

# Introduction

## THE PROBLEM

One of the most surprising developments in Mexico's transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is the outbreak of criminal wars and large-scale criminal violence after the demise of seven decades of one-party rule. Under the reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), several major drug cartels had coexisted in relative peace and pursued their criminal activities without conflict among themselves or serious confrontation with the state. But as the country moved into multiparty competition and opposition parties scored unprecedented victories across cities and states in the 1990s, eventually winning presidential power in 2000, the cartels went to bloody war over profitable drug trafficking routes. As the late journalist Jesús Blancornelas (2002) observed, the first major inter-cartel war emblematically broke out in Tijuana in the northwestern state of Baja California where, in a historic 1989 election, the PRI had lost control of a state for the first time in the century. Subsequent inter-cartel wars erupted in other central and northern states where leftist and right-wing opposition candidates unseated the PRI for the first time. In the 1990s, battle deaths reached an annual peak of 350; by 2005, the death count surpassed the threshold of 1,000 murders – this is the threshold commonly used to classify a conflict as a case of civil war.<sup>1</sup>

The consolidation of multiparty elections as the sole mechanism to select and remove leaders, and to allocate power through peaceful means, did not bring peace in Mexico but was associated with a dramatic increase in criminal violence. Six years into democracy,

<sup>1</sup> See Fearon and Laitin (2003).

incoming President Felipe Calderón from the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) – the party that had defeated the long-reigning PRI in 2000 – declared war on the cartels and deployed the army throughout Mexico’s most conflictive regions in 2006. The War on Drugs and the outbreak of state–cartel wars intensified inter-cartel wars, and drug violence grew between five and six times throughout Calderón’s six-year term in office. According to the official government count made by Calderón’s successor, between 2006 and 2012, 70,000 Mexicans were murdered in inter-cartel and state–cartel conflicts. This is more than four times greater than the median death toll of all civil wars in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of six years of state–cartel and inter-cartel wars, Mexico’s criminal underworld experienced dramatic transformations. Cartels fragmented and went from 5 to 62 organized criminal groups (OCGs), and the street gangs working for them went from dozens to hundreds (Guerrero 2010, 2011a). These groups rapidly expanded their range of illicit activities beyond drug trafficking and ventured into new criminal markets, including the illegal *extraction* of human wealth (e.g., extortion and kidnapping for ransom) and of natural resource wealth (e.g., illicit plundering of mines, forests, gas and oil refineries). As a result of these new ventures, OCGs expanded their targets of attacks from rival cartels and state institutions to unarmed civilians. But one of the most surprising transformations took place when drug lords and their criminal associates began to systematically murder mayors and municipal party candidates in their attempts to influence subnational election results and gain *de facto* control over municipal governments, peoples, and territories. By 2012, more than two decades after the onset of inter-cartel wars and six years after the launching of the federal War on Drugs, one-third of Mexico’s population lived in municipalities where local government officials and party candidates had been victims of lethal criminal attacks and where OCGs sought to establish subnational criminal governance regimes.

Why did Mexican cartels go to war as the country transitioned from one-party rule to multiparty democracy? Why did wars become more intense as elections in Mexico’s 31 states and more than 2,400 municipalities turned increasingly competitive, party alternation became widespread, and power was increasingly decentralized and fragmented along the country’s federal system? Why did cartels and their criminal associates

<sup>2</sup> Sambanis (2004) estimates that the median death toll was 17,000 murders.

launch major attacks against local government officials and party candidates during election cycles, and why did they develop an interest in becoming *de facto* rulers over Mexico's municipal governments and local populations and territories?

The outbreak of criminal wars as countries transition from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy and the intimate association between political change and large-scale criminal violence in democracy are, to be sure, not Mexico-specific phenomena. In South America, Brazil experienced an outbreak of criminal violence after democratization in 1985 (Arias 2006a; Lessing 2017), and gang violence has intensified decade after decade as electoral competition, political plurality, and political decentralization have increased (Albarracín 2018). Drug trafficking gangs have developed criminal governance regimes in large swaths of the impoverished favelas in Rio de Janeiro and other major metropolitan centers (Arias 2006a). In Central America, after the establishment of competitive multiparty elections in the 1980s and shortly after the peace agreements that brought decades of civil war to an end in the 1990s, Guatemala and El Salvador experienced a dramatic increase in criminal violence (Cruz 2011; Yashar 2018). And gangs in El Salvador have established tight controls over local neighborhoods and their populations in the country's largest urban centers (Córdova 2019).

Explaining why OCGs go to war as countries outgrow autocracy, why democratic institutions become intimately intertwined with criminal violence, and why criminal lords develop interests in becoming *de facto* subnational rulers poses major challenges to dominant theories of crime and violence in the social sciences. From the sociology of crime to the economics of crime and mafia studies, students of organized crime and criminal violence have ignored or only superficially considered politics as a potential driver of criminal peace and violence.

Following Durkheim's (1893/1964) seminal work on social alienation and social control, **sociologists** have argued that broken communities and mono-parental households in impoverished urban areas provide the structural conditions for young men to join criminal gangs and engage in violent criminal behavior (Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson 1993). More dynamic explanations emphasize the social dislocation that results from major periods of urbanization and outmigration from rural to urban areas. Both the static and dynamic approaches underscore the importance of weak social networks, the erosion of social capital, and the lack of social mobility as drivers of criminal violence. In studies that concentrate on neighborhood-level dynamics, the police appear as the only relevant

state actor and scholarly research has focused mainly on police strategy (coercive engagement through incarceration versus developing police legitimate and community cooperation) and on how different forms of police engagement with the community and the use of extralegal violence are mediated by class, race, and ethnicity (Braga, Brunson and Drakulich 2019). Whether the focus is on community structures or the police or both, state and electoral politics have been conspicuously absent from dominant sociological theories of criminal violence. Criminal gangs are assumed to be *apolitical* organizations, and the sphere of policing is considered to be detached from electoral politics.

While the scholarship on the sociology of crime may be particularly useful in explaining why some Mexican communities may be predisposed to experience greater criminal violence, it fails to account for the intimate linkages between electoral politics, drug wars, and large-scale criminal violence that developed as Mexico transitioned from authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy.<sup>3</sup>

At least since Becker's (1968) foundational contribution to the economics of crime, **economists** have sought to explain criminal behavior and violence in terms of the incentives that encourage people to engage in criminal activities (*push factors*) and the state actions that deter them from so doing (*pull factors*). Following Becker's proposition that individuals engage in crime when their opportunity cost is low and they have little to lose, economists suggest that poverty, the lack of labor market opportunities, poor schooling and high drop-out rates from school often drive young men into committing violent crime (Neumayer 2003; Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza 2002). Others have looked into state capacity and effective policing as a deterrent of crime and criminal violence (Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza 2002; Levitt 2004). Mirroring established assumptions in the sociology of crime, economists have long assumed that organized crime is a private, illicit economic enterprise and OCGs are primarily *apolitical* groups. Influenced by the economics of interest groups, some scholars have departed from this strong initial assumption and have modeled drug cartels as a specific family of interest group in which criminal bosses rely on bribery and coercion to influence government policy in their favor (Dal Bó, Dal Bó, and Di Tella 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For an important exception, see Villarreal (2002). His work, however, focuses on ordinary crime, not necessarily on organized crime and Mexico's drug wars. Beyond Mexico, see Vargas (2016).

The *push* and *pull* factors emphasized by the economics of crime may help explain individual predispositions toward violence, but they provide no direct interpretation of the potential political foundations of Mexico's criminal wars. Becker's emphasis on the state's policing capacity may represent a bridge to politics. As students of civil war have conjectured, states in transitional regimes tend to have low governing and policing capacities (Fearon and Laitin 2003). But this claim is devoid of politics. Although elections are the key mechanism of political change in transitions from closed autocracy to electoral autocracy and into multiparty democracy, most studies assume state capacity to be a financial or a technical problem, rather than a political question in which electoral incentives may inform the development of state presence and capacities in such areas as security and policing.

Since the publication of Gambetta's (1996) path-breaking interpretation of the Sicilian Mafia, analytic sociologists and political economists have made crucial theoretical developments to explain the rise of mafias, the rationality of their strategic behavior, and the conditions under which they become violent. Focusing on periods of major structural transformation, in which the state is relatively absent, **mafia scholars** have suggested that mafias emerge as OCGs that seek to provide protection to players in the criminal underworld. This happened in Italy during the transition from feudalism to capitalism and after the reunification of the country (Gambetta 1996), and in Russia after the collapse of communism (Varese 2001). To operate successfully, mafiosi need to develop a comparative advantage in information gathering and in violent coercion. That is why members of the old order – for instance, feudal guards in nineteenth-century Italy or former KGB agents in late twentieth century Russia – have played a leading role in the development of the mafia. As Gambetta contends, mafias operate within the confines of cities or small subnational regions, because information gathering and the capacity to enforce agreements cannot be effectively exercised beyond the mafiosi's place of residence. In these limited geographic spaces, mafia bosses can aspire to have the monopoly of force in the criminal underworld and promote an environment in which the everyday operations of illicit markets are kept away from the spotlight and state authorities are kept at bay either through the secrecy of illegal activities or through bribery. It is a widely held claim in this literature that mafiosi go to war only when their monopolistic controls are challenged. Competition is the main driver of violence in the criminal underworld (Schelling 1971; Gambetta 1996; Skaperdas 2001; Varese 2010).

While mafia studies have established the theoretical foundations of our understanding of the criminal underworld and an exploration of the linkages between macro-political change and criminal violence, three problems remain that limit the power of this literature to explain the outbreak of criminal wars and large-scale criminal violence in Mexico and other new democracies. First, contrary to expectations that OCGs would operate in the criminal lord's place of residence, Mexican cartels have expanded well beyond their home cities or states and have ventured into other parts of Mexico and abroad. These are large-scale, multisite, transregional and in some cases transnational criminal organizations. Second, rather than rely on the secrecy of bribery or on targeted violence to resolve conflicts without unnecessarily attracting the attention of state authorities, drug cartels and their private militias have engaged in lethal and barbaric violence resembling that of civil war. Large-scale criminal violence of the magnitude experienced in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, or El Salvador is an anomaly for mafia studies. Finally, in contrast to the desire for secrecy that characterizes the criminal underworld described in mafia studies, and contrary to the presumed restriction of OCGs' activities to the criminal sphere, Mexican cartels' decision to systematically murder local government officials and party candidates and to seek to develop subnational criminal governance regimes defies theoretical assumptions from mafia studies.

Although the study of organized crime and large-scale criminal violence has been conspicuously absent from political science (Barnes 2017), in recent years scholars of Latin America have led the way in developing a new understanding of the political foundations of crime and violence. Since Arias's (2006) pioneering work, scholars have increasingly recognized that different forms of engagement between OCGs and state agents are crucial factors in defining peace and violence in the criminal underworld. This approach develops a new understanding in which the state is no longer viewed as a homogenizing organization that seeks to monopolize violence. In this emerging literature, criminal gangs, drug cartels, and armed private militias are conceived as illicit organizations that engage in some form of competitive state-building in cities, towns, and neighborhoods (Arias 2006a; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Arias and Goldstein 2010; Arias 2017; Barnes 2017; Lessing 2017; Albarracín 2018; Bergman 2018; Yashar 2018; Flom 2019; Lessing and Willis 2019). When criminal bosses develop collusive agreements with state agents and learn to coexist, peace reigns in the criminal underworld. But when OCGs compete for turf against each other or compete for state protection – or when they compete against

the state – war and large-scale violence become the dominant form of interaction.

These new understandings of OCGs as political actors that compete for order and subnational territorial control provide the political basis to start thinking about the potential linkages between political change and peace and violence in the criminal underworld. However, an important theoretical limitation is that in this state-centric approach, *political regimes* and *elections* are not recognized as key mechanisms for the distribution of state power that may affect the forms of engagement between state agents and criminal organizations. To disentangle the relationship between political change and organized criminal violence we need a political approach that recognizes the role of the state, political regimes, and elections in a new explanation of the ontology of organized crime and of the conditions that lead to war and peace in the criminal underworld.

#### OBJECTIVES

In this book we seek to explain why Mexican cartels went to war as the country transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy, why violence skyrocketed in democracy, and why – over the course of the War on Drugs – cartels and their criminal associates developed political interests and established de facto subnational political controls across important swaths of Mexico's territory, subverting local democracies. We seek to explain three crucial moments in the development of Mexico's drug wars: the *outbreak* of wars, the *intensification* of violence, and the *expansion* of war and violence to the spheres of local politics and civil society.

In addressing these questions, the book necessarily ventures into foundational theoretical and conceptual work. Because the leading theories of crime – most of them developed in economics and sociology – have focused mainly on (1) economic incentives and social structures that contribute to the rise of violent criminal groups; (2) law enforcement activities that deter or stimulate criminal behavior; and (3) the internal organization of criminal groups, politics has been systematically overlooked. To be sure, scholars of mafia studies and organized crime have recognized that OCGs have historically emerged during periods of major economic and political transformation (Gambetta 1996; Skaperdas 2001; Varese 2001). Moreover, cross-national studies have shown that criminal violence tends to increase as countries transition from authoritarian rule to democracy (Neumayer 2003; Fox and Hoelscher 2012; Rivera 2016). And political scientists studying organized crime in Latin America have

begun to develop the theoretical foundations for understanding the political basis of criminal violence. Yet, our understanding of politics as a potential driver of large-scale criminal violence in Mexico and elsewhere remains impaired without explicitly theorizing political regimes and elections.

In taking a new theoretical approach that brings together the state, political regimes, and elections to explain the outbreak of criminal wars in new democracies, we hope to contribute to a new generation of scholarly work that seeks to develop a **political science of organized crime and large-scale criminal violence** – or what Barnes (2017) has called a subfield of criminal politics. We do this by redefining widely held assumptions and concepts, offering new theoretical formulations, and providing new data sources to rigorously test whether politics should have a central place in the field of criminology. The literatures on the micro-foundations of mafias and criminal behavior,<sup>4</sup> civil wars,<sup>5</sup> and state-centric explanations of criminal violence in Latin America<sup>6</sup> provide crucial analytical guidance and serve as the basis for theoretical reformulation. And a close dialogue with the sociology of crime<sup>7</sup> and with specific explanations of the outbreak of criminal violence in Mexico and Latin America provides invaluable inputs for considering alternative explanations.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

In building a new political understanding of organized crime and large-scale criminal violence, we first provide a new conceptualization of organized crime based on the state–criminal nexus. We then explain why different political regimes explain different forms of state–criminal association. Finally, focusing on transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy, we assess how changes in the distribution of state political power via

<sup>4</sup> See Schelling (1971), Gambetta (1996), Skaperdas (2001), Varese (2001), and Skarbek (2014).

<sup>5</sup> See Kalyvas (2006), Steele (2011), Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly (eds.) (2015), and Arjona (2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Astorga (2005), Arias (2006a and 2017), Bailey and Taylor (2009), Arias and Goldstein (2010), Snyder and Durán-Martínez (2009), Arias (2017), Lessing (2017), Albarracín (2018), Durán-Martínez (2018), Bergman (2018), and Yashar (2018).

<sup>7</sup> See Sampson (1993) and Villarreal (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See Astorga (2005), Astorga and Shirk (2010), Dube, Dube, and García-Ponce (2013), Calderón et al. (2015), Osorio (2015), Rios (2015), Shirk and Wallman (2015), Trejo and Ley (2016 and 2018), Durán-Martínez (2018), Flores-Macías (2018), Pansters (2018), and Cedillo (2019).

the introduction of electoral competition can upset state–criminal interactions, create uncertainty, and give rise to incentives for criminal wars.

### Bringing the State Back in: Redefining the Relationship between the State and Crime

Unlike most studies that conceptualize OCGs as illegal economic enterprises that operate in opposition to state authorities, we follow state-centric studies of organized crime in Latin America in the critical theoretical move of conceiving OCGs as illegal groups that are intimately related to the state.<sup>9</sup> We make the strong ontological assumption that organized crime cannot exist and successfully operate illicit markets without some level of informal state protection. Drug traffickers and human smugglers, for example, require some level of state complicity to transport drugs and humans across international and domestic borders; some level of protection is required in the event that they are caught and need to derail an investigation, escape from prison, or simply continue operating businesses from behind bars. Absent these protections, traffickers do not go very far in becoming viable players in the smuggling industries.

Rather than picture OCGs and the state as axiomatically engaged in a zero-sum game – as criminologists have long assumed – we focus on the areas where the spheres of crime and the state intersect.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, not all state agents are part of informal networks of government protection for criminals and not all criminal groups seek protection from state agents. But when these two spheres intersect and state agents and criminals collude, the intersection creates a *gray zone of criminality* where the rise of organized crime is possible. The gray zone is the habitat of organized crime; the ecosystem in which OCGs can breathe, grow, reproduce, and succeed. Outside the gray zone there are common criminals but no OCGs, and state agents that do not operate in the gray zone are actually law enforcement agents – they may be repressive, particularly when they use iron-first policies to fight criminals, but they are not in collusion with organized crime.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Arias (2006a and 2017), Snyder and Durán-Martínez (2009), Jaffe (2013), Trejo and Ley (2016 and 2018), Albarracín (2018), Durán-Martínez (2018), Yashar (2018), and Sobering and Auyero (2019).

<sup>10</sup> For pioneering analyses on state–criminal collusion, see Astorga (2005), Arias (2006a), Bailey and Taylor (2009), Snyder and Durán-Martínez (2009), and Arias and Goldstein (2010).

<sup>11</sup> The concept of the gray zone has been widely used by students of the Italian mafia (see Allum, Merlino, and Colletti 2019). Similar formulations include the concepts of

## Introducing Political Regimes: The Electoral Foundations of Criminal Peace and Violence

Our central claim is that any major change in the sphere of state power or state policy that upsets the terms of engagement between the state and OCGs can destabilize the gray zone, introducing uncertainty and generating incentives for large-scale criminal violence. Because political regimes and institutions define how state power is distributed and the public policies that states adopt, politics is constitutive of organized crime. Politics is crucial in defining whether a criminal industry is dominated by a single monopolistic organization or whether there is competition for turf. And, as scholars of organized crime in economics (Buchanan 1973; Schelling 1971; Skaperdas 2001) and sociology (Gambetta 1996; Varese 2001) have long established, the prospects for peace and violence in the criminal underworld are largely dependent on whether criminal markets are monopolistic or competitive.

To understand the dynamics of peace and violence in criminal markets, we need to go beyond the state and understand how state power is distributed. This is the world of political regimes. We suggest that the gray zone of criminality often emerges in authoritarian regimes and is intimately associated with the state's repressive apparatuses.<sup>12</sup> Autocrats rule by means of coercion and cooptation (Svolik 2012; Trejo 2012). Although economic cooptation is a key trait of most authoritarian regimes (Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007), to stay in power autocrats rely on state specialists in violence whose chief mandate is to gather information from political dissidents and to punish them when they become a threat to regime survival. Authoritarian specialists in violence are members of special units within the armed forces (or the police), secret service agencies, and civilian forces that are subcontracted as shadow powers to keep dissidents at bay (Greitens 2016). To undertake their work effectively, these state specialists in violence enjoy impunity – they carry a state

“parapolitics” and the “deep state” (Cribb 2009 and Tunander 2009). In Chapter 1 we discuss the novelty of our own formulation of the gray zone and distinguish it from its more common use in the Italian literature and in studies of parapolitics and the deep state.

<sup>12</sup> We do not imply that the gray zone of criminality only exists in autocracies. To be sure, the gray zone also exists in young and consolidated democracies. Yet, as we explain below and in Chapter 1, because repressive state specialists in violence enjoy high levels of impunity and play such a critical role in our definition of the gray zone, their more widespread existence in autocracies renders autocracies more likely to experience wider gray zones than consolidated democracies.

license to kill, torture, or “disappear” their enemies. This uncommon power, however, turns them into a potential threat to authoritarian rulers.

To safeguard their loyalties, and to prevent palace coups, autocrats often allow state specialists in violence to regulate and profit from the criminal underworld. As we will explore in subsequent chapters, from Mexico to Russia, from Guatemala to Panama, and from Chile to Brazil, autocrats have given state specialists in violence access to the criminal underworld.<sup>13</sup> As long as the authoritarian regime remains stable, the criminal underworld is peacefully regulated by state specialists in violence. Contrary to the widespread assumption that criminal lords always have private armies of hit men available to protect them and their turf, we provide evidence suggesting the opposite. In authoritarian regimes criminal lords do have bodyguards and private personnel for their personal security, but they do not have private militias to defend their turf because security is informally provided by state security agents.

However, when authoritarian structures begin to crumble, the uncertainty about state protection can destabilize the criminal underworld. OCGs then have powerful incentives to militarize, develop and train their own private armies, and prepare for a world of competition and conflict in which the command of their own private militias will empower criminal lords to defend their turf and seek to conquer rival territory. When countries transition from authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy, the expansion of electoral competition, the constant rotation of parties in office, and the decentralization and fragmentation of power that characterize democratic politics can become a major source of turbulence for the gray zone of criminality. Multiparty democracy stimulates the redistribution of state power, the removal of old personnel, and the appointment of new officials in national and subnational governments who embrace new policies and develop new alliances. Thus, every new election cycle can become a major threat or an opportunity for the redefinition of criminal power and the outbreak of new cycles of criminal violence. The periodic redefinition of power, alliances, and policies affects the gray zone of criminality because OCGs can only exist and thrive when criminal groups develop collusive informal agreements with state agents.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1.

### Scope Conditions: Criminal Wars in New (Illiberal) Democracies

While transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy can result in major spikes of criminal violence, they can also open trajectories for, comparatively, more peaceful development. Whether countries follow peaceful or violent trajectories of postauthoritarian development largely depends on what they do with state specialists in violence. Cross-national studies of criminal violence suggest that countries that prevent the outbreak of large-scale criminal violence after democratization are those in which elites adopt major security-sector reforms (Cruz 2011; Yashar 2018; Tiscornia 2019) to dismantle the networks of state repression and criminality built during the authoritarian era (e.g., Nicaragua). Countries that prevent major outbreaks of criminal violence also include those in which postauthoritarian elites engage in major transitional justice processes (Trejo, Albarracín, and Tiscornia 2018) that expose, prosecute, and punish perpetrators of gross human rights violations (many of whom also led criminal networks; for example, in Argentina, Chile, and Peru). These are cases of transitions to democracy in which postauthoritarian politics go beyond the mere establishment of multiparty competitive elections to begin to institutionalize a democratic rule of law. In contrast, cross-national studies of criminal violence show that when elites in postauthoritarian societies fail to adopt extensive security-sector reforms or ambitious transitional justice processes, the gray zone of criminality forged under authoritarian rule persists and expands in democracy (e.g., Mexico, Brazil, or Honduras). These are countries that transition from military or one-party rule to multiparty elections without developing the foundations for a democratic rule of law.

Mexico is a conspicuous case in which postauthoritarian elites failed to adopt any meaningful security-sector reform or a meaningful transitional justice process. It is a country that experienced an “electoral” transition from one-party rule to multiparty democracy in which the policing and judicial practices from the authoritarian regime remained intact. In fact, the Mexican transition is a prominent example of the limited or “thin” transitions that Karl (1986; 2000) categorized as cases of “electoralism” and that resulted in what Zakaria (2003) called “illiberal democracies.” These are postauthoritarian regimes in which multiparty electoral competition does not translate into military, policing, and judicial reforms to protect human rights and civil liberties. Brazil and Honduras, like Mexico, are quintessential cases of thin transitions that resulted in the development of illiberal democracies. And although post-conflict Guatemala and El Salvador developed truth

commissions to look into a repressive past, the immediate adoption of blanket amnesties forestalled judicial action and the development of major security-sector and judicial reforms to prevent the renewal of violence. Two or three decades into the postauthoritarian era, electoral competition in all these countries has failed to endogenously generate incentives for transitioning from illiberal to liberal democracies.

Our theoretical discussion suggests that when countries with long histories of state–criminal collusion forged under authoritarian rule transition to thin, multiparty democracy, without developing a democratic rule of law and without dismantling the networks of collusion between state repressive agents and criminal groups, the electoral mechanisms by which state power is distributed are likely to become intimately intertwined with criminal violence. In these illiberal democracies, electoral competition, the democratic removal of leaders, and the fragmentation and decentralization of political power are likely to generate uncommon uncertainty in the gray zone of criminality and become a permanent stimulus to, rather than a deterrent of, criminal violence. Contrary to expectations by Schumpeter (1943), Popper (1962), and Przeworski (1991), in these illiberal democracies – where state specialists in violence from the authoritarian regime remain untouched and the gray zone of criminality remains intact – the selection of leaders by means of free and fair multiparty elections is unlikely to become a “mechanism to settle our differences without bloodshed.”

## EMPIRICAL TESTING

### Why Mexico

Instead of comparing trajectories of criminal violence across new democracies, this book focuses on the Mexican case – a country that was most likely to experience an outbreak of criminal violence because postauthoritarian elites failed to reform the country’s authoritarian security and judicial systems at the time of transition. By design, the Mexican case allows us to keep constant the military, policing and judicial institutions and practices that gave rise to the gray zone of criminality under authoritarian rule. It also allows us to explore whether, and the extent to which, the dynamics of political-electoral change in illiberal democracy became a causal driver of the outbreak, intensification, and expansion of Mexico’s drug wars. We take a long-term view and assess the outbreak and evolution of drug wars and large-scale criminal violence from the 1980s to

2012. And we open our analytical lens to assess the subnational evolution of drug violence across 31 states and 2,018 municipalities.<sup>14</sup>

### Why Mexican Subnational Regions

Unpacking criminal violence across subnational units has major theoretical advantages for the study of drug wars.<sup>15</sup> Because drug trafficking is *a global chain of local operations*, a focus on subnational units allows us to understand incentives for peace and violence in the most relevant geographic space where drug cartels and their criminal associates operate and forge the informal linkages with state agents that constitute the gray zone. Throughout the book we are mindful of how changes at the global and national levels can affect the drug trafficking industry. Yet subnational jurisdictions are the most meaningful space to visualize the gray zone of criminality, to shed light on the likely connections between politics and the criminal underworld, and to explain the outbreak and evolution of criminal violence. While we recognize sociologists' common practice to disaggregate even further and assess the dynamics of violence in urban neighborhoods, our emphasis on electoral politics and formal power structures compels us to use political-administrative jurisdictions (e.g., states and municipalities) as units of analysis.

Focusing on the evolution of criminal violence over time offers a unique opportunity to assess the likely impact of the dynamics of political change along Mexico's transition to electoral democracy, on the changing nature of drug cartels, and on incentives for peaceful coexistence and war. A crucial part of the story in this book is the dramatic transformation of Mexican drug cartels over the course of the transition from one-party rule to multiparty democracy and as a result of the War on Drugs. This change enabled cartels to transform themselves from business organizations operating the drug trafficking industry to armed territorial actors who sought to monopolize multiple criminal industries and become *de facto* rulers over local populations and territories. Taking time seriously – both through the lens of history and through time-series cross-sectional analyses – allows us to understand mutations in criminal objectives, in

<sup>14</sup> Mexico's Federal District, which had a special administrative status up until 2018, is excluded from the analysis. We also exclude 418 municipalities from Oaxaca that select their mayors through indigenous customary practices and where political parties do not participate in municipal elections.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis of the advantages of a subnational focus, see Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder (eds.) (2019).

organizational structures, and in cartels' uses of violence to meet their ends. As students of civil war have demonstrated, armed groups change in fundamental ways over the course of war (Kalyvas 2006; Wood 2011; Arjona 2016).

Focusing on change across subnational jurisdictions is crucial because drug violence in Mexico varies dramatically across time and space. Cartels peacefully coexisted in the 1980s; they went to war in the 1990s and early 2000s; and these wars reached unprecedented levels of violence after the 2007 federal intervention and the launching of Mexico's War on Drugs. But violence also varied dramatically across geographic jurisdictions. During the most intense period of criminal violence (2007–2012), the most violent cities in northwestern, northeastern, and southern Mexico reached murder rates higher than in El Salvador (the most violent country in Latin America and the world during the time period under analysis), but other cities in the southeastern part of the country scored levels of violence similar to those of Chile (the least violent country in Latin America).<sup>16</sup> The fact that political change also varied widely across time and space facilitates our inquiry into the likely impact of electoral politics and changing power structures on the dynamics of criminal violence.

### Quantitative Data

The book draws on two original datasets, which we constructed: The Criminal Violence in Mexico (CVM) Dataset and the Criminal Attacks against Public Authorities in Mexico (CAPAM) Dataset.<sup>17</sup>

CVM provides a count of all murders that can be attributed to organized criminal groups in Mexico in the period 1995–2012. Although the Mexican government produces reliable information about homicides, official statistics do not distinguish homicides committed by common criminals from those committed by OCGs for our entire study period. Because we are interested in isolating organized criminal violence, we relied on a systematic review of Mexico's leading newspapers to document violence that resulted from conflicts involving OCGs. To be sure, this is not a census that measures the universe of murders associated with criminal organizations, but a data collection that uses Mexico's leading national newspapers to approximate the intensity of violence. To check our statistical results based on data from CVM, we relied on alternative

<sup>16</sup> For comparative data, see United Nations Development Program, UNDP (2013).

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth explanation of these two datasets, see Appendix A and B.

sources of information on organized crime violence produced by the Mexican government for limited time periods (2007–2011).<sup>18</sup>

CAPAM is a dataset that records a wide variety of features related to all murders, murder attempts, public death threats, and abductions committed by OCGs against government officials and party candidates in Mexico for the period 1995–2012. The information is based on a systematic review of 18 Mexican national and subnational newspapers, and two specialized weekly magazines. Because most national and subnational newspapers provide extensive coverage of these high-profile attacks, CAPAM is the most complete source of criminal attacks against public authorities and politicians in Mexico.

Distinguishing homicides perpetrated by common criminals from those committed by OCGs – and identifying different forms of violence and different groups of victims of violence – opens a unique window of analytical opportunity to understand the uncommon behavior of Mexican cartels and their criminal associates. Most of our statistical knowledge about the determinants of criminal violence is predicated on the basis of aggregate homicide rates. Developing more specialized datasets that distinguish perpetrators (e.g., deaths that can be attributed to state–cartel and to cartel–cartel conflicts) and victims (e.g., local government officials and party candidates) allows us to identify new patterns in what seem to be uncharted territories.

### Qualitative Data

Besides the quantitative data, we draw on extensive qualitative information from more than 40 in-depth interviews with former governors and mayors, former federal government officials, law enforcement agents and security officials, party leaders, religious leaders, leaders of NGOs, journalists, and families of victims conducted over the course of several waves of fieldwork between 2014 and 2018. We conducted these interviews in Mexico City and in cities from five Mexican states: Guerrero, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, and Baja California. Sometimes we met with our interviewees in their home states; on other occasions we met them in different places in Mexico and the US. We also draw on some of the best work of investigative journalism, which has flourished during the War on Drugs, as well as on path-breaking reports from Mexican NGOs working

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Mexican government data on homicides that can be attributed to OCGs, see Atuesta, Sordia, and Madrazo (2018).

in collaboration with international organizations and institutions. These sources provided crucial qualitative information to unpack the logics behind the general patterns measured through the quantitative data, explain outliers, and identify the causal mechanisms that connect changes in the distribution of electoral power and the intensity of drug violence.

## A Multi-Method Approach

### *A Multifaceted Problem*

Although our analysis focuses on the likely impact of politico-electoral change on the outbreak and escalation of drug violence, let it be clear from the outset that we are not advocating for a mono-causal explanation of large-scale criminal violence in Mexico.

At an analytical level, we do recognize that the drug trafficking industry is a global chain of local operations in which multiple actors working at multiple levels are involved in moving the illegal drugs from South America into Central America and Mexico, and then into the United States. We also recognize that multiple factors drive people from different walks of life to join drug cartels and their criminal associates, and multiple causes drive these groups to use violence to achieve their ends.

At an empirical level, we acknowledge that Mexico's drug wars take place against the backdrop of an international regulatory regime that – by prohibiting the production, commercialization and consumption of a wide variety of drugs – gives rise to illicit markets. Although not all illicit markets are violent (Gambetta 1996; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Lessing 2017; Yashar 2018), the reality is that in the absence of a common power (e.g., a mafia) or third-party protection (e.g., informal networks of state protection), organized criminal groups tend to settle disputes through war and violence. We also recognize that 80 percent of illegal drugs that pass through Mexico end up in the US and that 80 percent of the weapons used in Mexico's drug wars come from the US. We are cognizant that globalization and market-oriented reforms may exacerbate economic and social inequalities and may drive young unemployed men into the arms of street gangs and OCGs. Moreover, market-oriented reforms and the privatization of natural resources may give rise to different forms of violent conflict. We understand that broken families and intra-family abuse can drive young boys into becoming foot soldiers for the drug wars. We are also aware that changes in the international prices of drugs may stimulate important changes in criminal markets and may drive competition and violence.

While recognizing the complexities of the phenomenon and the richness of the theoretical explanations across social science disciplines, our goal is to join a growing group of political scientists in making a strong claim about a major omission in criminology: the political-electoral foundations of organized crime and large-scale criminal violence.

### *Multivariate Regressions and Quasi-experimental Techniques*

To evaluate our key theoretical propositions about the politico-electoral drivers of drug violence in Mexico, we first test for a host of variables associated with the effects of electoral competition and the fragmentation of political power on criminal violence, while controlling for a wide variety of economic, social, and demographic factors that operate at global, national, and subnational levels. We use results from time-series cross-sectional regression models as a baseline for the viability of our arguments.

To more effectively isolate the likely *causal impact* of political variables on the dynamics of criminal violence, we rely on quasi-experimental techniques to move from correlational to causal analysis. We use synthetic control models (Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller 2015) and natural experiments (Dunning 2008) to measure counterfactual scenarios. While we take causal identification seriously, we do not dismiss observational techniques associated with regression analysis because we do recognize the multi-causal nature of the phenomenon and hence would want to recognize the substantive impact of alternative explanations and controls.

Using both classical techniques of regression analysis with quasi-experimental tests allows us to (1) recognize the multi-causal nature of large-scale criminal violence; (2) show how political variables improve our explanations; and (3) identify and isolate the likely causal impact of political-electoral factors on the intensity of criminal violence.

### *Case Studies*

Following the logic of nested analysis (Lieberman 2005), we make active use of case studies to identify causal mechanisms – the concatenation of incentives that connect politics with violence. We select cities and states that we can identify on the regression models. Based on our own extensive fieldwork, local histories, and reports from investigative journalism, we then conduct process-tracing analyses (Waldern 2015) to identify how changes in state power affect the gray zone of criminality and the conditions under which this uncertainty may stimulate the outbreak of large-scale criminal violence. By identifying the causal chain of actors and

events, we can also address questions of endogeneity (Goertz 2017). Throughout this book, our historical case studies will be in intimate dialogue with the observational and the quasi-experimental results.

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The book's main findings center on three major transformations that took place in Mexico's drug industry over the course of two decades: (1) The outbreak of inter-cartel wars during the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy; (2) the escalation of drug violence to unprecedented levels in democracy; and (3) the development of subnational criminal governance regimes after two decades of war.

### Subnational Alternation and the Outbreak of Inter-cartel Wars

Although most scholars of drug violence in Mexico associate the outbreak of inter-cartel wars with the national transition to democracy in 2000 – when the PRI lost presidential power – and the escalation of violence with President Calderón's decision to launch a War on Drugs against the cartels in 2006, we present new evidence showing that cartels first went to war in the early 1990s at a time when the federal government was not pursuing a proactive anti-drug policy.<sup>19</sup> Rather than associate the outbreak of inter-cartel wars with national alternation or national policy changes, we show that cartels went to war during a wave of subnational party alternation, when opposition parties won several gubernatorial seats throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Because state-level police forces and agents associated with the state attorneys' offices played a central role in the development of informal networks of government protection for the cartels in the era of one-party rule, the alternation of political parties in state gubernatorial power and the removal of top- and mid-level officials in the police and the public prosecutors' offices created an era of acute uncertainty in Mexico's gray zone of criminality. This rendered cartels vulnerable to attacks by incoming authorities and rival cartels. To cope with this uncertainty, cartels took a momentous decision that would change Mexico's drug trafficking industry forever: drug lords created

<sup>19</sup> Prior to Calderón's War on Drugs, Mexican governments under the PRI launched Plan Cóndor, a major US-backed campaign against drug cultivation and traffic that spanned from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. See Cedillo (2019). Between 1985 and 2005, the Mexican government's anti-drug policies were reactive.

their own private militias to defend themselves and their turf against their enemies. Once cartels had secured their turf, these private militias empowered drug lords to seek to conquer rival territories whenever a new rotation of political parties in state power affected competing cartels. Our findings show that in Mexico, the spread of subnational party alternations led to the proliferation of inter-cartel wars across states with drug trafficking routes.

Subnational party alternation and the incoming opposition governors' decision to name new state attorneys and new chiefs of police had a dramatic, unforeseen impact on the gray zone of criminality. Because Mexico did not adopt a major security-sector reform or any transitional justice program to dismantle the networks of criminality that state specialists in violence had forged under the PRI's long period of authoritarian rule, party alternation in gubernatorial power – one of the defining features of democracy – changed the criminal balance of power, opening a new era marked by conflict and violence. Students of Mexican democracy have long argued that the electoral and federalist nature of the transition – opposition parties first scored major electoral victories across cities, then in state gubernatorial power, and finally in presidential power – resulted in a decentralized and peaceful process of regime change from below (Becerra, Salazar, and Woldenberg 2001; Merino 2003; Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007; Lucardi 2017). Our findings reveal that the narrow nature of the transition planted the seeds of violence in Mexico's nascent democracy: subnational dynamics of political competition and the rotation of political forces would unwittingly harbor incentives for the outbreak of narco wars and large-scale violence in the criminal underworld.

When transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy are confined to the electoral arena and past repressive, criminal arrangements are not carefully dismantled through major security-sector reform or via transitional justice mechanisms,<sup>20</sup> democratic mechanisms rapidly become

<sup>20</sup> As Tiscornia (2019) suggests, security-sector reforms help to dismantle criminal networks and contribute to the decline in criminal violence when new elites demilitarize armed forces that have been forged in the authoritarian era, and increase internal and external mechanisms of police accountability. Trejo, Albarracín, and Tiscornia (2018) show that by adopting ambitious transitional justice programs centered on truth and justice, new democratic elites expose, prosecute, and punish authoritarian specialists in violence who committed atrocities during the authoritarian era and who were part of the gray zone of criminality. This raises the costs of impunity in democracy and deters state–criminal collusion and the use of lethal violence to defend or fight crime. See Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion.

intertwined with criminality and violence. By the time the Mexican opposition conquered the presidency in 2000 and then renewed its hold on office in 2006, Mexico's five dominant cartels had developed their own private militias and were engaged in multiple conflicts in northwestern, northeastern, and southern Mexico. Inter-cartel wars had escalated from low-intensity conflicts (350 annual battle deaths in the 1990s) to conflicts marked by large-scale violence (more than 1,000 battle deaths by 2005). Although Mexico was technically considered to be a country at peace, the country's criminal wars had surpassed the threshold of battle deaths that is typically used to define a civil war.

### Intergovernmental Partisan Conflict and the Escalation of Drug Violence

There is extensive empirical evidence showing that the federal intervention in the War on Drugs and the deployment of the Mexican armed forces throughout the country's most conflictive regions between 2006 and 2012 led to a dramatic five-fold increase in the death toll of drug violence. Why violence increased, however, remains contested. One narrative suggests that the use of the military to fight the cartels provided incentives for cartels to arm themselves and fight back before they were crushed (Flores-Macías 2018). Another account suggests that the "kingpin strategy," by which federal forces killed or incarcerated the cartels' leaders, led to intra-cartel fragmentation, competition, and violence (Guerrero 2011a; Calderón et al. 2015; Phillips 2015). A third narrative argues that the use of unconditional violence to crack down on all cartels, regardless of whether they were attacking the government or not, led to a major backlash (Lessing 2017). Finally, a fourth account suggests that the federal intervention weakened the cartels and suppressed violence in subnational regions where the president was able to coordinate the government's actions with subnational co-partisan authorities, but proved to be ineffective and led to a violent backlash where authorities from different political forces failed to coordinate (Urrusti Frenk 2012; Ríos 2015).

While most explanations focus on state military strategies to crack down on the cartels, we shift the focus to the politico-electoral logics of the federal intervention and assess the extent to which partisanship informed the logic of the intervention. We argue that the uneven expansion of violence across Mexican territory between 2006 and 2012 was not a technical problem of policy coordination between the federal government and the states but one of acute intergovernmental partisan conflict.

In a context of sharp ideological polarization between Right and Left following the bitterly contested 2006 presidential election – in which the right-wing candidate defeated the leftist candidate by a razor-thin margin, without the loser admitting defeat – the president deployed the army to confront an escalating inter-cartel war (Aguilar and Castañeda 2009). Facing an immediate backlash from the cartels (Guerrero 2011b; Espinosa and Rubin 2015; Atuesta and Ponce 2017) and a sudden hike in violence that could have resulted in major electoral losses, the president devised a more comprehensive military, economic, and social intervention to contain the epidemics of violence in areas ruled by his co-partisans. At the same time, he conducted a unilateral and limited intervention in subnational regions ruled by the Left – the president’s arch-enemy – and blamed the escalation of violence on the leftist officials themselves.

Intergovernmental partisan conflict and the partisan nature of the federal intervention changed the balance of power in the gray zone of criminality: it alerted the cartels to a window of opportunity to contest controls over drug trafficking routes in subnational jurisdictions where leftist subnational authorities were unprotected. These politically unprotected areas became a magnet for drug cartels and for the multiple break-away OCGs that resulted from the kingpin strategy of cartel decapitation, by which several private militias serving the cartels became powerful independent organizations. Intense criminal competition for turf and for the expansion of the gray zone of criminality in subnational leftist states and municipalities led to a dramatic escalation of violence. The federal government reacted by blaming the escalation on its political rivals, running national smear campaigns against leftist governors and mayors, and even politicizing the national attorney’s office to prosecute leftist subnational government officials.

The politicization of the federal War on Drugs was possible because Mexican postauthoritarian elites failed to transform the country’s authoritarian security and judicial institutions and practices. As is the case in most authoritarian regimes, protecting authoritarian incumbents and the regime, rather than serving citizens, is the chief mandate of the military, the police, the public prosecutors’ offices and the judges. As presidents during the PRI’s era of authoritarian rule had done, President Calderón used the security sector and the judicial system to reward his political loyalists and punish his political enemies in the state’s war against the cartels. Contrary to the Weberian ideal type, in which state leaders would seek the monopoly of violence within a given territory, the dramatic escalation of violence in Mexico during the War on Drugs reveals that

electoral incentives may lead state leaders to strategically suppress violent challenges in regions that are relevant for their political ambitions, but allow the escalation of violence in areas under the control of their enemies.

### Wartime Transformations: The Development of Subnational Criminal Governance Regimes

One of the most puzzling developments during Mexico's War on Drugs is the sudden outbreak of a wave of 311 lethal criminal attacks against local government officials and party candidates between 2007 and 2012. We argue that these attacks represented an inflection point in a protracted and increasingly lethal conflict, revealing a second momentous transformation in the ecosystem of the gray zone of criminality: drug cartels and their criminal associates murdered hundreds of local government officials and party candidates to take de facto control over local governments, populations, and territories. OCGs became *territorial armed actors* and developed *subnational criminal governance regimes*. This turned Mexican cartels and their criminal associates into de facto political actors.

It has been well established in the literature on Mexico's drug wars that the 2006 federal intervention led to the fragmentation of Mexico's five leading cartels into over 60 different criminal organizations by 2012 and to a fierce competition for control over the country's profitable drug trafficking routes. To finance these conflicts, several of the cartels' break-aways, particularly the private militias and the street gangs who functioned as foot soldiers of these drug wars, moved into new criminal markets. These were devoted to the extraction of human wealth – e.g., extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and human smuggling – and the looting of natural resources – e.g., forests, oil and minerals. Within this new menu of illegal sources of income for war, the cartels and other OCGs discovered the municipality as a unique source of public funding and as an institutional instrument to control local populations, natural resources, and territories. To gain control over the municipalities, OCGs found a simple method: the use of targeted lethal violence against mayors and party candidates. In this endeavor, cartels took important cues from the political environment to seize local controls.

We show that cartels and their criminal associates took advantage of the dynamics of electoral competition and intergovernmental partisan conflict to select their targets for assassination and to establish subnational criminal governance regimes. Murders and murder attempts were more likely in municipalities of states where subnational authorities

were purposefully unprotected by the federal government: subnational regions ruled by leftist states – the president’s main political rivals. Our analysis also reveals that lethal attacks against local government officials and party candidates more commonly took place during subnational election cycles, when new mayors were elected and when they appointed municipal cabinet members. Drawing on extensive qualitative evidence, we show that following these attacks, cartels were able to infiltrate the incoming municipal governments, taking control over the local police and key administrative positions, including such areas as finance and taxation, and public developments. Controls over formal government positions facilitated the cartels’ control over coercion and taxation and allowed them to regulate local political processes and key economic activities.

During the Mexican transition to democracy, the dynamics of political change – including electoral competition and partisan alternation – undermined incentives for peaceful coexistence in the gray zone of criminality. But after the 2006 federal intervention and the War on Drugs the situation reversed, and cartels and their criminal associates increasingly began to shape local political processes. Unlike armed rebel groups who typically fight civil wars to remove national governments and establish a new political regime, drug cartels and their criminal associates did not have their eye on national power but sought to establish *de facto* subnational governance. Although Mexican cartels are not armed insurgent groups and the country’s drug wars are not a civil war (Kalyvas 2015), recognizing OCGs as armed territorial groups and recognizing their attempt to develop subnational criminal governance regimes is crucial to understanding the power that these groups have acquired in order to reconfigure local political orders.

#### THE ROAD AHEAD

The book is divided into four main sections.

Part I develops the book’s main theoretical claims. In Chapter 1, “The Political Foundations of Peace and War in the Gray Zone of Criminality,” we outline the theoretical framework that allows us to name, conceptualize, and analyze the gray zone of criminality as the ecological space where the state and crime intersect and where state specialists in violence and criminals give rise to organized crime. We explain why the gray zone commonly emerges in authoritarian regimes and why a thin transition to electoral democracy – in which elites fail to reform the security forces and

the judicial system that enabled the spread of the gray zone of criminality survives – enables the intimate association of electoral competition, political plurality, and the decentralization of political power with outbursts of large-scale criminal violence. Building on new assumptions and definitions, the chapter develops the general theoretical propositions that will serve as guidance for the formulation of specific hypotheses for testing in the empirical chapters.

Part II explains why Mexican cartels went to war as the country transitioned from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy. Chapter 2, “Why Cartels Went to War: Subnational Party Alternation, the Breakdown of Criminal Protection, and the Onset of Inter-Cartel Wars,” uses information from in-depth interviews with the first opposition governments in Mexico and new data on historical patterns of government repression in Mexico to show that state-level police and judicial authorities played a key role in developing the informal network of protection for drug cartels under the PRI era of one-party rule. Based on time-series cross-sectional models, the chapter then shows that subnational party alternation in the gubernatorial seat is a key driver of the outbreak of large-scale criminal violence. Using synthetic control models, we show that this association is causal. Chapter 3, “Fighting Turf Wars: Cartels, Militias, and the Struggle for Drug Trafficking Corridors,” draws on extensive interviews conducted in five Mexican states (Baja California, Chihuahua, Jalisco, Michoacán and Guerrero). It offers an in-depth analysis of how party alternation and the opposition governors’ decision to appoint new personnel in the state attorneys’ offices and the state judicial police led to the breakdown of protection. It also shows how cartels created their private militias in response to this political uncertainty and how the availability of these new armed organizations allowed drug lords to defend their turf and challenge rival territory. The chapter outlines the process by which sequential party alternation across states triggered an armed race among cartels, leading to dyadic conflicts in northwest, northeast, and south Mexico.

Part III focuses on the dramatic escalation of drug violence in democracy, following the federal intervention and the launching of the government’s War on Drugs. Chapter 4, “Why the State’s War against the Cartels Intensified Violence: Political Polarization, Intergovernmental Partisan Conflict, and the Escalation of Violence,” explains why in times of acute political polarization governments may have incentives to politicize law enforcement and politicized interventions may stimulate violence. Using time-series cross-sectional models, we show that

between 2007 and 2012 drug violence was more intense in municipalities of states ruled by leftist governors. This was not a problem of incompetence by leftist subnational authorities, but the result of intergovernmental partisan conflict between a right-wing federal government and leftist governors. We present a natural experiment, by which we compare the intensity of criminal violence in nearly identical municipalities located across the states of Michoacán and Jalisco, to show that the fact that Michoacán was ruled by the Left and Jalisco by the Right is a key causal driver that explains why the municipalities on the Michoacán side of the border experienced significantly higher levels of violence than their neighbors in Jalisco. Based on case studies from cities in three different states (Michoacán, Baja California, and Chihuahua), in Chapter 5, “Unpacking the War on Drugs: Presidents, Governors, and Large-Scale Narco Violence,” we disaggregate the federal intervention in the War on Drugs on the military, judicial, communicative, and social policy dimensions. We show the differing trajectories depending on patterns of intergovernmental partisan cooperation or conflict. We also analyze how cartels took cues from this conflict to make decisions about contesting unprotected territories, leading to conflict escalation.

Part IV explains why, as war became more intense, cartels and their criminal associates used targeted lethal attacks against subnational government officials and party candidates to establish criminal governance regimes. Chapter 6, “Why Cartels Murder Mayors and Local Party Candidates: Subnational Political Vulnerability and Political Opportunities to Become Local Rulers,” makes use of time-series cross-sectional analyses to show that cartels attacked mayors and party candidates where intergovernmental partisan conflict between Left and Right was more intense, and where mayors and local party candidates were politically vulnerable. It also shows that attacks took place disproportionately during subnational election cycles. Two natural experiments – contrasting municipalities along the Michoacán–Guerrero and Michoacán–Guanajuato borders – allow us to show that political vulnerability, afforded by intergovernmental partisan conflict and political opportunities, opened by subnational election cycles, are causally related to the probability of attacks against mayors and party candidates. Drawing on extensive interviews conducted in three different Mexican states (Michoacán, Guerrero, and Baja California), Chapter 7, “Seizing Local Power: Developing Subnational Criminal Governance Regimes,” presents case studies showing how cartels used the murder of mayors and candidates

to infiltrate local campaigns and municipal governments and developed controls to establish themselves as de facto local rulers.

In the Conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for a new understanding of the drivers of criminal violence in Mexico, for theories of criminal violence, and for security policies in new democracies. We first discuss how our theoretical focus on the politico-electoral drivers of organized crime and large-scale criminal violence offers a new interpretation of two decades of drug wars in Mexico (1990–2012). We use this lens to suggest that political and policy continuities after 2012 help explain the expansion and intensification of violence from 2012 to 2018. Beyond Mexico, we discuss how our theoretical reformulation of organized crime and our empirical findings contribute to the development of a political science of organized crime and large-scale criminal violence. We conclude the book by offering a reflection on the policy implications that follow from a political science approach to the study of crime and violence.