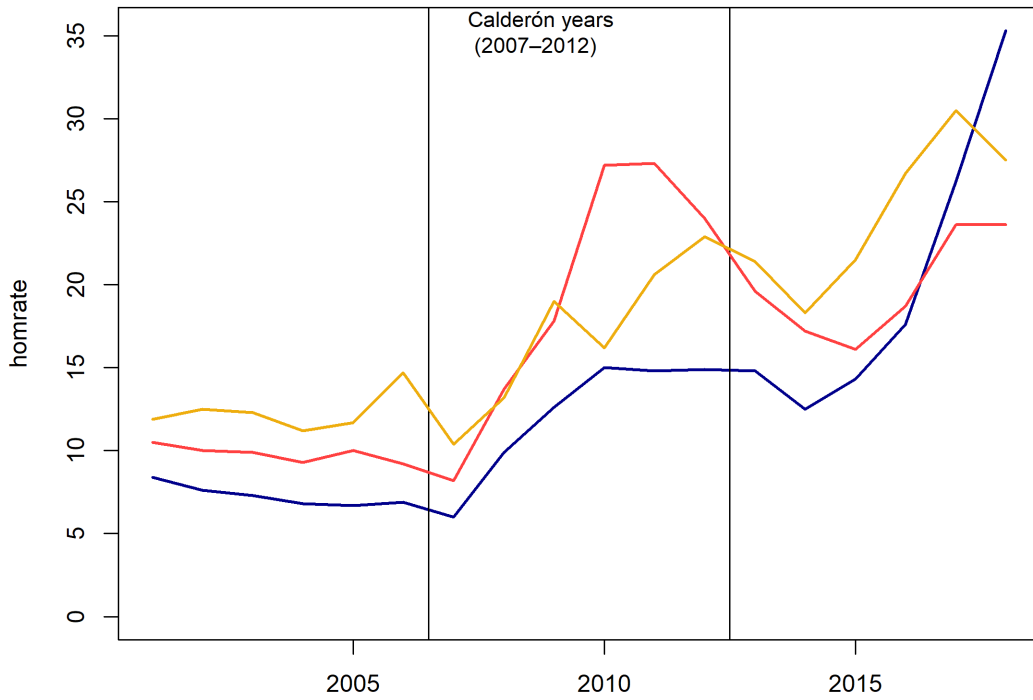
Beyond those caveats, outcomes in other states weaken the partisan explanation for violence intensification under Calderón. Consider now the cases of PRD-governed Michoacán, PAN-governed Jalisco, and PRI-governed Chihuahua (Figure 3). These, like the three shown above, are key cases offered by Trejo and Ley to support their partisan theory of criminal violence intensification, where the federal government intervened in similar ways as described above. Total homicide trends in Michoacán itself are noteworthy (gold color). Michoacán's first peak was in 2006, the year before Felipe Calderón's term began. After the first federal intervention in Michoacán, homicide rates fell—a much better outcome than what occurred after early interventions in other states. When homicides rose again in 2009, another federal intervention—one that the authors described as hostile and unilateral—was followed by another reduction of homicide rates. Michoacán's homicide rates remained near their pre-Calderón levels until past 2015, well after the PRI had come into power at both the state and federal level. Meanwhile, in neighboring Jalisco (blue), where the PAN was in power and the authors described cooperative relations between federal and state authorities, homicide rates had doubled from their pre-Calderón levels and had reached Michoacán's levels. But the most striking comparison case might be Chihuahua (red), where death rates were literally off the charts (or my chart, at least). The situation in Chihuahua was much worse than it was in Michoacán or anywhere else, which alone could explain greater federal efforts to do whatever was necessary to control it. Even in its best post-2006 years, Chihuahua experienced much more lethal violence than Michoacán in both absolute and per capita terms.

Figure 3. Homicide rates in Michoacán, Jalisco, and Chihuahua (2001–2018)



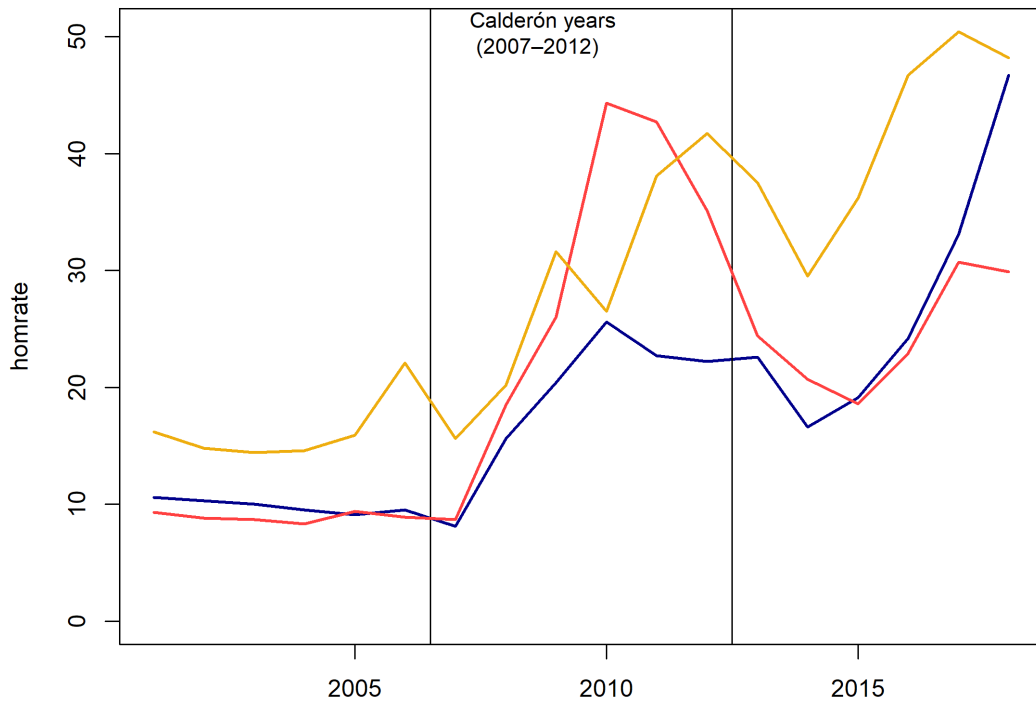
Trejo and Ley (2020) offer a plausible political theory supported by compelling details that Calderón-led federal authorities intervened differently in PRD-led states than they did elsewhere, and it may very well be true that outcomes in those states would have been better absent those political motivations and behaviors. However, **I have found the theory to be a poor predictor of actual violence outcomes in most of the individual cases highlighted by Trejo and Ley.**[2] Figures 4–6 show that **governor partisanship (under the Calderón presidency) is a poor predictor of 2007–2012 outcomes more broadly.** In each of the figures, the blue line represents homicide rates in a set of states with PAN governors in 2007–2010, the red line PRI governors, and the yellow line PRD governors.[3] The first of these, Figure 4, includes all states. Figure 5 includes only states with significant drug cartel presence, where federal interventions were likely.[4] Figure 6 is the same, but excludes three potentially influential cases, one from each party (Guerrero, Chihuahua, and Baja California).

Figure 4. Homicide rates in Mexican states by party of governor during Calderón administration



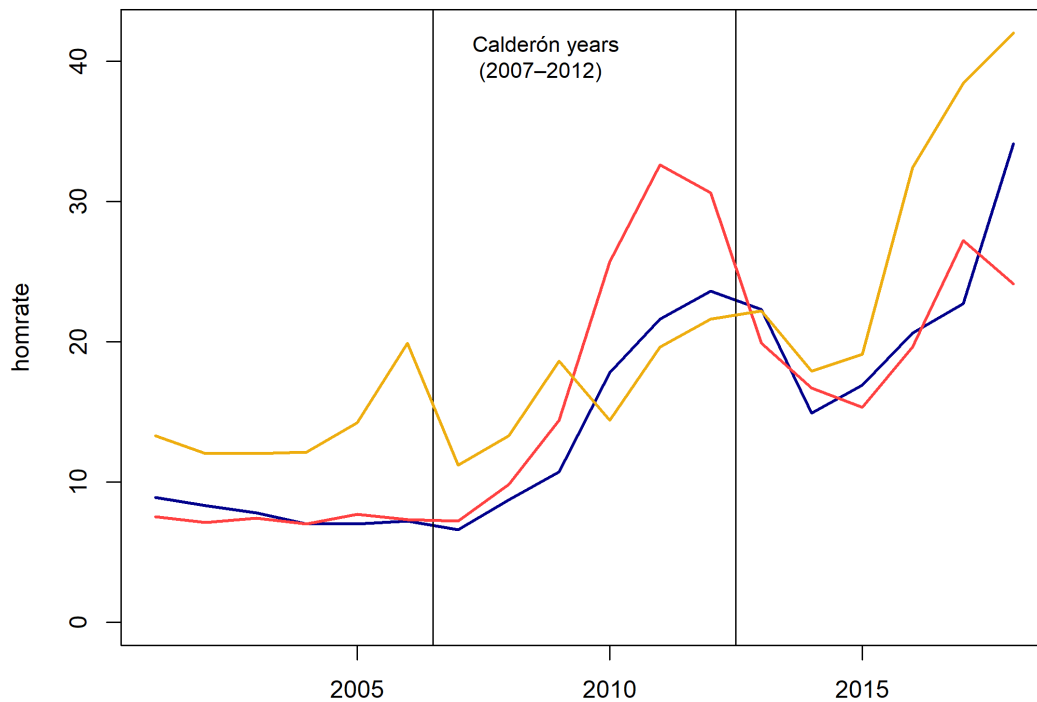
Note: All states are included here according to the party in power in 2007-2010.
Blue = PAN, red = PRI, golden = PRD.

Figure 5. Homicide rates in DTO-intense states by party of governor during Calderón administration



Note: Included here are Baja California, Jalisco, and Morelos (PAN, blue); Coahuila, Colima, Chihuahua, Durango, Nayarit, Nuevo León, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz (PRI, red); and Michoacán, Guerrero, and Zacatecas (PRD, golden).

Figure 6. Homicide rates in DTO states (minus influential cases) by party of governor during Calderón administration



Note: The states here are the same as in Figure 5 with three excluded: Guerrero, Baja California, and Chihuahua.

All three figures show a widespread spike in homicide rates after 2007, a temporary easing after 2012, and a rebound in violence after 2015, regardless of political party in power during the Calderón years. The first shows that, in the first half of the Calderón administration, PRI-governed states jointly suffered the worst violence and, proportional to "baseline" (2001–2006) levels, the PAN and PRD fared equally badly. In support of Trejo and Ley (2020), however, it also shows violence plateauing or falling back down in PAN and PRI states in the second half of the Calderón administration, while total violence in PRD states continued to worsen. The second figure (Figure 5) tells much the same story. However, the third figure does not. (Note that, in this figure, the set of PRD and PAN states have dwindled to two each: Michoacán and Zacatecas for PRD, and Morelos and Jalisco for PAN.) The PRD states are shown to fare no worse, and possibly even better, than the PAN states with significant DTO presence. The PRI states fare no better than the others. What support there was that PRD states fared worse under Calderón than did PAN and PRI states appears to have been driven by the case of Guerrero.[5]

Recall that I use total homicide rates, not DTO-related homicides specifically (as of March 2022 I do not have access to the authors' dataset of inter-cartel violence from 2006 to 2012), though the two series are highly correlated. If I included disappearances in these series, patterns would be similar for PAN and PRD states, but the PRI spikes would be worse (likely driven by Tamaulipas). In other words, there is no evidence that violence in PAN states was more hidden than in PRD states (despite the high levels of cooperation and political incentives to sweep corruption under the rug described by Trejo and Ley).

Endnotes

[1] Three kingpin strikes that were highly relevant for Guerrero were the arrest of one Beltrán Leyva brother in Sinaloa state, which precipitated a split between the Beltrán Leyvas and their former Sinaloa Cartel partners; the killing of another Beltrán Leyva brother in Morelos state, which split the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO); and the arrest of the head of one of the remnants of that organization in Mexico City (alias "La Barbie"). Because the BLO had a major presence in Acapulco and elsewhere in Guerrero, each of those splits fractured the state's criminal underworld. But the government strikes occurred outside of Guerrero and were unrelated to that state's party in power.

[2] The remaining PRD case they highlight is Zacatecas, which had a PRD governor until 2010. Its homicide rate averaged 7 before Calderón, 6, in Calderón's first two years, and then rose in 2009 and 2010, reaching 13 in the last year of Governor Amalia García's term. These were relatively low figures compared with the other cases, with the country as a whole, and with what Zacatecas would suffer over the following two terms, under PRI governors.

[3] Homicide rates are calculated after pooling the states' total population and homicides; in other words, they are weighted averages by population.

[4] Narrowing to states with heavy DTO presence helps at that time helps include states where federal interventions were plausible and exclude influential cases that might be considered outliers, such as Mexico City. Mexico City, then known as the Federal District, was governed by PRD, experienced *relatively* benign outcomes, and has a large population, so it alone may have made PRD states look good.

[5] Excluding Baja California also reveals that the two other DTO-heavy PAN states did just as badly under President Calderón as Michoacán and Zacatecas did—or worse, given their lower baseline levels.

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