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# Of Love and Hate: Understanding the Determinants of Presidential Legacies

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Vidal Romero<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Presidents should prefer to be positively remembered in history for improving their country's conditions, rather than to be hated for generations. Few, however, succeed. Why? The inquiry goes beyond historic accounts or mere intellectual curiosity; it is a key part of understanding presidential decision making. We answer this question using data from an expert survey on the Mexican Presidency, the first of its kind for Mexico. Problem-solving capacities and presidents' ability to change the existing institutions are the main determinants of success. Corruption is barely punished by experts. Negative remembrance in history is associated to authoritarianism and economic crises.

## Keywords

presidential legacies, presidential decision making, Mexican Presidency, expert surveys

Executives in presidential systems are typically perceived, by citizens and analysts, as having an enormous amount of influence upon their country's fate. Great expectations are commonly placed on a president's performance in office in all types of regimes. Executives add to these expectations by promising citizens all sorts of goods, from new legislation to hospitals to space trips. Significant sums of public resources are invested on a president's public image, and on public works, many of which have the clear purpose of leaving a president's mark on their nation. Despite all of these efforts, executives rarely fulfill the expectations that are placed upon them, and few are recorded in history as "good" presidents.<sup>1</sup> Why? What determines whether a president is able to build a positive legacy? Is the corrupt behavior of presidents actually punished by history?

These are questions that the existing literature has not fully addressed. We still do not have a precise explanation on what determines whether a president is well regarded, hated, or ignored by history. With few exceptions for the U.S. Presidency,<sup>2</sup> the analytical literature on the subject is practically nonexistent. The topic has been dominated by biographical, journalistic, and historical accounts that provide good detail on presidents' administrations, but from which we cannot determine the components that result in a positive presidential legacy.

Understanding presidential legacies goes beyond mere historical accounts or intellectual curiosity. It is a key part of inquiring into presidential decision making. Much of a president's behavior is explained by a desire to achieve a positive place in history books. Yet, we also observe

presidential misconduct that appears to conflict with their legacy motive.

To provide a better understanding of legacies, we posit an explicit concept of *positive presidential legacy*, based on the ample literature on the American Presidency. We also discuss the theoretical dimensions of the legacy concept, break it down to its specific components, examine the nature of these components, and delve into the relationships between them.

We examine the legacy concept using the Mexican Presidency as case study. We use data from a survey conducted by the author between 2009 and 2010: the Survey of Academics on the Mexican Presidency (SAMP). The SAMP follows a line of similar surveys done for the U.S. Presidency, and a few other countries, dating back to the pioneer work of Arthur M. Schlesinger in 1948. To our knowledge, this is the first survey of its type for the Mexican case, and one of the few conducted outside the United States.

We find that a president's capacity for problem solving is the item most correlated with a positive overall evaluation by experts in the SAMP. When inquiring about the specific items that help a president achieve a positive place in history, we find that their ability to reform

<sup>1</sup>Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Mexico City, Mexico

## Corresponding Author:

Vidal Romero, Departamento de Ciencia Política, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Delegación Álvaro Obregón, Mexico City, D.F. 01080, Mexico.  
Email: vromero@itam.mx

existing institutions and preside over a good economic environment are the two categories most frequently mentioned by experts. Individual virtue does not seem to significantly increase the likelihood of a positive legacy.

On the negative pole of legacy, specific autocratic behavior is punished, but with a caveat; Mexican presidents ruling during the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) hegemonic regime (from the 1930s to the early-1990s) are not penalized by experts for heading a non-democratic regime, as if the type of political regime was exogenous to chief executives.

Experts do not punish an executive's corrupt behavior, as one may have expected. From the performance categories that we tested, corruption is the variable that has a smallest impact on the overall evaluation of a president's administration. It is possible for a president to misbehave in office and still aspire to a relatively positive historical evaluation.

Our study's contribution is threefold. First, by positing an explicit definition of the concept of positive presidential legacy, we add a specific conceptual tool to help study presidential decision making. Second, we contribute toward a better methodological design for this type of inquiry. Our design maximizes the number of observations in the analysis using multivariate methods. Our third contribution regards our understanding of the Mexican Presidency. To our knowledge, the data in this article are the first systematic analytical effort to assess and explain Mexican presidential performance in office.

In the remainder of this article, we first tackle the concept of positive presidential legacy and discuss the current literature on the subject. We then describe and analyze Mexican presidential legacies using the SAMP. The last section discusses the implications of our findings for the study of presidential legacies and outlines a research agenda.

## Conceptualizing Presidential Legacies

The logic of legacy as a motivating force goes back to Alexander Hamilton (1788), who argued in *Federalist* 76 that the one-man structure of the presidency motivates executives to be concerned for their own reputations, and therefore acts as an effective constraint to presidential abuse of power.

Executives' behavior in office, at least partially, seems to comply with Hamilton's assessment. Presidents in democracies and nondemocracies court the public by systematically investing in monumental infrastructure projects, they envision (usually unfeasible) public policies to end their countries' problems, they make high profile public appearances, and try hard to influence the media and academics to speak well of their administrations.

Different publications in the literature on the American Presidency have analyzed, implicitly or explicitly, presidential legacies. Some authors—such as Moe (1993), Skowronek (1993), Cameron (2000), and Nelson (2000)—broadly describe legacy as *a president's place in history*, which is related to policy outcomes and personal traits. Other studies use the related concept of “presidential greatness” to refer to a president's accomplishments in office (e.g., Bailey 1966; Murray and Blessing 1994; Simonton 1981). This concept considers a wide array of items for which presidents are, or could be, evaluated ex post, which also include personal traits and outcomes.

Beverlin and Ostrander (2008) aimed at narrowing the definition of presidential legacies to make it more meaningful to political science. They defined presidential legacy as “the impact of a president's actions beyond their own administration” (Beverlin and Ostrander 2008, 2). They propose focusing on institutional and policy aspects, as opposed to popular and historical legacies, because the former are more plausibly linked to constraints on behavior and actual impact on their nations. They focus on outcomes and not on presidents' personal traits.

While we mostly agree with Beverlin and Ostrander's arguments, our analytical purpose is of a different nature. Their work proposes focusing on a specific subset of items for assessing a precise domain of presidential legacies (i.e., the items for which a president ought to be well remembered). We, instead, aim to take the set of items that the experts consider relevant and use it to determine what qualities make a “good president” (i.e., the items for which a president is actually well remembered). Therefore, we opt for a broader and more inductive definition of the concept of legacy, which could then be applied across time and countries.

We analyze presidential legacies based on Goertz's (2006) framework of “three level concepts,”<sup>3</sup> and we build on the existing work on the topic. At our first theoretical level, we focus on the concept of *positive presidential legacy*, which we define as *the set of items in a presidential administration for which presidents are well evaluated after their term is over*.

The negative pole of the concept, a negative presidential legacy, considers the items for which presidents are badly remembered. Presidents make mistakes, unforeseen consequences occur, or presidents may also want other things in addition to a positive legacy. Some of those things may conflict with the positive legacy motive, most notably corruption.

In between the positive and negative poles of legacy, there is a continuum of mixed evaluations of overall tenure and of specific performance areas.

At the second level, we identify two core dimensions of the concept of a positive presidential legacy: the personal traits of the individual holding office and the

outcomes attributed to a presidential administration. These are the dimensions most commonly found in the literature, and which resemble Simon's (2009) image and performance-based expectations on presidential behavior. Theoretically, the division is straightforward. Personal traits are abilities and capacities inherent to the individual, for instance, honesty or intelligence. Outcomes refer to observable items, such as economic results or institutional reforms.

As the existing literature agrees (Nelson 2000; Neustadt 1990; Pfiffner 2003; Rockman 1984; Rose 1993; Simon 2009; Skowronek 1993; Waterman and Rockman 2008), the characteristics of a "good president" are changeable as a function of context. Different times and nations demand different types of actions and outcomes from their chief executives. Therefore, these two theoretical dimensions (traits and outcomes) contain specific elements that are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions to achieve a positive legacy.

The structure of the relationship between dimensions and the categories within those dimensions is more accurately portrayed as one of *family-resemblance* (Goertz 2006, 35–46).<sup>4</sup> It implies that the components of a positive presidential legacy can be substituted. There is not one specific characteristic or action that a president must have or do as a necessary condition to achieve a positive legacy. The same applies for the negative pole.

The desire to achieve a positive presidential legacy, *ceteris paribus*, induces presidents to behave in certain ways and not in others. Presidents bet on a few items to make their mark in history. Sometimes, what needs to be done is determined exogenously—by natural disasters, for instance. Sometimes, it is partially exogenous, as in the case of wars or economic crises.

The great tragedy for presidents is that, once their term is over, they have little control over how history will judge them. A statement by Mexican President Felipe Calderon (2006–2012) clearly exemplifies this point. In a 2011 meeting with civil society to discuss crime and violence, he stated,

I would, of course, like to be remembered for the things I have done for education, for the hospitals . . . for the environment. No. I will likely be remembered for this issue (the fight against organized crime) and, probably, with great unfairness.<sup>5</sup>

Across time, historical events are reassessed as new information is revealed, or weighted differently. It is not a neutral process; there are multiple biases on how information is selected.<sup>6</sup> We remember presidents for only a handful of actions, and many times, we have no memory of any specific act, especially for those farther away in time. Notorious incidents—positive or negative—tend to

overshadow other things that occurred during a presidential administration.

Given the changing nature of the components of a positive presidential legacy, it is at the empirical level—the third level in Goertz's (2006, 50–53, 62–65) framework—that we can further inquire into its specific nature. In the following sections, we first review the main existing empirical work regarding a president's place in history to contextualize the SAMP, and we then present and analyze the results for the Mexican case.

## Measuring Presidential Legacies

Ever since there have been rulers in human societies, there have been people judging them. There have also been debates about how we should evaluate said rulers (Nichols 2012). The standard approach to determine a president's performance *ex post* in the existing literature is to recur to specialists' rankings and grades to establish a president's place in history.

As legacy has to do with achieving a place in history, historians have done most of the empirical research. Of this research, most of it is concentrated on the American Presidency. The 1948 survey on U.S. Presidents conducted by Arthur M. Schlesinger is the pioneer work on retrospective evaluation of presidents by experts on the field.

Many more expert surveys have followed since then for the United States, such as the 1962 follow-up of Schlesinger, the 1992 continuation by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and a survey by Gary Maranell in 1968. Other surveys conducted by media are the *Chicago Tribune* poll of 1982, the *Wall Street Journal* surveys of 2000 and 2005, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) polls of 1999 and 2009, and *The Times* survey of 2008. There are studies with a more academic profile, such as the Murray and Blessing survey of 1982 (Murray and Blessing 1994), the 1996 Ridings and McIver survey (Ridings and McIver 1997), and the series of surveys by the Siena Research Institute of 1982, 1990, 1994, 2002, and 2006.

Experts tend to agree on the top rated presidents. The best-ranked executives are systematically Lincoln, Washington, and F. D. Roosevelt. There is, however, relatively less agreement about the villains, the most recurrent are Nixon, Harding, Buchanan, and Pierce.

Regarding the determinants of presidential legacies, the existing literature is less conclusive. In terms of the concepts presented in this article, there is no consistent division between the dimensions of personal traits and outcomes. Authors may sometimes confuse means with ends by connecting particular traits of the individuals holding the presidency to whether they succeeded as presidents (Beverlin and Ostrander 2008; Fine and Waterman 2008; Moe 1993).

Simonton (1981) finds that three quarters of the variance in what he labels “presidential greatness”—which is a composite index of items from the Maranell survey—is explained by a bundle of biographical and contextual variables: administration duration, number of war years, a president’s publications before his tenure, failed assassination attempts, and scandals. He finds practically no effect from variables in the dimension of individual traits. Similarly, Murray and Blessing (1994) report no effect of biographical characteristics on presidential ratings. They show that a president’s legacy is associated with significant developments in American history, or with serious crises, which are mostly contextual variables. Nichols (2012) also finds that context matters for rating presidents. He focuses on political context, adding a substantive dimension to the time variable.

Other countries have followed the rankings approach to determine rulers’ place in history. For the United Kingdom, in 1999, BBC Radio 4 asked historians to rank 19 British prime ministers from Lord Salisbury to John Major. In 2006, the *BBC History Magazine* presented Francis Beckett’s rankings for all prime ministers of the twentieth century. The British Politics Group conducted another survey in 2000, and Mori-Leeds interviewed 139 historians to examine prime ministers’ places in history. In Australia, the newspaper *The Age* interviewed 15 historians in 2004 to rank their modern era prime ministers.

To our knowledge, there is no study for the Mexican case in which experts on the subfield evaluate the job done by presidents, except for a few retrospective evaluations of presidents at the public opinion level (e.g., Alduncin 1986).<sup>7</sup> The SAMP is the first study of its type for the Mexican case.

### The Legacy of Mexican Presidents: Experts’ Evaluations

As in many other presidential systems, Mexican executives are ubiquitous in their country’s political life. Since the Mexican Presidency was first introduced in the early-nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> it has been expected that executives would intervene in all of their country’s concerns, independently of their formal authority (or not) to do so.

There are two general strands of literature explaining Mexican presidential performance. The first set portrays Mexican presidents as having an enormous amount of power relative to all other political actors (e.g., Camp 1993; Cosío Villegas 1972, 1974; Krauze 2002). In this literature, presidents are expected to be able to modify the status quo with relative ease. Therefore, presidential decision making, and thus legacy, becomes a question of preferences and will, more than a question of power relative to other actors.

A second strand of the literature posits that the Mexican executive is more constrained than it may appear (Carpizo 2002; Casar 1997; Crespo 2004; Romero 2005; Vernon 1966; Weldon 1997). This strand provides a more accurate view of presidential decision making based on institutions and bargaining among political actors. The Mexican executive does not have sufficient formal powers to behave as an omnipotent leader. This is even more evident once we compare Mexico to other countries with presidential systems. In addition, the president’s informal authority is constrained by other political actors. This was true even during the PRI’s hegemonic regime.

It is in this restricted setting that Mexican presidents struggle to fulfill the high public expectations placed on them, something very similar to what we observe for presidents in the United States (Simon 2009).

### The Survey

The SAMP follows a standard design, comparable with studies for the United States, where most of the work on the subject has been conducted. As in all of these types of surveys, the sample is not randomly selected. In a first stage, a researcher either creates an exhaustive sampling frame of experts on a subject as potential interviewees (as in the case of the SAMP) or chooses a smaller subset of experts based on specific criteria.

The SAMP’s survey population was composed of academics and practitioners (we label them “experts”) in the areas of economics, government, history, law, political science, and public administration. Two routes were used to include the specific individuals. First, based on web searches and our own expertise, we constructed an exhaustive list of academic institutions and think tanks. The list consisted of organizations mainly in Mexico and the United States, and we also included institutions from other countries, in which we found experts on the topic. From the institutions on the list, we identified individuals who reported research experience on the Mexican Presidency. These individuals were included in the study population.

Our second source of experts on the Mexican Presidency came from bibliographic references. We listed all individuals who (to our knowledge) had written about the Mexican Presidency and attempted to contact them requesting their participation in our survey.

In the end, our sampling frame consisted of 268 experts on the Mexican Presidency from institutions in Mexico (215), the United States (35), the United Kingdom (10), Germany (3), Colombia (2), France (1), Canada (1), and the Netherlands (1).

In the second stage, the interviewees decide whether to answer the questionnaire. In a strict sense, expert

surveys are not probabilistic, because respondents are self-selected. Thus, we cannot fully infer to the population of experts on a particular presidency (unless, obviously, that the whole population of experts responds to the survey, which is highly unlikely). Yet, by testing and adjusting for potential biases on the sample, we may be able to reduce the uncertainty of our results. Thus, in terms of the results' external validity, and the ability to generate valid inferences, the issue becomes the identification of potential biases that generate the estimated differences between the subsets of respondents and nonrespondents.<sup>9</sup>

The size of the population of experts on a particular country's presidency is relatively small. Experts also share a common pool of information. Therefore, we can set reasonably plausible priors on the sort of information we will obtain from a survey inquiring into presidents' place in history. One common procedure to minimize potential biases by respondents is to control the results for the respondents' ideology; for instance, weighting the results for experts' self-positioning along the liberal-conservative dimension (e.g., Murray and Blessing 1994). We follow this strategy in the subsequent sections to identify potential biases in the SAMP and enhance the external validity of our results.

We find no issues regarding the internal validity of our survey. The relationships among the items in the questionnaire are consistent for the subpopulation under study, and, thus, we can learn, for instance, what determines a president's place in history from the experts in our sample.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with academics to adjust phrasing and length. The SAMP asked respondents to grade twenty-six Mexican presidents. At the time the survey was administered, there had been sixty-seven chief executives since Mexico became an independent republic in 1824. Many, however, were interim executives who lasted a few weeks, days, or even minutes in office. Short tenures in office were especially recurrent during the nineteenth century, when Mexico underwent a phase of acute instability. These short tenures do not leave much space for the judgment of history, thus they were excluded from the sample. The subset of presidents who were included in the SAMP are those considered the main executives from the nineteenth century by standard historical work, most of the twentieth-century presidents, and the only president who had finished his tenure in the twenty-first century by the time the survey was administered.<sup>10</sup>

The experts were asked to grade each of the twenty-six presidents on a 0 to 10 scale on six different items: their work on economic issues, the degree of corruption in their administrations, their capacity to reform the existing

state institutions, their capacity to face the problems they encountered, their cabinet's performance, and overall performance.

The grade a president receives on "overall performance" is a proxy for our theoretical concept of a president's general legacy. The 0 to 10 scale can be thought of as a continuum between negative and positive legacies. The remaining five categories of presidential performance approximate specific second-level components. The categories of corruption, and economic and cabinet's performance, fit into the outcomes dimension. A president's capacity for institutional reform and for problem solving in principle fits both dimensions—outcomes and personal traits—because of the impossibility to directly observe personal capacities as such.

The questionnaire then requested that respondents state two positive and two negative items for which each president would be remembered in history. These open-ended questions allow us to have a more precise account of the specific components of presidential legacies.

The SAMP was conducted between April 2009 and February 2010. The survey was, in most cases, answered through the Internet. An e-mail describing the project was sent to all the participants with a link to the web survey. We sent two reminders in a five-month period. In the final round, we contacted the experts in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area offering to conduct the interview over the phone or face-to-face.

After two rounds of e-mails, and telephone and face-to-face interviews, forty-two questionnaires were completely or partially responded. The respondents are almost equally distributed on historians (55.6%) and political scientists (44.4%).

Although the sample size may seem small at first glance, the number of observations is not so different from many of the surveys of its type and in general of expert surveys. The pioneer work by Schlesinger in 1948 had a sample of 55 historians and the 1962 survey had 75. The follow-up by Schlesinger Jr. in 1992 interviewed 32 historians. The 1982 *Chicago Tribune* survey consisted of 49 historians. The 2000 *Wall Street Journal* had a sample of 132 experts and its 2005 poll interviewed 130 academics. *The Times* in 2008 had a minisample of 8 media experts. Few studies have had much bigger sample sizes, the exceptions being the Murray and Blessing (1994) survey that has a sample of 846 academics, the study by Ridings and McIver (1997) that interviewed 719 specialists, and the Siena Research Institute surveys from 2006 and 2010, with 744 and 238 academics interviewed, respectively.

The sample sizes for surveys outside the United States are also not so far from the SAMP's sample. The 1999 BBC Radio 4 poll involved 20 historians, the British

Politics Group survey consisted of 22 interviewees in 2000, and the *BBC History Magazine* study had only 1 expert, Francis Beckett, who ranked all prime ministers in the twentieth century. The Mori-Leeds survey had an ampler sample of 139 historians. In Australia, *The Age* interviewed 15 historians.

Thus, in comparative perspective, the SAMP's absolute sample size is within the range of previous studies. Moreover, if we approach the sample size relative to the potential respondents—that is, the number of experts in the field—the SAMP's sample size is larger than many of the surveys for the United States, as there are many more experts on the U.S. Presidency than there are experts on the Mexican Presidency.

For our multivariate examination, we increase the number of valid observations by using a dyad of presidents and experts in sample as the unit of analysis. We then control for the potential nonindependence of the observations. This choice allows us to use multivariate parametric methods with a statistically reasonable level of certainty in our results. Previous studies have used the average of experts' grades and other aggregated variables for every presidential administration as units of analysis, getting very small sample sizes with high statistical uncertainty (e.g., Nichols 2012; Simonton 1981).<sup>11</sup>

### Evaluating the Presidents

To first evaluate a president's place in history, we describe the Mexican executives' grades on the different items in the SAMP, which provide a fair approximation of a president's placement in the continuum between a positive and a negative legacy. Table 1 presents the means and rankings (based on the means) for the six items that were graded in the SAMP; it also shows the standard deviation for the overall grade.

Table 1 produces various pieces of useful and interesting information. The two best-evaluated presidents are the usual suspects: Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) and Benito Juárez (1958–1972, multiple terms, some nonconsecutive). These two presidents have a similar standard deviation in their overall grades, the smallest of all presidents, which points to a wide agreement about their exceptional place in history. SAMP experts associate Cárdenas's good grades with two specific actions: the expropriation of the oil industry and the agrarian reform he headed. Juárez is well remembered by the experts for more general items, such as his defense of the existing institutions and his fight for the nation's sovereignty. Not much surprise here; the choice of these two presidents seems to echo the official history of the PRI era.

The third best-ranked president, Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911, multiple terms, some nonconsecutive), would likely be a surprise for some; yet this assessment reflects

recent historical accounts on Díaz's government (e.g., Garner 2001; Krauze 1987). Díaz is commonly regarded as a dictator because of his refusal to give up power leading up to the Revolution of 1910. Nevertheless, Díaz is also one of Mexico's greatest reformers. Many of the economic changes introduced by Díaz led to Mexico's nineteenth-century modernization. Experts seem to put more weight on the latter, and they also seem to agree on this, because the standard deviation on Díaz's overall performance is relatively small.

At the lower end of the table are many of Mexico's favorite villains: Victoriano Huerta (1913–1914), who deposed and assassinated the triumphant president of the Revolution Francisco I. Madero (1911–1913); Antonio López de Santa Anna (1833–1855, multiple terms, some nonconsecutive), who is credited for giving up a significant part of Mexico's territory to the United States; and José López Portillo (1976–1982) and Luis Echeverría (1970–1976), who are blamed for the severe economic crises and corruption that Mexico suffered in the 1970s and early-1980s.

We also have two badly graded presidents who did extraordinary things before their term, but fell short of fulfilling expectations during their presidency. Vicente Fox (2000–2006) defeated the PRI at the polls after seventy-one years of a hegemonic regime. Yet, experts in the SAMP gave relatively low grades to Fox due to alleged corrupt acts of aides and family members during his tenure and his incapacity to change the existing institutions. Francisco I. Madero headed the armed movement that deposed Porfirio Díaz in 1911. His low grades also have to do with his incapacity to govern and his lack of understanding of the historic moment in which he was ruling.

The variance on grades tends to increase as the grades get lower. There seems to be agreement about who are the best presidents, but more diverse opinions about those in the middle and in the lower part of the ranking, something similar to what we observe for the United States.

We find no empirical differentiation between personal traits and administration outcomes, which speaks to the inherent difficulties of empirically disaggregating these two dimensions. The six grading categories are grouped into a single empirical dimension.<sup>12</sup> This issue has been widely discussed, but not settled, in the literature on presidencies (e.g., Beverlin and Ostrander 2008; Moe 1993; Simon 2009), and it merits further research.

Yet, as we will show, it is possible to estimate the independent effects of each of the evaluation categories on the overall grade. Some dimensions and components weight more than others on assessing a president's overall reputation.

To assess potential sources of bias present in experts' surveys, as identified by the literature, we test for differences in grades due to experts' ideology. We specified six

**Table 1.** Average Grade, Ranking (in Parenthesis), and Standard Deviation [in Brackets] by President.

Term years	President	Overall <sup>a</sup> performance	Economics	Corruption <sup>b</sup>	Capacity to reform the institutions	Capacity to face problems	Cabinet performance
1934–1940	Lázaro Cárdenas	8.4 (1) [1.0]	7.8 (1)	6.9 (3)	8.6 (1)	8.6 (1)	7.8 (2)
1857–1872 <sup>c</sup>	Benito Juárez	8.4 (1) [1.2]	7.2 (4)	7.2 (1)	8.5 (2)	8.6 (1)	7.9 (1)
1876–1911 <sup>c</sup>	Porfirio Díaz	7.6 (3) [1.5]	7.5 (2)	5.0 (12)	7.7 (4)	8.1 (3)	7.6 (3)
1940–1946	Manuel Ávila Camacho	7.1 (4) [1.4]	6.9 (7)	5.7 (8)	6.0 (10)	6.8 (8)	6.9 (6)
1924–1928	Plutarco Elías Calles	7.1 (4) [1.6]	7.0 (6)	4.4 (17)	7.8 (3)	7.3 (4)	7.1 (4)
1920–1924	Álvaro Obregón	7.1 (4) [1.4]	6.6 (10)	4.4 (17)	6.7 (7)	7.3 (4)	7.1 (4)
1952–1958	Adolfo Ruiz Cortines	7.1 (4) [1.4]	7.1 (5)	6.5 (4)	6.0 (10)	7.0 (6)	6.6 (8)
1994–2000	Ernesto Zedillo	6.8 (8) [2.4]	6.4 (11)	5.2 (10)	6.2 (8)	6.9 (7)	6.1 (10)
1917–1920	Venustiano Carranza	6.7 (9) [1.6]	6.3 (12)	5.1 (11)	7.4 (5)	6.6 (9)	6.3 (9)
1958–1964	Adolfo López Mateos	6.7 (9) [1.4]	7.4 (3)	5.7 (7)	6.1 (9)	6.6 (9)	6.9 (6)
1946–1952	Miguel Alemán Valdés	6.4 (11) [1.5]	6.7 (8)	3.2 (23)	5.9 (12)	6.5 (11)	5.9 (13)
1824–1829 <sup>c</sup>	Guadalupe Victoria	6.3 (12) [2.2]	6.7 (8)	6.4 (5)	5.1 (15)	5.6 (14)	5.9 (13)
1833, 1846–1847 <sup>c</sup>	Valentín Gómez Fariás	6.1 (13) [1.8]	6.2 (13)	6.2 (6)	5.5 (14)	5.8 (13)	5.4 (18)
1988–1994	Carlos Salinas	6.0 (14) [2.6]	5.4 (18)	3.4 (22)	6.9 (6)	6.2 (12)	6.1 (10)
1911–1913	Francisco I. Madero	5.8 (15) [2.0]	5.9 (14)	7.1 (2)	5.6 (13)	4.5 (18)	5.5 (17)
1928–1930	Emilio Portes Gil	5.5 (16) [1.9]	5.7 (17)	4.7 (13)	4.5 (18)	5.0 (15)	6.0 (12)
1829	Vicente Guerrero	5.3 (17) [2.2]	5.2 (20)	5.3 (9)	3.9 (21)	4.4 (19)	4.7 (21)
1982–1988	Miguel de la Madrid	4.9 (18) [2.5]	4.9 (21)	4.4 (17)	5.0 (16)	4.7 (16)	5.1 (19)
1932–1934	Abelardo L. Rodríguez	4.9 (18) [1.9]	5.8 (15)	4.1 (20)	3.8 (23)	4.6 (17)	5.6 (15)
1964–1970	Gustavo Díaz Ordaz	4.6 (20) [2.0]	5.7 (16)	4.5 (16)	4.4 (20)	4.0 (23)	5.1 (20)
2000–2006	Vicente Fox Quesada	4.6 (20) [2.7]	4.5 (22)	4.6 (15)	3.8 (22)	4.2 (21)	4.2 (24)
1970–1976	Luis Echeverría Álvarez	4.5 (22) [2.0]	4.5 (22)	3.8 (21)	4.8 (17)	4.3 (20)	4.6 (22)
1930–1932	Pascual Ortiz Rubio	4.4 (23) [1.9]	5.3 (19)	4.7 (13)	3.6 (24)	3.6 (24)	5.6 (15)
1976–1982	José López Portillo	3.6 (24) [2.0]	3.5 (25)	2.8 (24)	4.5 (19)	3.2 (25)	4.5 (23)
1833–1855 <sup>c</sup>	Antonio López de Santa Anna	3.3 (25) [2.3]	4.1 (24)	2.8 (24)	3.3 (25)	4.2 (22)	4.1 (25)
1913–1914	Victoriano Huerta	2.0 (26) [2.1]	2.6 (26)	2.6 (26)	1.7 (26)	2.7 (26)	2.9 (26)

Source. Survey of Academics on the Mexican Presidency (SAMP) 2009–2010.

The sample size ranges from a minimum of 11 to a maximum of 42; the mean is 32.8 observations by cell. Sorted by overall performance. Grades in a 0 (worse) to 10 (better) scale. The number of observations ranges from 25 to 36.

<sup>a</sup>Mean (ranking) standard deviation.

<sup>b</sup>Corruption scale goes from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (noncorrupt).

<sup>c</sup>Multiple terms, some nonconsecutive.

regression models using each of the six grading categories as dependent variables, and the experts' position on the liberal-conservative dimension as the independent variable. The models considered fixed effect by president and clustered errors by expert in the sample. This position was estimated by a questionnaire item that asked experts to place themselves on a 1 to 5 scale which, on one extreme, stated that "the state must be the main regulator of the economy," and on the other extreme stated that "the market should be the main regulator of the economy." If experts' economic ideology had an effect on the grades, then the coefficient of the economic ideology variable

should have been statistically significant. In all six regressions, the coefficient of the liberal-conservative positioning was statistically nonsignificant. Thus, we have no reason to suspect of biases related to this dimension.<sup>13</sup>

### Positives and Negatives

As we mentioned, participants in the SAMP were asked to state up to two positive and two negative items for which they believe that each president would be remembered in history. These were open-ended questions; responses were recoded into more general categories.



**Table 2.** Positive and Negative Features for Which Presidents are Remembered in History.

Positive	
Ability to reform the existing institutions	33%
Good economic performance	17%
Leadership/state vision	12%
Defense of national sovereignty	8%
Follows the rules/limited by constrains	7%
Stabilized the country	6%
Honesty	5%
Capacity to conciliate among different groups	5%
Good diplomatic relations	4%
Efficacy/get things done	2%
Knowledge of society's problems	0.7%
Bargaining abilities	0.6%
Sincere concern for people's problems	0.4%
Good working team/cabinet	0.1%
Negative	
Authoritarianism	24%
Corruption	24%
Incapacity to govern	12%
Economic mismanagement	12%
Lack of leadership/lack of state vision	9%
Not bounded by institutions/breaks the law	8%
Submissive to foreign interests	4%
Not working for the citizenry	2%
Inability to bargain	1.6%
Populism	1.2%
Nepotism	1.1%
Inability to reform	1.0%
Bad working team/cabinet	0.1%

Source. Survey of Academics on the Mexican Presidency (SAMP) 2009–2010.

$n = 857$  for positive mentions and  $n = 802$  for negative mentions.

These allow us to study specific second-level dimensions, and its components, for which presidents are remembered in history. Table 2 presents the frequencies for these responses.

A president's ability to reform existing institutions is the single most mentioned category; it accounts for a third of the total mentions of positive executives' characteristics.<sup>14</sup> A good economic performance is the second most rewarded item. Both components are highly related to Mexico's circumstances in the last decades: economic crises, and a continual struggle to modify several archaic rules that hinder the country's development.

Of the list of negative items for which presidents are to be remembered, the most cited are corruption and authoritarianism. We find that the weight of the positive categories is not symmetric on the negative pole of legacy. Despite the fact that presidents are censured for corruption, honesty is not a valued trait toward achieving a positive legacy. It is unlikely that presidents will

be remembered in history books for being "honest." A correspondence analysis of positive and negative characteristics shows that, on the main dimension (accounting for 49.1% of the variance), corruption is different from all the other negative categories, and it groups closely to the positive category of "leadership/state vision." Presidents who are positively regarded as "leaders" may also frequently be labeled as "corrupt."<sup>15</sup>

The top positive and negative traits, with a high number of mentions, are general characteristics on which experts tend to agree. We also see a significant dispersion in the rest of the responses, which implies context-specific components of presidential legacies—as stated in our conceptual characterization of the components.

## On the Determinants of Presidential Legacies

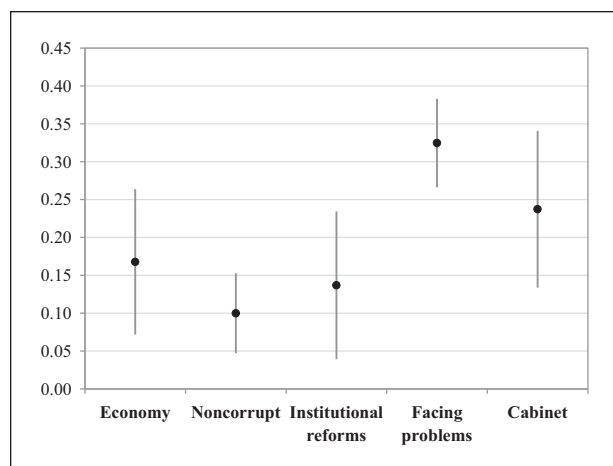
The descriptive data in the previous section provide us with some relevant clues about what determines how a president may be remembered in history; however, we are not controlling for other potentially relevant items. Of especial interest would be to understand how much weight each one of the graded items has on experts' overall assessments of presidents.

To empirically approximate the determinants of presidents' overall place in history, we specify an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model with fixed effects by president and error clustering by expert. The dependent variable is the overall grade that experts assess on every president, which approximates the executives' place in the legacy continuum from negative to positive. The core independent variables are the five categories in which experts graded presidents; its coefficients approximate the relative weight of every category on the overall grade.

The unit of analysis is the dyad of presidential administration and expert responding to the survey. The model has 647 observations and is specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Overall grade}_i = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Economic performance}_i \\ & + \beta_2 \times \text{Corruption}_i + \beta_3 \times \text{Institutional} \\ & \text{reforms}_i + \beta_4 \times \text{Capacity to face problems}_i \\ & + \beta_5 \times \text{Cabinet performance}_i + \theta_{ni} \\ & \times (\text{President}_1, \dots, \text{President}_n) + \mu_i, \end{aligned}$$

where  $i$  refers to the specific presidential administration and  $\mu$  is the random error of the model. The model controls for two potential sources of nonindependence and heterogeneity of the observations: first, it includes fixed effects by president. One may suspect that there are



**Figure 1.** Marginal effect of a one-unit change of the independent variable on the overall grade.

Source. Marginal effects computed using Clarify (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000).

idiosyncratic differences among presidents that are beyond the independent variables considered in the model. The second source of potential nonindependence is the existence of systematic differences among the respondents of the SAMP on the grading scales, deriving in nonindependent observations within the subset of answers of every respondent of the survey. We control for this potential problem by specifying a clustered model by expert.<sup>16</sup>

To test for potential biases in the model due to experts' ideology or professional field—which are standard potential sources of biases in this type of surveys, as identified in the literature—we included in identical regression models variables to account for three potential sources of bias: positions on the appropriate role of the state in the economy, position on abortion, and whether the respondent was a historian or a political scientist. None of these variables was significant, and the coefficients of our variables of interest did not change. Therefore, we find no evidence of biases.<sup>17</sup> In addition, a model that includes these variables would reduce our sample size by 211 observations.

On the basis of the regression model, Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of a one-unit change (in a 0–10 scale) of each of the five independent variables that approximate experts' evaluation of presidents on different areas. The points are the punctual prediction of the model and the vertical lines are the 95% confidence interval of the prediction.<sup>18</sup>

*Ceteris paribus*, the area of performance most important to experts for defining a president's overall grade is their capacity to face the problems they encounter in office. Many times, these problems are exogenous, but well-graded presidents rose to the challenges presented to

them. There is, thus, an ingredient of luck in whether a president has the opportunity to demonstrate his talent, or lack of talent, as may be the case.

The size of the effect of problem-solving is about double the impact of economic performance; for every point increase on the grade of problem-solving capacities, the overall grade increases by 0.33 points. This result relates to findings for the U.S. Presidency that emphasizes the relevance of the context in explaining presidential greatness (e.g., Murray and Blessing 1994; Nichols 2012; Simonton 1981). It also supports the theoretical construction of second-level dimensions and its components as being substitutable (i.e., a family-resemblance structure), because the nature of the particular problems to be encountered will vary across time and space.

Economic performance and institutional reforms matter, yet in a smaller proportion than an executive's capacity to confront problems. Experts on the Mexican Presidency seem to value a president's reaction to challenges more than economic performance as such. Note, however, that many of the challenges to be faced will be of economic nature.

The second item that has the most impact on legacy is the cabinet's performance. This is curious because experts hardly ever mention it as a positive or negative characteristic. Further research should focus on this specific component to provide a better understanding of the weight that the executive's team has on its evaluation.

One of the most interesting results is that the item that has the smallest marginal impact on the overall grade is corruption, which was one of the core characteristics of the PRI regime (Magaloni 2006). Experts place relatively less weight on corrupt behavior to determine a president's overall performance in office as compared with the rest of grading categories. This may help explain why corruption is so widespread among executives, and perhaps also why so few executives are formally prosecuted for this behavior (Romero 2011).

Related literature on elite corruption finds no strong relation between corruption and voters punishing their representatives (Golden 2005; Reed 1999). Multiple former presidents from Latin America who were allegedly corrupt have run for reelection, and have sometimes won office again, such as Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Alan Garcia in Peru.

To have a better understanding on the size of the effect of corruption on a president's overall grade, Table 3 shows the estimated overall grades for four hypothetical scenarios of extreme grades in corruption and the capacity to face problems, while holding everything else constant. We use the data from the regression model.

The upper-left cell is the case of the worse possible president on these two items: *ceteris paribus*, a highly corrupt and incompetent president. The model predicts a

**Table 3.** Overall Grade (and Rank) Simulations.

		Capacity to face problems	
		Minimum (0)	Maximum (10)
Corruption <sup>a</sup>	Minimum (0)	3.5 (25th)	6.7 (9th)
	Maximum (10)	4.5 (22nd)	7.7 (3rd)

Source. Simulations computed using SPost (Long 1997) in Stata. The number in every cell represents the predicted grade for every combination of grades on corruption and the capacity to face problems. In parenthesis is the ranking corresponding to every grade. <sup>a</sup>A minimum grade in corruption means a corrupt president, a maximum means a noncorrupt president.

3.5 grade for this hypothetical president in a 0 to 10 scale, ranking him in twenty-fifth place out of twenty-six presidents. In the diagonal lower-left cell is the opposite scenario: *ceteris paribus*, an honest president, who is a capable problem solver. This president would get a 7.7 grade, which would rank him in third place.

The most interesting combinations are in the two other cells. The upper-right cell portrays, *ceteris paribus*, a president who is an excellent problem solver, but who is quite corrupt. Despite his abuses of public funds, this president would get a 6.7 overall grade, which is above the weighted grade mean. This would gain him a solid ninth place. History, it seems, does not punish corruption as one may expect.

Finally, the lower-left cell portrays, *ceteris paribus*, a president who is terrible at problem solving, but who is impeccably honest. This hypothetical president would be severely punished by the experts with a 4.5 grade. There are only four presidents with worse grades than him. Honesty alone does not seem to pay.

## Conclusion

This study aims to contribute to our understanding of presidential decision making by delving into the subject of presidential legacies. Theoretically, we add a more explicit and analytical account of the subject. We explicitly posit a concept of positive presidential legacy, its dimensions and components. We identify two different dimensions of this concept: outcomes and personal traits. The components of these dimensions are not fixed; they are a function of context. This framework allows us to delve into the topic in a more systematic manner and to set the bases for future comparative research.

From the Mexican case, we have learned that the issues determining positive presidential legacies may have a different weight on legacy's negative pole. This is a relevant contribution to analyzing presidencies. It implies, for instance, that negatively scored acts do not necessarily mean a negative overall legacy. A president

can have a positive legacy if the score on the positive determinants is high enough. The case of corruption noticeably illustrates this.

We also corroborated that the line between outcomes and personal capacities is empirically unclear. The core problem lies on personal traits being unobserved. This limitation induces experts to infer capacities from outcomes. This makes these two categories empirically undistinguishable in principle. This is a significant issue for further research on presidential legacies.

Methodologically, we contribute to a more robust specification and analysis of multivariate models for survey data on presidential rankings by experts, and we contribute to the design of expert surveys on the topic outside the United States.

A theory on presidential legacies should be sufficiently general to explain behavior across cases. Yes, country's contexts and specific historic moments do matter in determining how a president is remembered in history books. Yet, we should be able to generalize to generate systematic knowledge on the issue. In this study, we found some general elements we believe can be used as guidelines for measuring presidential legacies in other countries.

Most of the comparative work on presidential regimes has focused on their institutional structures (e.g., Haggard and McCubbins 2001; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Shugart and Carey 1992), but not on performance. Further research on presidential legacies should expand empirical studies on the subject across and within countries, systematically, and over time. This would increase our understanding on why presidents do the things they do.

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## Notes

1. For more in-depth analyses about expectations on presidents' performance in the United States, see Simon (2009) and Ragsdale (2000) on "presidential imagery," and Pious (2008) on "presidential failures." For the Mexican Presidency, see Camp (1993) and Elizondo (1987).
2. See Nelson (2000) and Rose (1993) on evaluating presidents, and Beverlin and Ostrander (2008) and Nichols (2012) on presidential legacies specifically.
3. Goertz (2006) develops an ontological view on social science concepts that is structured on three levels. At the first or basic level, the concept is determined as it is used in theoretical propositions. At the second level, the dimensions of the basic level are established, specific components are stated, and the relationship between them is specified. The third level examines the concept structure.
4. The notion of *family-resemblance* implies that a concept has multiple dimensions that have enough similarity to be substituted. The adequate connector among dimensions is "or," as opposed to a *necessary condition* structure in which the connector among dimensions is "and."
5. Available at <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/?p=67886>
6. See McCullagh (2002) for a historiographic account on the different biases in historical research. See Kosso (2009) for a more epistemological discussion about the nature of historiographic facts, evidence, and explanations. See Lustick (1996) for a useful discussion about historiography and the problem of selection bias in political science.
7. See Moreno (2009, 253–59) for a good review of studies on presidential approval in Mexico.
8. See Valadés (1998) for a description of presidential formal authority across Mexican history.
9. See Farber and Farber (1997), Pfiffner (2003), Beverlin and Ostrander (2008), and especially Nichols (2012) for critiques on the potential limitations of this approach for assessing presidents' place in history and also on its advantages.
10. Our selection mostly coincides with compilations of Mexican presidents by two of the most renowned historians on Mexican presidents, Enrique Krauze (1994, 1997, 2002) and Will Fowler (2009).
11. The questionnaire and the data set are available upon request to the author.
12. A principal components analysis of the grading categories shows only one dimension above the standard eigenvalue cut at 1 ( $n = 649$ ). The output is available as supplemental material at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>
13. For space reasons, we do not include the regressions' output here. It is available as supplemental material at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>
14. This is much in the realm of what Burns (1978) labels "transactional leadership," which refers to actual changes based on the pursuit of the common good of the nation.
15. A more in-depth analysis on the relationship between positive and negative mentions is beyond the length of this article. The output of the correspondence analysis is available as supplemental material at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>
16. We find no evidence of multicollinearity in the model. The variance inflation factor test has values far below the 10 value that is usually used as threshold.
17. The regressions' output is available as supplemental material at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>
18. The complete regression output is available as supplemental material at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>

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