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The Transformation of Mexican Cartels and Violence Against Government Officials

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s, Mexican cartels have increasingly threatened, attacked, and assassinated government officials. Existing explanations emphasize electoral incentives, political vulnerability, and government crackdowns. We propose an additional and largely overlooked explanation: transformations within Mexico's criminal underworld itself. As large cartels fragmented, more localized criminal organizations emerged, multiplying both symmetric and asymmetric inter-cartel conflicts. We argue that cartel capacity and inter-cartel conflict interact to produce distinct incentives for the targeting government officials. To test these claims, we combine original data on assassinated politicians in Mexico between 2000 and 2018 with existing datasets on attacks against political actors and municipal-level cartel presence. We find that high-capacity cartels and inter-cartel conflicts are the strongest predictors of violence against politicians. While early violence is driven primarily by high-capacity organizations, lower-capacity splinters become significant perpetrators after fragmentation intensifies, but only in municipalities experiencing inter-cartel conflict. Lower-capacity cartels operating alone do not predict assassinations. We further find that cartel dynamics primarily shape violence against local and, to a lesser extent, state-level politicians, but not federal officials. These findings demonstrate that changes within the criminal underworld play central roles in shaping patterns of political violence in Mexico's ongoing security crisis.

Keywords: drug cartels, criminal fragmentation, inter-cartel conflict, political assassinations, political violence, Mexico

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Introduction

In 2001, a group of men dressed in black approached María de los Ángeles Tamés Pérez, municipal government councilmember of Atizapán de Zaragoza in the State of Mexico, in her car and opened fire.[1] Authorities declared her dead by the impact of at least four bullets fired at no more than a meter distance. Investigations soon revealed that Tamés Pérez was planning on providing evidence to government authorities about bribes accepted by the mayor from drug traffickers. This event made national and international headlines, as violence against state officials by criminal organizations (COs), also known as "cartels" in Mexico,[2] was practically unheard of in 2001 despite cartels operating in the country for decades. However, since then, the killing of politicians gradually increased and is now alarmingly common: during the 2018 electoral cycle alone, cartels murdered over 150 mayors, mayoral candidates, and former mayors, making the homicide rate for this position greater than that of the general population (Calderón, 2018).

This phenomenon is both distressing and underexplained. Not only do COs not seek state power (Lessing, 2017, 2021), but the use of violence against government officials in Mexico is a relatively new phenomenon despite powerful cartels operating in the country for decades. This brazen form of violence defies common views that violence against the state by COs is costly and should therefore be uncommon (Gambetta, 1993; Bailey and Taylor, 2009; Durán-Martínez, 2017), especially since COs can credibly threaten state officials rather than wield actual violence (Lessing, 2017). Yet COs cannot survive or operate without some degree of state protection, cooperation, or collusion (Arias, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2020; Durán-Martínez, 2017), and thus obtaining protection from politicians is necessary. Under certain conditions, the pursuit to gain this protection can turn violent. Existing studies identify three primary political factors that create the conditions for COs to violently target government officials: election cycles (Trejo and Ley, 2020; Blume, 2017; Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017;

[1] "La Regidora sabía demasiado" *Proceso*, March 12, 2002.

[2] We use the term "cartel" to denote criminal organizations in Mexico. For the purpose of this article, we use both terms interchangeably.

Alesina et al., 2018), intergovernmental party politics (Trejo and Ley, 2016, 2020; Blume, 2017; Durán-Martínez, 2017), and government crackdowns (Lessing, 2017; Durán-Martínez, 2017). However, these explanations seem to fall short in fully explaining the prevalence of violence against government officials in Mexico given the specific timing and location of the killings.

We contend that the literature has overlooked a key factor as an additional explanation for this violence: the transformation of Mexico's drug cartels over the past two decades. Mexico's criminal underworld went from being dominated by a handful of large and powerful cartels that specialized in drug trafficking and operated in specific regions key to the drug trade in the early 2000s, to a highly contested environment where dozens of large and small cartels involved in a diverse set of illicit activities operate and fight each other across the country. Although this criminal metamorphosis coincides with the increase in violence against government officials, the relationship between the two has been largely overlooked by existing research. We link these two coinciding patterns by posing the following question: what role does the transformation of COs have in explaining where and why they assassinate government officials?

Our central claim is that the *capacity* of COs shapes the strategies available to COs when interacting with the state, thus conditioning their propensity to use violence against the state. We propose that two interdependent changes to the structure within and relationship between COs created incentives for them to attack the state: the fragmentation of high-capacity drug cartels as they expanded throughout the country that gave rise to more localized cartels of lower-capacity, resulting in the escalation of symmetric and especially asymmetric cartel conflicts. We argue that cartel capacity and inter-cartel conflict interact to produce interrelated but distinct incentives for the targeting government officials, with the proliferation of lower-capacity cartels and the resulting symmetric and asymmetric conflicts making assassinations more likely. Political violence thus serves to further the ultimate goal of COs – profit and survival – through the strategy of eliminating rival support and

consolidating state protection.

Analyzing how the transformation of cartels affects violence against the state, however, is difficult. A key limitation of existing studies is the lack of detailed data on COs, leading scholars to rely on proxy or highly aggregated measures (Calderón, 2018; Blume, 2017; Hernàndez Huerta, 2020; Trejo and Ley, 2020). This article makes an empirical contribution to the study of political violence by using local-level data on both political assassinations and cartel dynamics in Mexican municipalities across 19 years. To test our theoretical conjectures, we triangulate evidence from two datasets on violence against state officials. The first is from Trejo and Ley (2020) (we herein use "TL" when referring to this dataset), which measures *lethal and non-lethal attacks* against government officials, political candidates, and party activists between 2007 and 2011. The second is an original dataset on all *assassinated* politicians in Mexico from 2000 to 2018. Importantly, this data captures both the period before drug cartels and criminal dynamics changed fundamentally, and after 2010 when the transformation was in full effect. To measure local cartel dynamics, we use municipal-level data on the geographic presence of cartels between 2000 to 2018 (Sobrino, 2023) from the Mapping Criminal Organizations in Mexico (MCO) project (Signoret et al., 2021).

We conduct two analyses. First, we replicate Trejo and Ley's (2020) study covering 2007 to 2011 but include our measures for fragmentation and inter-cartel conflict between COs of different capacities. Second, we extend the analysis to cover 2000 to 2018 using our original data. Results from a series of two-way fixed effects Poisson regression models find that high-capacity cartels drive violence against government officials in both the 2007 to 2011 period and in the extended 2000 to 2018 period, both under monopoly presence and particularly when contesting a territory with rival cartels. Although symmetric conflicts between lower-capacity cartels are not associated with high-profile attacks between 2007 and 2011, this changes once we look at the extended dataset that includes years after the full transformation of cartels. In the 2000 to 2018 period, we find that lower-capacity cartels are strongly associated with more assassinations, but only when involved in symmetric and

asymmetric conflicts. Looking at which politicians COs are targeting, we find that the patterns are driven by the killing of local officials, with violence against state officials being driven by high-capacity cartels, and cartel transformations having no explanatory power for the killing of federal officials, underscoring the importance of local dynamics and insulation of federal actors. These findings suggest that transformations in the criminal underworld may be key to understanding where and why COs violently attack the state.

Our findings are crucial for understanding Mexico's ongoing security crisis and its implications for democratic governance. As cartels continue to evolve and fragment, the persistent targeting of politicians threatens not only electoral competition and the supply of politicians, but also the state's ability to provide good governance. Beyond Mexico, the assassination of government officials by violent non-state criminal actors is more widespread than is currently recognized (Blume, 2025), affecting countries across Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and parts of Europe. Moreover, political killings go beyond politicians and affect judges, prosecutors, party members, and other public figures (Blume et al., 2025) as well as law enforcement officers (Alcocer, 2025; Lessing, 2017). The deliberate killing of state actors by COs is among the most egregious form of political violence and has major implications for democratic institutions, the rule of law, the state's monopoly of force, and governance. This article highlights the role of the criminal underworld in this violence by showing how changes within and between COs can drive political violence against the state, with the capacity of COs being central to understanding their relation with the state. In doing so, it also speaks to related research on political killings by other non-state actors, including rebel (Arjona et al., 2025) and paramilitary groups (Acemoglu et al., 2013).

Existing Explanations

The increase in violence against government officials by COs in Mexico since 2000 remains both alarming and underexplained. Existing literature identifies three political factors that

create incentives for COs to use violence against government officials: election cycles, political vulnerability, and government crackdowns.

Election Cycles

Election cycles can present key periods of political opportunity in which COs can use coercion to their advantage. Studies on the mafia in Italy find that COs can either use coercion before elections to influence electoral outcomes in favor of their preferred candidate (Alesina et al., 2018) or following elections to influence the behavior of elected politicians (Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017). Whether it is pre- or post-election, Trejo and Ley (2020) find that attacks in Mexico intensify around subnational election cycles as COs seek to establish criminal governance, with anecdotal accounts suggesting both pre- and post-election motives being present.

Political Vulnerability

A leading explanation for the proliferation of violence against government officials by COs in Mexico is that democratization during the 1990s prompted decentralization, political polarization, and party alternation, making security coordination across levels of government increasingly difficult and politicized. These factors left municipal politicians without protection from state-level co-partisans (Blume, 2017) or federal co-partisans (Rios, 2015; Shirk and Wallman, 2015; Trejo and Ley, 2020) vulnerable to attacks by COs. Relatedly, Durán-Martínez (2017) argues that when the state security apparatus is fragmented, including due to conflicts between levels of government, COs may use more visible forms of violence that are directed at rivals, society, and, centrally, the state.

Government Crackdowns

A leading argument is that crackdowns can push COs to use violence against the state. In the Mexican case, President Calderón declared war against drug trafficking in December 2006 and deployed the military to combat cartels in coordination with state authorities. While the logic of violent lobbying presented by Lessing (2017) is that COs carry out general violence (because they cannot target politicians) to push politicians to change de jure policies, we extend the logic of violent corruption against enforcement agencies – the use of *occasional* violence against law enforcement officers to reduce enforcement and reduce corruption costs – to violence against politicians. Under this explanation, anti-state violence in Mexico should target those responsible for the crackdown: federal and state officials.

Alternatively, crackdowns have also been argued to increase conflicts between law enforcement agencies, reducing the ability of the state to either credibly punish or protect COs, leading COs to use violence against rivals, society, and the state to assert their power (Durán-Martínez, 2017). Under this explanation, state actors working where enforcement efforts concentrate are most vulnerable to CO violence. Indeed, existing research finds that violence against the state increases where crackdowns and government interventions are implemented, including in Brazil (Magaloni et al., 2020; Barnes, 2022), Mexico (Gutiérrez-Romero and Iturbe, 2024), and Colombia (Campos-Contreras et al., 2025).

The Mexican Case

Through the 1990s and early-2000s, a handful of large drug cartels operating in key regions for the drug trade dominated Mexico's criminal underworld. Through the 1990s and early 2000s these major drug cartels began a series of conflicts against each other as Mexico democratized (Trejo and Ley, 2020). Nevertheless, violence against government officials was practically nonexistent during the 1990s, with the first recorded political assassination – according to our data collection efforts – being in 2001. As cartel-related violence began to increase, the

newly-elected President Calderón declared war against drug trafficking in December 2006 and deployed over 45,000 troops throughout the country during his presidency to combat drug trafficking and drug cartels.

Starting in early 2006 but increasingly so in 2010 and after, the large cartels that dominated Mexico's criminal underworld began to fragment into an ever-increasing number of COs operating throughout the country due to both government kingpin strategies, new illicit market opportunities, and internal disputes (Phillips, 2015; Atuesta and Ponce, 2017; Esberg, 2025; Alcocer and Hesles Toscana, 2025). While the crackdown provoked some of the cartel fragmentation and helped fuel competition among rival cartels, the crackdown only partly explains fragmentation events, with other factors contributing to many fragmentation events and outbreaks of inter-cartel conflicts (Alcocer and Hesles Toscana, 2025). Fragmentation resulted in the proliferation of at least 70 powerful cartels by 2018 (Signoret et al., 2021; Alcocer and Hesles Toscana, 2025). With the proliferation of new cartels due to fragmentation, the number of inter-cartel conflicts also grew significantly. As new cartels emerged, violence expanded on multiple fronts: large cartels continued conflicts against each other, large cartels often launched attacks against the very fragments that had broken away from them, and newly-formed splinters inherited old rivalries and initiated fresh disputes with other splinters.

Alongside these criminal transformations, violence against state officials, practically unheard of before 2001, also began to gradually increase and is now alarmingly common: during the 2018 electoral cycle alone, cartels murdered over 150 mayors, mayoral candidates, and former mayors (Calderón, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

We propose the drastic transformation of Mexico's criminal underworld that coincided with the increase in cartel violence against government officials as an additional explanation for

political violence. Our central claim is that the *capacity* of COs shapes how they relate to the state, and thus conditions their strategies to deal with the state to obtain protection or erode rivals' protection. We understand capacity as the tangible resources COs possesses to exert their influence and include organizational, economic, and coercive means. Capacity captures the latent potential to implement and enforce its decisions, which fundamentally shapes the actions available to COs when crafting strategic behavior. We focus on the *capacity* of COs given that the fragmentation of large cartels as they expanded throughout Mexico starting in the 2000s resulted in the proliferation of cartels of varying capacities needing to contend with both the broader landscape of a state crackdown and inter-cartel conflicts.

Following these observations, we build on Sánchez Valdés (2014) to argue that differences in capacity shape COs' strategic behavior by constraining available actions when pursuing their goals, and consequently, influence their propensity to use violence against government officials. In other words, we argue that COs of varying capacities may be more or less prone to use violence against the state both when they are dealing with the state without competition and when they are contending with the state amidst *symmetric* and *asymmetric* inter-cartel conflicts. We contend that each of these factors – cartel fragmentation and inter-cartel conflict – though fundamentally interrelated, create their own distinct incentives that may push COs of differing capacity to attack the state. However, our theoretical priors about the relation between cartel capacity and their use of violence are uncertain.

In understanding what COs ultimately seek to gain from such political violence, we follow the conventional wisdom in existing research that profit and survival are first order concerns for COs, and note that COs cannot survive or successfully operate without some degree of state protection, cooperation, or collusion (Arias, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2020; Durán-Martínez, 2017). Thus, obtaining protection from politicians and eliminating rival COs' state protection is necessary. Under certain conditions, the pursuit to gain this protection can turn violent. This violence can not only remove unwanted state actors, but also generate an environment of uncertainty and fear as COs signal power and resolve in their pursuit of

protection and, ultimately, profit and survival. Fragmentation and inter-cartel conflict make these pressures more acute and change which types of organizations are more likely to employ violence against local officials.

Figure 1 shows a diagram outlining our theory, which we break down in the following subsections. We underscore that while fragmentation is partially driven by government decapitation strategies, nearly half of all fragmentations are due to reasons other than government actions (Alcocer and Hesles Toscana, 2025), and even when they are, they can create their own unique incentives to use violence against the state than the cartel-state war logic outlined by Lessing (2017).

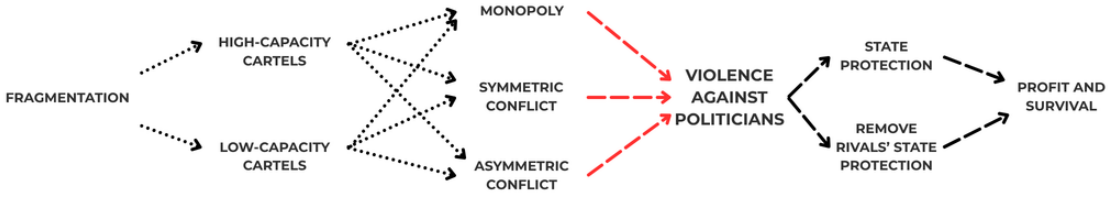


Figure 1: Theory diagram illustrating how fragmentation impacts incentive structure to use violence against state officials.

Cartel Fragmentation and Violence Against Government Officials

The fragmentation of Mexican cartels meant the continued operation of high-capacity cartels and the proliferation of lower-capacity cartels. We understand high-capacity COs as those that are most dominant and often internationally active that typically operate across regions within Mexico (Sobrino, 2023; Esberg, 2025; Durán-Martínez, 2017; Farfán-Méndez, 2019; Alcocer and Hesles Toscana, 2025). Lower-capacity, yet still powerful COs include cells that are affiliates of larger cartels, splinters that defected from larger parent COs, or unaffiliated COs (Esberg, 2025; Alcocer and Hesles Toscana, 2025). These lower capacity cartels tend to operate in a few municipalities or within rather than across regions. Our conceptual classification is thus about *relative* capacity, with larger COs having greater organizational, financial, and coercive capabilities.

Blume (2017) finds that political assassinations are more likely in Mexican states where there is criminal fragmentation, but attributes the effects to these territories being contested by an increasing number of cartels; that is, to the logic of inter-cartel conflicts. We contend that criminal fragmentation itself may create independent incentives for COs to attack politicians beyond the incentives it can create through inter-cartel conflicts.

We argue that differences in capacity shape available strategies COs have when interacting with the state and thus impact the likelihood that they use violence against state officials. For one, given that state protection is central for COs to successfully operate and survive, COs consistently seek this protection. Lower-capacity COs, however, may not have the financial means to capture government officials through bribes, especially state and federal officials, and may thus have to rely on local politicians and firepower when seeking political protection. This would make smaller COs more prone to violence against the state, such as what is discussed in civil conflict literature as a strategy to outbid other moderate competitors (Mahoney, 2020). For example, Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima, a fragment of the powerful Zetas cartel, only operates in about a dozen municipalities in the state of Guanajuato, and is largely responsible for the state having the highest number of political and law enforcement assassinations between 2018 and 2022. In public messages, the cartel also complained on various occasions about their inability to bribe and buy protection from state and federal state actors.

At the same time, high-capacity COs can likely rely on state and federal protection more frequently and have more coercive capabilities and financial resources, meaning that larger COs can more credibly threaten and bribe agents of the state, reducing their need to use violence.[3] For example, during the trial of Joaquin Guzman Loera, former leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, it came to light that the cartel spent millions of U.S. dollars per month for payments to federal, state, and local level politicians and law enforcement agencies (Ibarra,

[3]Blume (2017) offers a different interpretation by arguing that older COs relied on the corporativist model for protection from the PRI party, making them less prone to violence than newer COs. Yet, this explanation does not explain the turn to the local, and overlooks that new COs were often a result of fragmentation where members of "older" cartels defected and organized their own cartels.

2019). This logic leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 1a (P1a): *Lower-capacity COs are more likely to kill politicians than high-capacity COs.*

Yet it could also be that, on one hand, high-capacity cartels with greater coercive capability can more easily kill politicians with impunity due to their capabilities to evade, bribe, or intimidate law enforcement and judicial agencies, in particular lower-level politicians. Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), for example, is less inclined to negotiate with politicians and is consequently more likely to use violence (Breda and Pellegrini, 2024). In 2020, CJNG allegedly orchestrated the assassination of former governor Aristóteles Sandoval in Jalisco in an attack carried out with precision and followed by the destruction of evidence. As of this writing, besides the owner of the restaurant where the event took place, no one was ever arrested or prosecuted for the crime. On the other hand, lower-capacity cartels could be more cautious when contemplating the use of violence because they have fewer capabilities to deal with the backlash that such violence may cause, particularly from state or federal forces. This logic provides an alternative to P1a with the following:

Proposition 1b (P1b): *High-capacity COs are more likely to kill politicians than lower-capacity COs.*

This logic also points to both high- and lower-capacity COs targeting lower level state officials more than higher-level officials. Local officials are more directly embedded in the arenas where cartels operate and can thus provide more immediate protection or impose costs in the short term than higher-level politicians who are more removed from day-to-day operations and involved in broader de jure policymaking. Moreover, targeting local officials entails lower political and strategic costs: such attacks are less likely to trigger coordinated state retaliation. Thus, lower-capacity COs being less capable of gaining protection from higher level officials leaves local officials more vulnerable to attacks while high-capacity cartels with higher level state protection may be able to then perpetrate violence against

local officials with some impunity. At the same time, higher-level officials tend to be better protected, live and work in areas with higher state capacity, and be less accessible, making them harder to target even if the intent exists. This follows the violent lobbying logic presented by Lessing (2017).

Proposition 2 (P2): *High- and low- capacity COs are more likely to kill local politicians than higher-level politicians.*

Inter-Cartel Conflict and Violence Against Government Officials

The fragmentation of Mexican cartels meant the continuation of symmetric conflicts between high-capacity cartels and the rise of symmetric conflicts between lower-capacity cartels and asymmetric conflicts between high- and lower-capacity cartels. The link between inter-CO conflicts and violence against the state, however, is not obvious. As Lessing (2017, 210) states, "The relationship [between cartel-state killings and inter-cartel killings] is quite weak." Yet, some existing scholarship highlights the role of inter-cartel conflict in explaining some of the violence against the state (Rios, 2012; Lessing, 2017; Blume, 2017; Hernàndez Huerta, 2020; Calderón, 2018; Alcocer, 2025). These studies, however, limit their discussion to whether conflicts are present or not without considering variation in conflicts.

We draw and build on these theories by highlighting that fragmentation meant increasing conflicts between cartels of differing capacities. As new cartels emerged due to fragmentation, violence expanded on multiple fronts: high-capacity cartels continued conflicts against each other, high-capacity cartels launched attacks against their lower-capacity fragments, and newly formed splinters inherited old rivalries and initiated fresh disputes with lower-capacity splinters. We contend that while inter-cartel conflicts create incentives to attack the state, as previous scholarship notes, these incentives differ depending on the capacity of the cartels involved in the conflicts. Yet, the direction of these effects is theoretically uncertain.

To make the argument, we draw on the civil war literature highlighting that asymmetric conflicts (those between actors of distinct capacities) differ in kind from symmetric conflicts

(those between actors of similar capacities) (e.g. Cunningham et al., 2009; Wood, 2014; Hultquist, 2013; Butler and Gates, 2009; Mack, 1975; Arreguín-Toft, 2001) as the relative distribution of power among warring groups heavily impacts their conflict strategies. More powerful groups can more easily wield violence to force concessions (Cunningham et al., 2009) while smaller groups can only inflict modest damage (Hultquist, 2013). Yet, while large groups have the capacity to cause widespread destruction, they also have a wider range of non-violent strategies at their disposal, such as negotiations and bribes (Wood, 2014). Smaller groups may not have these repertoires of non-violence available to them, and they thus adopt non-conventional strategies to achieve more parity with the larger groups (Butler and Gates, 2009). These non-conventional strategies may involve targeting politicians. We apply these insights to COs.

First, symmetric conflicts between high-capacity COs may lead to greater violence due to their superior coercive power, leading to more violence for at least two reasons. When political actors are seen as obstructing operations or aiding rivals, warring COs can credibly and violently retaliate. For example, in 2011 the Zetas accused Fortino Cortés Sandoval, the PRI mayor of the municipality of Florencia de Benito Juárez in Zacatecas, of being an informant for the Gulf Cartel. The Zetas kidnapped him from the headquarters of the Regional Livestock Union, killed him, and left a message on his body accusing him of collaborating with their rivals. Cartels can also use violence as a costly signal to showcase a group's strength, resolve, cohesion, and intentions (Lessing, 2015), a strategy that is widely discussed and well-established in the international relations literature (e.g. Powell, 2004; Jervis, 1982; Fearon, 1997). Amid inter-cartel conflicts, the target of such signals may be state actors that are seen as obstructing their operations or aiding rivals.

Yet, conversely, high-capacity COs may have more to lose from provoking state repression and may instead rely on bribes and political influence given their greater financial capabilities, making them less reliant on overt violence. For example, recent accusations against Sinaloan politicians by the US government and Mexican journalists name all but one can-

didate running for governor in 2021 as having met with the Sinaloa Cartel and agreeing to collaborate upon their entry into office.

Second, symmetric conflicts between lower-capacity cartels may mean they fear state retaliation more than higher capacity cartels, making them more cautious. This could mean these types of inter-cartel conflicts result in fewer violent attacks against politicians. At the same time, such COs may lack the financial and political capital to secure protection through corruption and may thus turn to violence as a way to eliminate rivals' political support or coerce local officials. Indeed, Lessing (2017, 223) affirms that splinter COs "often invested heavily in armament and soldier training," thereby continuing to use incredibly brazen forms of violence both against the state as well as other cartels. This follows the conventional wisdom in the conflict literature finding that terrorism is a weapon of the weak.

Third, given these dynamics, asymmetric inter-cartel conflicts, those between high-capacity and lower-capacity COs may be especially unpredictable, as asymmetries in power, protection, and local ties create volatile conditions where both sides might resort to political violence – either to consolidate control or destabilize rival alliances. Existing research notes that shocks to relative capacity between COs can trigger wars between stronger and weaker COs due to military power imbalances (Osorio, 2015) and bargaining failures (Daly and Barham, 2024). These different dynamics play out in Guanajuato, for example, where inter-cartel conflict centers on strategic resource-rich areas, such as the so-called "Bermuda Triangle" region that encompasses 15 municipalities connected by Pemex's oil pipeline (Breda and Pellegrini, 2024). At least two large cartels, the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel, fight over this territory, as well as the smaller yet highly-violent Zetas splinter, Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel, which has led to the killing of dozens of politicians in the region.

Taken together, we expect that different types of inter-cartel conflict may shape violence against the state in varied ways, but our priors given existing research are uncertain for which types of conflict are most likely to trigger attacks on politicians. We thus posit:

Proposition 3 (P3): *Different types of symmetric and asymmetric inter-cartel conflicts –*

those between high-capacity cartels, between high-capacity and lower-capacity cartels, and between lower-capacity cartels – are associated with varying levels of violence against politicians.

Built into this logic is the uneven exposure of state actors across levels of government, but crucially, this exposure interacts with the type of inter-cartel conflict. In symmetric conflicts between high-capacity cartels, local politicians may be targeted occasionally as part of broader strategies of coercion and signaling, particularly when they are perceived as aligned with rivals. In symmetric conflicts between lower-capacity cartels, resource constraints may limit access to state protection from higher levels of government, increasing reliance on coercion against local officials to secure short-term advantages. These dynamics are likely most acute in asymmetric conflicts, where disparities in capacity generate acute insecurity and unstable equilibria: lower-capacity actors may resort to violence against local officials to offset their disadvantages or disrupt rival alliances, while stronger actors may use targeted violence against the very local officials that lower-capacity rivals rely on.

Proposition 4 (P4): *Symmetric and especially asymmetric conflicts involving lower-capacity COs are associated with killings of local politicians more than higher level politicians.*

Empirical Strategy

To assess our theoretical conjectures, we triangulate evidence from two different datasets: the TL data measuring high-profile attacks between 2007–2011 and original data on politician assassinations covering 2000–2018. First, we replicate the main results from TL while including our variables on fragmentation and inter-cartel conflict. Second, we analyze our extended dataset using the variables on fragmentation and inter-cartel conflict. While the empirical design does not allow us to isolate causal effects, by documenting correlations while controlling for key covariates and triangulating results from different datasets and

measurements, the article seeks to present evidence of robust and theoretically meaningful associations between cartel dynamics and political violence.

Data

A key limitation of existing studies is the lack of data, compelling scholars to rely on proxy or aggregated measures. For example, Calderón (2018) and Blume (2017) rely on highly aggregated state-level data on cartel presence that does not capture local dynamics, and Hernàndez Huerta (2020) analyzes political assassinations in 2017 and 2018 using data on cartel presence from 2010. Other studies simply do not use data on cartels and instead rely on proxy measures, such as approximating criminal conflict using drug-related homicides (Hernàndez Huerta, 2020; Trejo and Ley, 2020). While these measures are justifiable given data constraints, they do not directly measure various criminal dynamics and, for those that do use CO data, do not measure them at the local level or in the appropriate time period. Thus, beyond proposing that the transformation of Mexican cartels matters for understanding political violence, this article makes an empirical contribution to the study of political violence by using local-level data on CO dynamics in Mexican municipalities.

Dependent Variable: Politician Assassinations, 2000–2018

Data on violence against state officials remains disjointed, covering different periods, types of events, and targets. Trejo and Ley (2020) measures *lethal and non-lethal attacks* against government officials, political candidates, and party activists between 2007 and 2011; Blume (2017) measures *assassinations of politicians* from 2005 to 2015 aggregated to state level; Rios (2012) covers assassination of *mayors* between 2007 and 2011; Hernàndez Huerta (2020) examines the assassination of *political candidates* during the 2017-2018 electoral cycle. This article contributes to this effort by significantly extending the time period covered and creating a single and uniform measure for all politician assassinations across 19 years and providing detailed information on each killing. This allows us to measure violence against

politicians from its first instance and track its growth across time.

We create an original national-level dataset on all murdered politicians that have run for or held elected office at any level of government in Mexico from 2000 to 2018, including federal legislators, state legislators, governors, mayors, and municipal councilmembers (*regidores* and *síndicos*). The dataset includes 466 documented assassinations and the following information for each: name, position held or running for, level of government, party affiliation, date of assassination, municipality where the assassination occurred, municipality where they worked, and a brief description of the assassination. The Online Appendix includes additional data collection details and compares our dataset to the TL data for overlapping years, 2007–2011.

Following Trejo and Ley (2020), we only include assassinations with indications that cartels may have been involved: the use of high-caliber weapons, dozens of bullets being used, ambushes, multiple armed men, and had previously been linked to, threatened, or attacked by cartels, among others. Due to limited information on many of the assassinations, we create two measures – a less conservative measure and a more conservative measure that requires a higher degree of certainty that an assassination was linked to cartels. Our main results use the more conservative measure ($n = 415$) and use the less conservative measure ($n = 437$) for robustness. Additionally, some local politicians are assassinated in municipalities where they did not run for or held office. In the main results we assume politicians were killed due to where they worked and use the place where they were killed as robustness. As is standard in the literature on violence against politicians (Rios, 2012; Blume, 2017; Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017; Alesina et al., 2018), law enforcement officials (Lessing, 2017; Alcocer, 2025), and journalists (Holland and Rios, 2017; Bartman, 2018; Carey and Gohdes, 2021), we only measure assassinations to avoid measurement bias present in data including threats and other forms of non-lethal coercion.[4]

Figure 2 shows the geographic distribution of these assassinations between 2000 to 2018.

[4]We discuss this decision further in the Online Appendix.

The figure shows that assassinations are geographically disperse, occurring in 29 of the 32 states – we see no assassinations during this period in Aguascalientes, Campeche, and Queretaro.

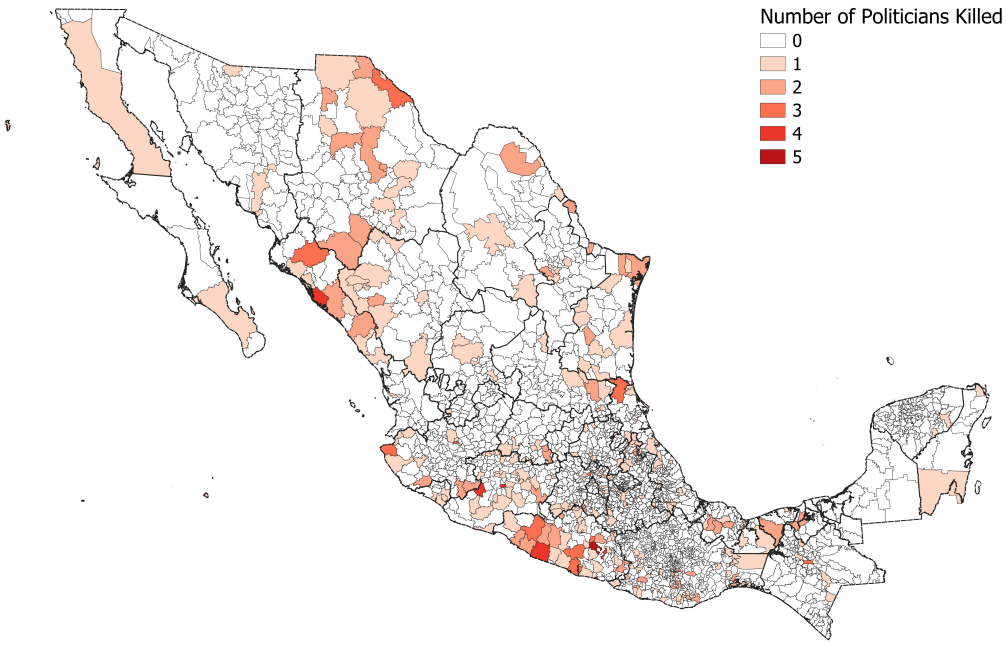


Figure 2: Geographic distribution of political assassinations in Mexico between 2000–2018. Original data by authors.

Figure 3 shows the temporal distribution of murders by level of government (municipal, state, and federal), office and positions, and affiliations to main national political parties. The data shows that assassinations were nearly non-existent until 2004 when they increase slightly, then in 2008 they increase significantly, and in 2016 they increases exponentially. The data also shows that most victims are affiliated with the three largest political parties during this time period, with the centrist PRI party having the most, then the center-left PRD, then the center-right PAN. While these are absolute numbers and are not normalized to the number of positions held by each party, it suggests that cartels are not ideological and target parties across the political spectrum. The figure also shows the positions of each victim, with the vast majority being candidates or officeholders in local governments,

especially mayors and councilmembers.

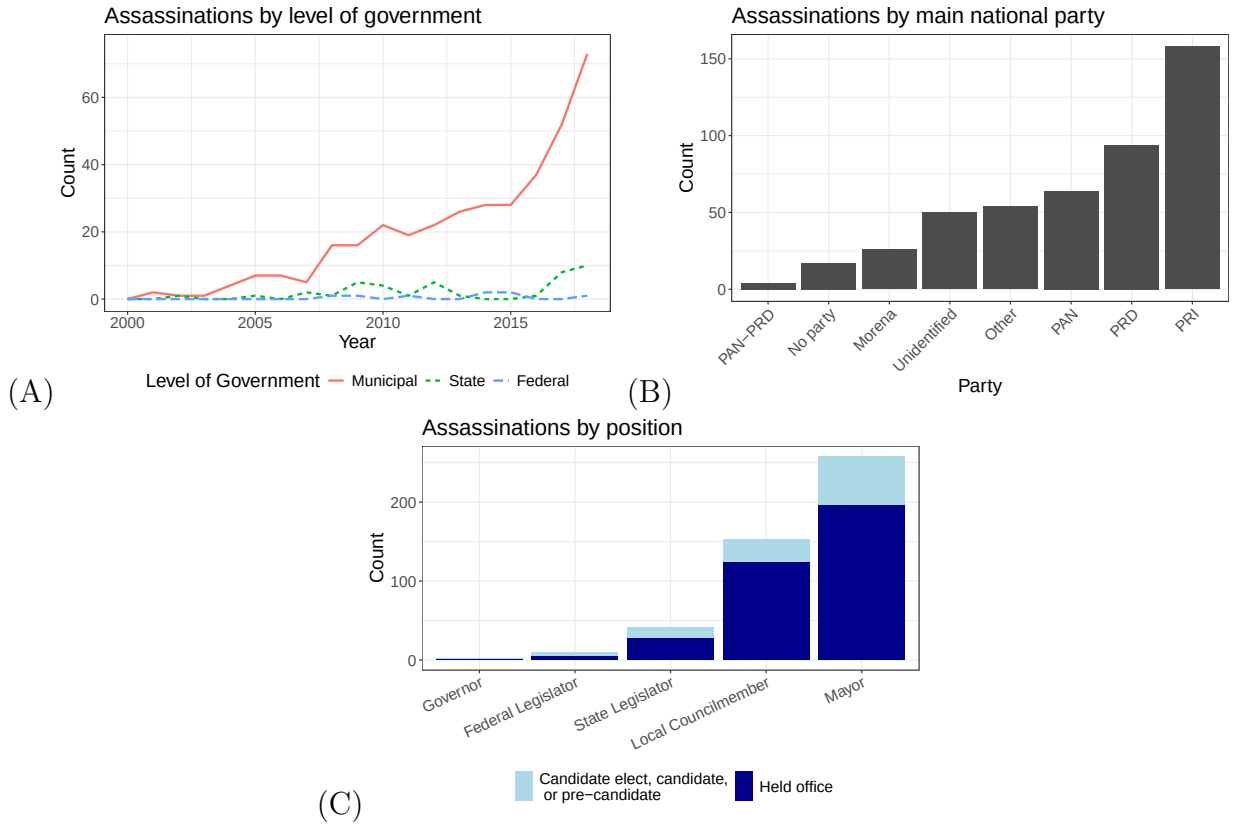


Figure 3: Number of political assassinations by (A) level of government, (B) main national political party, and (C) office and position in Mexico between 2000–2018. Original data by authors.

Independent Variable: Criminal Dynamics

To measure the aspects of the transformation of Mexican cartels that we have underscored, we use data from the MCO project (Signoret et al., 2021) on the geolocation of 69 COs in Mexico between 2000 and 2018 (Sobrino, 2023). This panel dataset tracks each cartel and identifies which municipalities they operated in each year. The author creates this dataset by scraping Google and Google News for articles mentioning each CO and using natural language processing to identify where these articles report each cartel to have operated in a given year. The data by Sobrino (2023) relies on background qualitative information from Signoret et al. (2021) to include only criminal organizations that operate *independently* per

year. It does not separately measure subordinate armed wings, cells, or factions, nor affiliated street and youth gangs or individual leaders. It also only measures cartels once they become independent, for instance, CJNG only enters the data in 2010 as a high-capacity cartel when it begins to operate independently and is not included prior to 2010.[5] As with most media-based measures, these data may contain measurement error due to uneven reporting, particularly prior to the intensification of media attention during Mexico's drug war. Nevertheless, validation exercises by Sobrino (2023) demonstrate substantial correspondence with independently hand-coded cartel datasets, including the proliferation of fragmentation.

Following existing research and classifications, (Signoret et al., 2021; Esberg, 2025; Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011), we begin by classifying cartels into two categories: high-capacity cartels and lower-capacity cartels that emerged from fragmentation events. We broadly define high-capacity cartels as the most dominant and internationally recognized, which typically operate in large sections of the country and have their origins in large trafficking networks established in the 1990s – before political killings emerged. We define lower-capacity cartels as either those that splinter from large cartels or unaffiliated COs that operate independently from large cartels yet are not major organizations. Lower-capacity cartels usually operate in more limited regions. This measure thus captures *relative* capacity rather than absolute capacity. This process gives us 11 large cartels and 58 small cartels in our sample. We acknowledge that our classification necessarily simplifies a fluid and evolving criminal landscape. However, to the extent that we misclassify cartels, this would actually attenuate differences categories, biasing against finding systematic relationships between cartel capacity and patterns of political violence. The Online Appendix enumerates the cartels in each category and discusses our measurement decision and its implications further.

Using this categorization, we create measures identifying different cartel dynamics per municipality across time: monopoly presence and symmetric and asymmetric conflicts. We

[5]CJNG was formed as a cell of the Milenio Cartel with the support of the Sinaloa Cartel, but became independent in 2010 when Milenio Cartel leaders were captured or killed and the Sinaloa Cartel broke relations with the Milenio Cartel.

operationalize monopoly presence by creating two variables, *low-capacity cartel monopoly presence*, which takes a value of 1 when the municipality has one smaller cartel present that year and 0 otherwise, and *high-capacity cartel monopoly presence*, which takes a value of 1 when the municipality one has one larger cartel present that year and 0 otherwise.

To operationalize symmetric and asymmetric inter-cartel conflicts, we create three variables. First, we measure high-capacity symmetric conflicts (high-capacity versus high-capacity cartel conflict) by identifying the municipality-years where two or more high-capacity cartels – and no lower-capacity cartel(s) – are present at the same time. Second, we measure asymmetric conflicts (high versus low-capacity cartel conflict) by identifying the municipality-years where one or more large cartels and one or more lower-capacity cartels are present at the same time. Lastly, we measure lower-capacity symmetric conflicts (low versus low-capacity cartel conflict) by identifying the municipality-years where two or more lower-capacity cartels – and no high-capacity cartel(s) – are present at the same time. We recognize that these measures are imperfect, as more than one cartel operating in a territory does not necessarily imply that they are actively contesting it. However, no panel data exists on cartel alliances and rivalries to better measure local conflicts. We nevertheless believe our measure is a good proxy for substantive and empirical reasons that we discuss further in the Online Appendix. Finally, we note that although some measurement bias is present, it biases against criminal conflicts because the conflict measures include some municipalities that are not being contested. This error would also bias the monopoly coefficient downward, as municipality-years closer to monopoly governance would be shifted into the contested category, pulling high-violence monopoly observations away from the monopoly indicator. Thus, the measurement error works against finding support for either hypothesis.

Figure 4 shows the number of cartels by capacity and municipalities with different types of cartel presence across time to illustrate the transformation of cartels in Mexico. Figure A2 in the Online Appendix shows the geographic distribution of cartel presence.

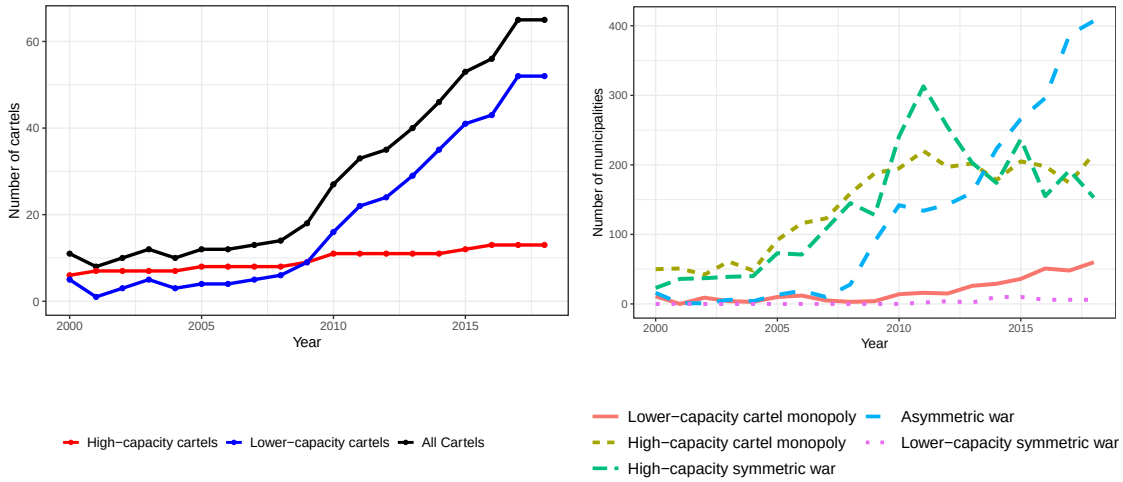


Figure 4: Number of (1) unique cartels in data by capacity, and (2) municipalities with different types of cartel presence, 2000 – 2018.

Covariates, 2000–2018

For the models analyzing the extended period, 2000–2018, we control for existing alternative explanations using data on elections, political vulnerability, government crackdowns, and other important covariates.

To capture *electoral incentives*, we adopt conventions used by existing studies and use election data from Magar (2018) to create a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for years that a municipality has a local election. Municipalities have elections every three years and are staggered in time across states. Some existing studies also include measures of electoral competition, but if killing a candidate or politician influences electoral competition, then these are endogenous to the use of violence so we exclude them.

Trejo and Ley (2020) operationalize *political vulnerability* creating nine dummy variables capturing all federal–state–municipal party configurations among the three major parties and a juxtaposition index from these configurations. However, the party landscape has become far more complex since 2011, with four major national parties and the proliferation of dozens of state and local parties. To extend the concept of local political vulnerability, we use election data from Magar (2018) to create three dummy variables for municipalities

depending on whether the mayor is vertically aligned with (1) only the governor, (2) only the president, or (3) both the governor and president.

To capture the *federal crackdown*, which began in December 2006 and was spearheaded by the military, we would ideally have information on the precise location of military deployments and operations. This data does not exist. We instead use data from the military on the number of confrontations with organized crime between December 2006 and December 2018 per municipality obtained through freedom of information request by the Programa de Política de Drogas (PPD, 2020).

Finally, we consider *state capacity* given that it shapes how COs and states interact (e.g., Moncada, 2016, 2022; Durán-Martínez, 2017; Yashar, 2018). To operationalize state capacity, we follow Trejo and Ley (2020), and measure the number of prosecutors per municipality using official data from the National Census of Justice Prosecution (*Censo Nacional de Procuración de Justicia*). This information is only available starting in 2011, so we use the 2011 measure to impute pre-2011 years, and use updated data for each municipality-year until 2018.

Table A2 in the Online Appendix shows the summary statistics for the variables used for the 2000-2018 analysis.

Estimation

We estimate a Poisson regression with two-way fixed effects given that our outcome is a non-negative count variable. The models specify a log link between the expected outcome and the covariates, absorbing municipality and year fixed effects. We find no overdispersion in our dependent variable, so we do not use negative binomial models. We believe this approach has at least three main strengths over other approaches used in this literature. First, fixed effects do not assume that unobserved heterogeneity is uncorrelated with the observed explanatory variables like the random effects models (Wooldridge, 2006) used by Trejo and Ley (2020), making fixed effects consistent. We have strong substantive reasons to

believe this assumption is violated in this case. Empirically, as is standard practice, we test the random effects assumption using a Hausman specification test (Hausman, 1978) and find that we must reject the null hypothesis that random effects are appropriate in this case ($p < 0.00$). Second, unlike random effects and the count and logistic models without fixed effects used by Blume (2017) and Hernàndez Huerta (2020), fixed effects allow us to exploit within-unit variation and estimate how criminal and political changes *within* each municipality affect violence against government officials, which we believe is a more appropriate comparison than pooling observations and comparing differences *across* municipalities. This is particularly important if municipalities that cartels covet and thus attract intense criminal dynamics are systematically different than municipalities that cartels do not covet and fight over. Third, unit fixed effects control for any unit-specific time-invariant omitted variable and the time fixed effects control for any common shocks that affects all municipalities, allowing them to account for important unobserved covariates.

Our main analysis follows the form:

$$\begin{aligned}\log \mathbb{E}[y_{it}|X_{it},\tau,\mu] =& \delta_1 \textit{high-capacity cartel monopoly}_{it} + \delta_2 \textit{lower-capacity cartel monopoly}_{it} + \\ & \delta_3 \textit{high-capacity symmetric conflict}_{it} + \delta_4 \textit{asymmetric conflict}_{it} + \\ & \delta_5 \textit{lower-capacity symmetric conflict}_{it} + \beta X_{it} + \tau + \mu,\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where y_{it} denotes the count of violent attacks against government officials in municipality i at time t, which we also separate into the count of killings by level of government. *high-capacity cartel monopoly*$_{it}$ is a dummy variable indicating whether municipality i at time t is controlled exclusively by a single small cartel; *lower-capacity cartel monopoly*$_{it}$ indicates exclusive control by a single large cartel. *high-capacity symmetric conflict*$_{it}$, *lower-capacity symmetric conflict*$_{it}$, and *lower-capacity symmetric conflict*$_{it}$ are dummies indicating whether municipality i at time t experienced conflict involving two or more large cartels, two or more small cartels, or both types, respectively. X_{it} is a matrix of time-varying control variables,

and τ and μ denote year and municipality fixed effects. We estimate Poisson fixed-effects models using a Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood (PPML) estimator, which remains consistent even under misspecification of the variance function.

Results

Given the novelty of the topic and the data, we triangulate evidence from two analyses to gain leverage over the concepts and measures of interest. First, we replicate the TL study from 2007 to 2011 while including our measures of the transformation of cartels. Second, we extend the analysis to the 2000 to 2018 period by using our own original data on political assassinations, which accounts for changing cartel dynamics through a longer time frame.

High-Profile Attacks, 2007-2011

We first replicate Trejo and Ley (2020), adding our measures of criminal dynamics using Poisson fixed effects regression models. This data analyzes high-profile attacks between 2007 and 2011. The authors control for fiscal revenue, political variables, and geographic regions (see Trejo and Ley, 2020, Ch. 6). Table 1 shows the results replicating the TL results when adding variables on criminal dynamics.

Most generally, in support of P1b, we find that high-capacity cartels are driving attacks against high-profile officials in monopoly presence but particularly in places with inter-cartel conflicts against high- or lower-capacity cartels. In contrast, lower-capacity cartels are only positively associated with attacks when they are fighting high-capacity cartels. More specifically, model (4) finds that the monopoly presence of large cartels is associated with a nearly two-fold increase in the expected count of attacks. It also finds that inter-cartel conflicts that involve a high-capacity cartel are associated with a six to seven-fold increase in the expected count of attacks. In contrast, coefficients for lower-capacity cartel monopoly and symmetric conflicts between small cartels are not statistically significant. These results make

Table 1: The transformation of cartels and high-profile attacks attacks in Mexico, 2007-2011. Poisson fixed effects models.

	High-Profile Attacks			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
High-capacity cartel monopoly	1.244***	1.091***	1.287***	1.128***
	(0.190)	(0.206)	(0.190)	(0.206)
Lower-capacity cartel monopoly	0.177	0.602	0.225	0.642
	(1.007)	(1.012)	(1.007)	(1.012)
High-capacity symmetric conflict	2.139***	1.800***	2.196***	1.839***
	(0.144)	(0.167)	(0.144)	(0.168)
Asymmetric conflict	2.286***	2.039***	2.344***	2.083***
	(0.170)	(0.203)	(0.170)	(0.201)
Lower-capacity symmetric conflict	−11.706	−8.980	−11.690	−8.817
	(1346.165)	(1453.324)	(1373.401)	(1456.506)
PAN-PAN-PRI	0.252	0.181		
	(0.372)	(0.438)		
PAN-PAN-PRD	−0.969	0.041		
	(1.036)	(1.054)		
PAN-PRI-PAN	0.809*	0.567		
	(0.319)	(0.365)		
PAN-PRI-PRI	1.106***	0.830*		
	(0.283)	(0.339)		
PAN-PRI-PRD	0.169	0.587		
	(0.444)	(0.480)		
PAN-PRD-PAN	1.308***	1.355**		
	(0.385)	(0.487)		
PAN-PRD-PRI	1.722***	1.561***		
	(0.300)	(0.409)		
PAN-PRD-PRD	1.849***	1.712***		
	(0.306)	(0.400)		
Juxtaposition index			0.227***	0.218***
			(0.026)	(0.044)
Local election		0.715***		0.695***
		(0.149)		(0.148)
Federal election		−1.492**		−1.509**
		(0.516)		(0.514)
Attacks in neighbors t-1		0.209***		0.206***
		(0.057)		(0.058)
Fiscal revenue		0.006		0.006
		(0.010)		(0.010)
Prosecutor offices		−0.617		−0.609
		(1.386)		(1.390)
Mun. alternation		0.014		−0.012
		(0.132)		(0.128)
St. alternation		0.320		0.298
		(0.183)		(0.181)
Mun. electoral competition		−0.309**		−0.341**
		(0.113)		(0.112)
St. electoral competition		−0.052		−0.015
		(0.257)		(0.243)
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	12 095	9843	11 916	9698
AIC	2492.95	2045.32	2471.95	2012.10

* p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001. Clustered standard errors.

substantive sense, as fragmentation took off in 2010 and this sample only covers up to 2011, meaning that large cartels were initially those driving the attacks, especially when fighting over a territory.

Consistent with existing research, the coefficients for local political vulnerability – in the form of vertical political alignment and juxtaposition index – and local elections are consistent with the findings in Trejo and Ley (2020) in direction, statistical significance, and relative size.

Politician Assassinations, 2000-2018

Our extended analysis extends the 2007 to 2011 period covered by TL to 19 years between 2000 and 2018. Table 2 shows the main results. Columns correspond to our main regression models without covariates (model 1) and with covariates (model 2), and alternative dependent variables using the less conservative outcome measure of whether assassinations were related to cartels (model 3) and location where politicians were killed rather than where they worked (model 4). In the Appendix, we also show that the results are robust to alternative specifications that relax distributional assumptions and account for rare events, including quasi-Poisson and binary outcome models, as well as to controlling for cartel expansion. Results across models and alternative measurements are consistent.

Centrally, our findings indicate that high-capacity cartels are driving the assassination of politicians, both under monopoly presence and in places with inter-cartel conflicts against high- or lower-capacity cartels. Moreover, with this extended dataset, we now find that symmetric conflicts between lower-capacity cartels are also associated with assassinations of politicians, though lower-capacity cartel monopoly presence does not help explain these killings. These findings lend support to P1b, that high-capacity cartels drive violence, and P3, that different types of inter-cartel conflicts are associated with varying levels of violence. The effects are all substantively large, with model (2) suggesting that high-capacity cartel monopoly presence is associated with a 177% increase in the expected count of assassinations,

Table 2: The transformation of cartels and political assassinations of elected officials in Mexico, 2000-2018. Poisson fixed effects models.

	Political Assassinations			
	Main models		Alternative DV: Less conservative measure	Alternative DV: Place killed
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
High-capacity cartel monopoly	1.003***	1.020***	0.941***	1.028***
	(0.224)	(0.225)	(0.215)	(0.242)
Low-capacity cartel monopoly	−0.016	−0.012	−0.048	−0.075
	(0.491)	(0.492)	(0.491)	(0.481)
High-capacity symmetric conflict	1.345***	1.354***	1.284***	1.352***
	(0.213)	(0.212)	(0.205)	(0.228)
Asymmetric conflict	1.078***	1.075***	0.989***	1.050***
	(0.238)	(0.238)	(0.230)	(0.248)
Low-capacity symmetric conflict	1.525*	1.508*	1.460*	1.803*
	(0.671)	(0.680)	(0.682)	(0.722)
CO-military confrontations		0.006	0.005	0.016
		(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.011)
State pol. vulnerability		−0.203	−0.271	−0.363
		(0.185)	(0.182)	(0.194)
Federal pol. vulnerability		0.237	0.194	0.273
		(0.167)	(0.164)	(0.162)
State and federal pol. vulnerability		0.009	0.029	0.029
		(0.266)	(0.259)	(0.266)
Local election		0.113	0.109	0.051
		(0.125)	(0.122)	(0.127)
Log(Prosecutors+1)		0.103	0.107	0.120
		(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.066)
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	46 627	46 627	46 627	46 627
AIC	7541.8	7546.0	7687.6	7485.0

* p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001. Clustered standard errors.

symmetric conflicts between high-capacity cartels with a 287% increase, asymmetric conflicts with a 193% increases, and symmetric conflicts between lower-capacity cartels with a 351% increase. Unlike the TL replication, none of the models find statistically significant effects for political vulnerability, crackdowns, or local elections. These null results diverge from existing findings and conventional wisdom.

Table 3 disaggregates assassinations by level of government.[6] The results reveal important differences in the mechanisms underlying political killings. At the municipal level, cartel monopoly and all forms of inter-cartel conflict are associated with higher rates of assassinations, suggesting that local officials are the most vulnerable and are targeted both as part of territorial control and during cartel conflicts. It also shows that lower-capacity cartels, not only high-capacity cartels, target local politicians. At the state level, however, violence is more selectively associated with higher-capacity cartels, both where they dominate and where they are in conflict with each other, consistent with more strategic targeting tied to higher-stakes competition. Lower-capacity cartel monopoly and symmetric conflicts are negatively associated with killings of state officials. Lastly, assassinations of federal officials are exceedingly rare and show no systematic relationship with cartel dynamics, indicating that such actors are largely insulated from routine criminal violence. Taken together, these patterns suggest that political violence is primarily a local phenomenon, with escalation to state level officials correlating only with high-capacity cartels.

Triangulating Results

The results suggest two main conclusions. First, high-capacity cartels are the primary perpetrators of violence against state actors, suggesting that their capabilities allow them to act violently with relative impunity. Second, while lower-capacity cartels tend to avoid high-profile violence in the absence of conflict, their behavior changes when they engage in inter-cartel conflict, particularly with respect to municipal officials. As rivalries escalate and

[6]Due to the extreme rarity of federal-level assassinations, models including year fixed effects do not converge because many years exhibit no within-year variation in the outcome.

Table 3: Assassinations of elected officials by level of government in Mexico, 2000-2018. Poisson fixed effects models.

	Political Assassinations		
	Municipal officials	State officials	Federal officials
	(1)	(2)	(3)
High-capacity cartel monopoly	0.971***	2.119*	−17.711***
	(0.236)	(0.916)	(0.629)
Lower-capacity cartel monopoly	0.144	−19.090***	−18.954***
	(0.511)	(0.514)	(0.401)
High-capacity symmetric conflict	1.309***	2.558**	1.123
	(0.225)	(0.960)	(0.691)
Asymmetric conflict	1.067***	2.078*	1.314
	(0.252)	(0.996)	(0.862)
Lower-capacity symmetric conflict	1.558*	−0.740	0.061
	(0.688)	(0.624)	(0.383)
Controls	✓	✓	✓
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	
Num.Obs.	46 627	46 627	46 627
AIC	7266.9	5183.5	4987.3

* p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001. Clustered standard errors. Year fixed effects omitted for federal-level models due to lack of within-year variation.

the stakes become higher, even these weaker groups use violence against the state to undermine rivals' protection networks or coerce local authorities into collaboration. Ultimately, these findings underscore a critical shift in the nature of political violence in Mexico. As the criminal underworld transformed from being dominated by a few high-capacity, regionally bounded cartels into a highly fragmented and contentious arena abound with low and high-capacity cartels, their strategies for confronting the state became more openly violent.

Other findings, while not our main focus, are worth noting, particularly the null results in the extended analysis for political vulnerability, local elections, and the government crackdown since they counter prominent arguments. We interpret these findings through three context-driven perspectives. First, the political vulnerability findings are from a period when the PRI still dominated most state governments, making misalignment between

mayors and governors relatively rare and more politically consequential. As Mexico's party system became more fragmented after 2012, vertical misalignment became more common, less exceptional, and possibly less informative for cartels deciding where to direct violence, reducing its explanatory power post-2011. Second, while local elections were a strong predictor between 2007 and 2011, assassinations have since become more frequent outside of election cycles and inter-cartel conflicts have proliferated, plausibly dampening the direct effect of elections. Third, the increase in killings of politicians was driven by killings of *local* politicians, which has likely diluted the initial explanatory power of the crackdown in accounting for these killings.

Conclusion

Violence against government officials, particularly assassinations, is one of the most perverse and destabilizing threats that non-state actors can pose to the state. While scholars have extensively studied political violence by rebel and terrorist organizations, the literature examining the role of COs in targeting state officials remains less developed. This article advances this burgeoning literature by demonstrating how transformations to the structure of COs and the relations between these can push COs to carry out political assassinations.

Our findings offer important contributions to criminal and political violence research by underscoring the importance of criminal capacity for how COs interact with the state. Even more, this project has important practical implications as we seek to understand Mexico's ongoing security crisis and its consequences for democratic governance. Recognizing the role of criminal dynamics in shaping violence against the state is essential for designing more effective policies to protect public officials and curb criminal influence over political institutions.

While we highlight fragmentation and inter-cartel conflicts as key criminal transformations, future research could investigate the role of other transformations on violence against

the state, such as cartel expansion, internal structure, protection networks, leadership characteristics, and illicit market activities. Even more, future research should explore the consequences of this violence, as it likely has profound implications for democracy, governance, and public security. In the Mexican context, as cartels continue to evolve and fragment, the persistent targeting of local politicians threatens not only democratic institutions but also the state's capacity to provide good governance.

Beyond Mexico, this study has broader implications for other countries where COs engage in political violence. From Brazil and Ecuador's prison gangs to mafias in Italy and insurgent-criminal networks in Colombia, armed groups around the world selectively kill politicians to secure territorial and economic interests. Our findings suggest that transformations in the criminal underworld may be key to understanding where and why these attacks occur.

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Author contributions

Marco Alcocer: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing, Data Curation, Visualization.
Megan Erickson: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing.

Statements and declarations

Declaration of conflicting interest

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Data availability statement

The dataset and replication files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at `https://www.prio.org/journals/jpr/replicationdata`.

Declaration of AI usage

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools or generative AI-assisted technologies were used in the creation or preparation of this manuscript.

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