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# Islands of power. Democratic legitimacy, autonomous organisms, and their conflict in Mexico

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**ABSTRACT**

In connection with the democratic transition in Mexico, several autonomous organisms were created by constitutional amendment, in significant public policy areas. However, these same organisms came under increasing criticism over the past years, as technocratic and illegitimate, in the country's national media. Institutional confrontation followed. We discuss this conflict employing our own theoretical proposal on sources of bureaucratic legitimacy. Furthermore, based on key informant interviews, we examine the understanding of senior officials who serve at autonomous organisms about their role in Mexican democracy, and how this understanding informs and orients their work toward strengthening the legitimacy of their own institutions.

**KEYWORDS**

Autonomous organisms; bureaucracy; democratic legitimacy; Mexico

## Introduction

Debates about the democratic legitimacy of state institutions usually take place among scholars. Nevertheless, they can reach on occasion a wide public audience, as happened during the past years in Mexico. The issue made it to prime-time television at a prestigious broadcast network in 2014. One of the best-known experts on Constitutional Law in the country, Diego Valadés, went on air to criticize with some passion the "absurdity" (*disparate*) taking place with the reform of Mexican state institutions. He was referring to the creation of autonomous organisms run by nonpartizan experts. "We are creating islands of power," denounced Valadés, "that don't answer to anybody" (México Social, 2014).

A trend toward the creation of autonomous organisms began during the early 1990s in Mexico.[1] Since then, several federal institutions were created or declared autonomous by constitutional amendment (Martínez Robledos, 2015). Some differences exist about their legal definition and exact number, but most authors agree that 10 autonomous organisms were established at the federal level, from 1994 to 2018, in significant public policy areas (Dussauge-Laguna, 2015; Fabián Ruiz, 2017b; Pérez Guzmán, 2016).

Independent bureaucratic authorities are relatively common in several countries.[2] These kinds of public organizations are often commissions for human rights, election authorities, data protection institutions, central banks, and others. Their independence

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means that such institutions are protected from partisan political influence, and they have autonomy for their decisions. However, the autonomy that public bureaucracies should have—or assume in fact—for public policy decisions has been a subject of discussion among government scholars for a long time, as we will further examine below. Then again, instead of just having some autonomy for their decisions, independent bureaucratic authorities are specifically created in order not to be subordinated to the executive power at all, their independence means that they are protected from the influence of the political party in government. The potential for disagreement about their democratic legitimacy becomes even stronger, as shown by the wide public debate around autonomous organisms in Mexico. In this country, moreover, the creation of such institutions was associated with the democratic transition. As a result, issues of political legitimacy and constitutional government were involved from the beginning.

The first autonomous organism in this reform trend was the National Commission on Human Rights, created in 1990 and declared independent by constitutional amendment in 1991. A prestigious nonpartisan expert, Jorge Carpizo, was appointed as its president. The initiative was seen as a decisive moment at the beginning of Mexico's democratic transition (Farah Gebara, 2015). Several scholars, including Carpizo (2004) himself, had diagnosed excessive concentration of power in the presidency as a severe deficiency of Mexican democracy. Therefore, protection of human rights required institutional autonomy from the executive power, which had been often responsible for their violation in the past (Levy & Bruhn, 2006).

Concentration of power in the presidency characterized the previous political era in Mexico. The country's political system was a semi-authoritarian, single party regime from 1929 to 1990, under the dominance of PRI (*Partido de la Revolución Institucional*). During this time, a façade of liberal democracy was maintained, but the PRI won virtually every election, employing coercion and violence if necessary (Magaloni, 2005).

Another critical juncture in the country's transition to democracy was the reform of the National Electoral Commission. The semi-authoritarian regime maintained power through electoral manipulation. With ample consensus among political forces, a reform of the electoral commission was passed in 1994, and consolidated by constitutional amendment in 1996, so that electoral supervision would be protected from political interference (Farah Gebara, 2015). Again, since the national executive was central de facto power for electoral fraud in the previous regime, autonomy was a crucial requirement for the electoral commission (Flores-Macías, 2018). Under the new electoral system, a still dominant PRI lost its majority for the Lower House of the National Congress in 1997, and three years later the main opposition party won the national presidential election. Mexico could begin to be considered as a plural democracy (Magaloni, 2005).

Based on the contributions of the two autonomous organisms created in the 1990s, further independent bureaucratic institutions were created during the following years, in significant public policy areas (see Table 1).

However, less than two decades after the involvement of the first autonomous organisms in the democratic transition, all of them were being decried as undemocratic "islands of power" by a prestigious Constitutional Law scholar in prime-time television.

**Table 1.** Autonomous organisms in Mexico, with year of creation/constitutional establishment.

| NAME – acronym – [translation] | Year | Institutional role |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Comisión Nacional de Derechos humanos – CNDH [National Commission for Human Rights] | 1991 | - Human rights protection |
| 2. Banco de Mexico – Banxico [Bank of Mexico] | 1994 | - Central banking |
| 3. Instituto Nacional Electoral – INE [National Electoral Institute] | 1996 | - Supervision of national elections |
| 4. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía – INEGI [National Institute for Statistics and Geography] | 2008 | - Enforcement of transparency and objectivity in public statistics |
| 5. Comisión Federal de Competencia Económica – COFECE [Federal Economic Competition Commission] | 2013 | - Enforcement of competition laws |
| 6. Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones – IFT [Federal Telecommunications Institute] | 2013 | - Monitoring of media pluralism, accessibility, and regulation of telecommunications |
| 7. Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación – INEE [National Institute for the Evaluation of Education] | 2013 | - Evaluation of national education results and impact |
| 8. Instituto Nacional de Transparencia, Acceso a la Información y Protección de Datos Personales – INAI [National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information, and Personal Data Protection] | 2014 | - Enforcement of public information rights and data protection |
| 9. Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política Social – CONEVAL [National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy] | 2014 | - Evaluation of social development policy results and impact |
| 10. Fiscalía General de la República – FGR [Attorney General of the Republic] | 2014 | - Federal prosecution office |

And they were going to receive further strong criticism in the media, as we will summarize below. It was a radical change of perceptions. Independent bureaucratic authorities had been considered necessary during the transition in Mexico, but perhaps their creation implied, nonetheless, a conflict with democratic principles, as their critics were going to claim repeatedly in the following years?

The present article details the democratic legitimacy of public bureaucracies in Mexico, focusing on the debates and conflicts around autonomous organisms. The research includes a study of the perceptions and opinions of higher civil servants, working at the new organisms, about issues of bureaucratic legitimacy and constitutional government. This part of the research is based on key informant interviews conducted in Mexico City.

The attention of our study to bureaucratic officials seeks to compensate for the gap in the literature regarding autonomous organisms in Mexico, which has often simply ignored the bureaucracy, as pointed out by Ballinas Valdés (2011). Such neglect corresponds to a more general—and more concerning—deficiency in studies of democracy. The vast research on democratic transitions produced since the late 1980s paid almost no attention to the role of public bureaucracies in democratic consolidation and legitimacy, either for Latin American or Eastern European cases, as pointed out by Graham (1997), and Suleiman (2003), respectively. In a recent collection of studies on liberal-democratic ascent and breakdown, including Mexico, the editors still complain that the "literature on democratization has mostly disregarded the bureaucracy" (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 5).

The neglect of bureaucracies represents an obvious deficiency in studies of democracy because public officials are a central institutional actor in any system of governance. Moreover, the case of Mexico offers a particularly interesting angle on this issue, because new bureaucratic institutions were specifically designed and created to advance the democratic transition in the country. Therefore, the controversy over autonomous organisms in Mexico exposes connections, but also potential conflicts between public bureaucracies, constitutional government, and democratic values in transitional political systems.

The first section of the article summarizes critical opinions on autonomous organisms in Mexico and describes ensuing institutional conflicts. After a review of theoretical perspectives on legitimacy in public administration, the second section introduces our own theoretical proposal on this issue, as a conceptual framework for the article. The third section discusses materials and methods employed for field research. We introduce and analyze, in the fourth and final section, the results of key informant interviews in Mexico.

The conclusion of the article emphasizes the key significance of normative elements in the controversy over autonomous organisms in Mexico; and it recapitulates how the democratic understanding of senior officials, as revealed in interviews, informs and orients their work toward strengthening the political legitimacy of their own institutions.

## From controversy to political conflict

Over the past years, autonomous organisms have come under increasingly strong criticism in national newspapers and other media in Mexico. Alcocer (2013) described their creation as a "disease," and claimed that autonomous organisms are undemocratic, since they have "no restraints whatsoever," and they are "superimposed and above the elected powers" (p. 12). López Ayllón (2013) deplored the "explosion" of autonomous organisms, because they "deprive" the executive branch of its capacity to make public policy. Salazar Ugarte (2014) cautioned against the "weakening" of the state caused by autonomous organisms. In addition to his interview in national television, quoted above, Valadés (2014) also condemned autonomous organisms, in national media, for being "subtracted from the people's sovereign rule," and for "declaring themselves [ … ] as a new sovereign expression: the bureaucratic" (p. 12). Ehrman (2016), while conceding the "superior efficiency" of autonomous organisms, denounced them as "government of technicians or technocracy," because their decisions do not express "popular will." For Pérez Daza (2017), autonomous organisms take "decisions of national transcendence" without regard for Congress, the institution that "represents the interests of society."

Compared to denunciations in the media, scholarly criticism of autonomous organisms has been less outright hostile, but forceful nonetheless. An early academic critic, Cárdenas Gracia (2012) addressed the technocratic character of the organisms, as admonitory advice, declaring that they "should avoid any kind of mandarin-like attitudes [*mandarinato*] or technocratic excesses" (p. 252). Rodríguez Corona (2014) conceded that autonomous organisms perform a "most important function," but he also observed that their creation is a "snub" [*desaire*] to the classical powers as established by the Constitution "and the legal-political legitimacy that these represent." As a

consequence, autonomous organisms in Mexico lack "necessary democratic controls" (pp. 74, 76). Martínez Robledos (2015) acknowledged that autonomous organisms "strengthen the state," but their autonomy has not translated into "social legitimacy," and thus the authorities' constitutional status "has not been able to realize or legitimize itself" (p. 139). Fabián Ruiz (2017b) criticized autonomous organisms for taking "counter-majoritarian decisions," because they are not "democratically elected," and therefore do not represent the citizens; such organisms should only "fulfill specific functions with a technical character" (p. 117).

Media and scholarly criticism of autonomous organisms became politically charged in 2018 when a newly elected national administration was reported to plan a reduction of their autonomy, making them more "subordinate" to the executive power (Velázquez, 2018). A few months later, the administration introduced an education reform, which was passed by Congress as law in May 2019. The reform included the elimination of one of the autonomous organisms, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE), tasked with the evaluation of education results and impact (see Table 1). The administration had to secure wide support for this initiative, given INEE had been declared autonomous by constitutional amendment and its elimination required thus a majority of two-thirds of both chambers of Congress, in addition to ratification by at least 16 state legislatures. After the reform was passed, however, the President of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador—generally known by his initials AMLO—began to employ an aggressive language, claiming that education policies of previous administrations were under the influence of "technocrats," who had promoted "discredit campaigns" against teachers (López Obrador, 2019c).

Even more confrontational was the summary firing, in July 2019, of the executive secretary of another autonomous organism, the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), a decision justified by President AMLO arguing that "technocrats do not understand" the problems of the country (López Obrador, 2019b). The senior civil servant fired had been in office for almost fourteen years. The President also declared that he was considering the outright elimination of CONEVAL (López Obrador, 2019a). The political purge of its executive secretary did not prevent future conflicts with this same organism, however. Two years later, with a serving executive secretary appointed by the President, the latter rejected nevertheless the national measurement of poverty elaborated by CONEVAL, at a press conference, claiming to have "different data" (López Obrador, 2021).

The conflict continued to escalate in 2020 and 2021, when President AMLO and members of his administration began to direct attacks against *all* autonomous organisms, as a group. In June 2020, the President stated at his daily press conference that INE, the independent electoral commission declared autonomous by constitutional amendment in 1996, was "the mechanism [*aparato*] most expensive in the world for organizing elections;" and the President further remarked that INE was the "clearest example" of those organisms created in Mexico that "haven't done anything," and "that were created just to pretend" (López Obrador, 2020). By the beginning of 2021, it was announced that the President and members of his cabinet were elaborating a proposal to eliminate all autonomous organisms. The roles assumed by those organisms, President AMLO and members of his cabinet declared, were essential state

responsibilities that had been "teared off," and they should be performed again by the executive power (Pérez, 2021). The conflict seemed to decrease in 2022, after the President made—grudgingly—conciliatory remarks about the autonomous organisms, announcing that their elimination was no longer a priority of his administration. President AMLO further explained that there would be no time during his mandate—which ends in 2024—to achieve such a goal, considering that a constitutional amendment would be required for the purpose, and the opposition did "not approve anything at the time" (López Obrador, 2022).

Although the vocabulary employed by President AMLO and members of his administration has been very aggressive, some of the underlying arguments about autonomous organisms reveal connections to media and scholarly criticism. First of all, both the critics and the AMLO administration generally assume the principle of majoritarian popular will as the fundamental—almost exclusive—source for democratic legitimacy. Therefore, non-elected, professional bureaucracies have been denounced as illegitimate or undemocratic, particularly if they have any authority to take decisions on their own—as is characteristic of independent bureaucratic authorities. From this argument results, secondly, the general employment of the derogatory term "technocracy" to refer to professional bureaucracies, a designation common among the critics, and almost permanent in declarations by President AMLO.

The concept of "technocracy" refers to elite groups that seek to impose a single, exclusive public policy paradigm justified on scientific rationality (Centeno, 1994). Then again, the application of this term to the professional leadership of autonomous organisms, in our days, runs the risk of ignoring important normative elements associated with these institutions in Mexico. First of all, the relevant contribution of autonomous organisms to the democratic transition, and secondly, the circumstance that most of them were established by constitutional amendment, a procedure that requires qualified majorities—more on this below. In any case, the most significant and politically charged criticisms of autonomous organisms have been consistently normative, and they focus on denying their democratic legitimacy.

However, scholarly debates in Mexico have been relatively unbalanced in this regard, since prominent supporters of autonomous organisms, such as Ballinas Valdés (2011, 2018) or Dussauge-Laguna (2015), have shown a certain reluctance to address normative issues in the controversy, and therefore they have barely considered the question of democratic legitimacy. Dussauge-Laguna (2015) has claimed that critical opinions of autonomous organisms are based on "myths" and "prejudices," instead of representing "empirically founded realities" (p. 2). Ballinas Valdés (2018) has similarly stated that the debate "has been conducted to a great extent under wrong assumptions" (p. 32). Wrong assumptions or empirical mistakes may occur among critics of autonomous organisms, but the critics' strongest arguments are normative, they correspond to specific interpretations of the principles of democratic government. The notion—assumed by most critics—that popular will is the fundamental source of democratic legitimacy cannot be considered wrong; on the contrary, it represents a widespread normative conception of democracy in Latin America (Caramani, 2017).

Among supporters of autonomous organisms in Mexico, only Ackerman (2007, 2016) has consistently addressed normative issues; the author discusses *challenges* that

undermine the legitimacy of autonomous organisms: for example, low expectations among citizens, or the *great volatility* of their legitimacy, so that results must be delivered quickly, and their functioning must be *spotless*. In addition, Ackerman (2016) underlines that autonomous organisms must win support among civil society, because very few of them have "formally coercive powers" (p. 34). We shall further consider Ackerman's contribution in next section.

## The legitimacy of public administration

Legitimacy is a central question for political theory, but also for the study of government bureaucracies. As Jordan (2006) observes, legitimacy represents a "critical part of the normative and empirical study of public administration" (p. 631). The concept involves the normative justification of political power, such as Stout's (2013) definition of legitimate authority as "the *rightful* empowerment of various governance actors to decide and to act [emphasis added]" (p. 5). Some scholars have expressed a certain frustration about debates on legitimacy in public administration, suggesting that they are "pointless" in the terms conventionally defined (McSwite, 1997, p. 19). Even acknowledging problems with conventional formulations—more on this below—it has been suggested that legitimacy can be used as an "organizing lens" to integrate diverse perspectives that correspond to the interdisciplinary nature of public administration (Stout, 2013, p. 51; Zavattaro, 2014b, p. 535). In the present article, we propose to employ the concept of legitimacy according to this approach, as an instrument to organize different contributions related to the normative justification of bureaucratic authority.

As mentioned earlier, it is far from straightforward to assume that public bureaucracies should have authority to take decisions on their own. Stout (2013) suggests to examine this matter by means of three traditions that synthesize, as ideal-types in the sense of Weber, influential principles in the theory and practice of public administration. Designed as *constitutional*, *discretionary*, and *collaborative*, each tradition provides a different answer to the question of legitimate bureaucratic authority. Stout (2013) describes the deep connections of the constitutional tradition to "earlier historical time periods within public administration" (p. 81), and Peters (1996) accordingly defines this set of ideas as "the old-time religion" (p. 3). This tradition upholds the conventional notion that the administration must have a technical, neutral role, separated from politics; since democratically elected officials represent the will of the people, they should take public policy decisions, while the administration remains in charge of implementation. From a critical perspective, as Stout (2013) points out, one of the central problems with this tradition results from its assumption that elected officials are responsive to citizens, that they are "representative" in a substantial—and not just formal—sense, which happens often not to be the case (p. 182). Rosanvallon (2011) suggests that issues such as widespread corruption and executive overreach have been historically among the reasons behind the establishment of bureaucratic authorities not subordinated to elected officials; in such cases, citizens have perceived elected officials as too partisan to take impartial decisions in certain important matters (p. 80).[3]

Reasons that justify the creation of bureaucratic authorities not subordinated to elected officials are clearly present in Mexico. Executive overreach, partisanship and clientelism have been described as typical practices. For the semi-authoritarian era (1929–1990), Guerrero Amparán (1999) defined a *practically absolute* presidential dominance, while Sánchez González (2009) portrayed a *perverse* system, controlled by corruption and clientelism in order to "exalt" (*enaltecer*) the executive power (p. 89). After the democratic transition, past legacies remain visible, thus, for example, "an authoritarian political culture" with political power "centralized in the executive branch" (Klingner & Arellano Gault, 2006, p. 73), and "increased patronage and politicization of public programs" (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021, 179).

The second tradition of administrative legitimacy, which Stout (2013) designates as discretionary, is associated with the Progressive Era (1896–1916) in the United States, an optimistic age inspired by ideals of economic growth, welfare and human advancement. The discretionary tradition is skeptical of politics, as a source of government failure, and therefore the administration must have wide discretion to exercise power, "on the basis of technical, managerial and moral expertise" (Stivers, 2002, p. 142). In Europe and Latin America, the principles of discretionary administration are connected to the work of the widely influential French thinker Léon Duguit.[4] Public power, for Duguit (1921), was legitimated not by its origin (elections), but by the services it provided as a contribution to social solidarity (p. VII); moreover, the provision of public services should be decentralized, and in charge of career civil servants protected from political arbitrariness (Duguit, 1923, p. 61; see also Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 39). If we adopt a critical approach, however, one of the main difficulties with the discretionary tradition is that public administration, even if enlightened and benevolent, should operate as an autocratic elite according to this model (McSwite, 1997, p. 149; Stout, 2013, p. 128).

The third or collaborative tradition can be seen as an attempt to integrate and go beyond the two previous traditions (Stout, 2013, p. 225). This proposal, gaining strength in our time, aspires to transcend the contradiction between public administration as the *servant* of politics—constitutional tradition—and public administration as the *master* of state power—discretionary tradition. The collaborative principle supports a role for public administration that, instead of being servant or master, acts to promote and facilitate citizens' participation and engagement. McSwite (2002) describes this orientation as *collaborative pragmatism*, "a collaborative approach to government, where experts are simply part of a cooperative process in which they have no superior role" (p. 77). Discussions of legitimacy become thus "pointless," (McSwite, 1997, p. 19) because no one group of citizens or sector of social activity is given authority to act on another's behalf, administrative authority emerges from understanding among citizens, developed through participatory processes (Stout, 2013, p. 225).

The collaborative tradition can be criticized for its utopian character, as Stout (2013) acknowledges (p. 198, see also Zavattaro, 2014b, p. 538). Even so, the collaborative ideal seems to correspond better with contemporary governance than other traditions. Given that "governments are increasingly decentered among other actors" (Stout, 2013, p. 231), contemporary governance demands *fluid networking* as the appropriate style of organizing. Instead of hierarchy and command, such a "networking organizing style

**Table 2.** Sources of bureaucratic legitimacy, with special reference to Mexico.

| Traditions of legitimacy | Sources of legitimacy | Legitimacy issues in mexico |
|---|---|---|
| Constitutional tradition | 1. Constitutional Law | - Creation of autonomous organisms by constitutional amendment<br>- Reassurance about authority among key informants |
| Discretionary tradition | 2. Public Policy Results | - Critics concede competence and efficiency of autonomous organisms, but question their legitimacy nevertheless<br>- Contribution to democratic transition |
| Collaborative tradition | 3. Public Reputation<br>4. Public Policy Procedures | - Tension between pressures to remain "technical," and the logic of interacting with social actors<br>- Disparity between ideal principle and concrete practice |

supports collaborative processes and outcomes both within the public organization and between the organization and society" (Stout, 2013, p. 163).

To conclude this brief treatment of the concept of legitimacy in public administration, we introduce our own theoretical synthesis and proposal, as a conceptual graphic model, in Table 2.

The model presented in the table connects traditions of administrative legitimacy, listed on the left column, with the analysis of legitimacy in terms of *sources*, a treatment advanced by Habermas (1996) that emphasizes the dynamic and contested character of legitimation as a political process. The four sources of legitimacy considered, on the center column, are related to specific issues around autonomous organisms in Mexico, listed on the right column.

The first source of democratic legitimacy corresponds to Constitutional Law. As Stout (2013) remarks, according to the Constitutional Tradition, "public administration achieves its legitimacy by virtue of being an integral component of the constitutional order" (p. 193). Autonomous organisms were created in Mexico by constitutional amendment in each case, and such a procedure provides them with a clear-cut source of legitimacy, in terms of this tradition. As a confirmation of the point, key informants in Mexico expressed particular reassurance about the democratic legitimacy and public policy authority of their organizations, because these had been established or declared autonomous by constitutional amendment. In other words, our own research shows that the constitutional order represents a crucial source of democratic legitimacy—while far from being sufficient in itself.

Public policy results are the second source of democratic legitimacy. The focus on results corresponds to the discretionary tradition. As Stout (2013) points out, in this tradition, "outcomes prove legitimacy" (p. 135). As referred to earlier, Ackerman (2016) emphasizes that autonomous organisms in Mexico must show "results extremely fast" (p. 29) to consolidate their legitimacy. Scholarship on independent bureaucracies used to support the notion that public policy results can compensate for deficits in other sources of legitimacy, but this point of view has been much questioned (Maggetti, 2010). The case of Mexico confirms doubts about public policy results as alternative to other legitimacy sources. From the beginning of the public controversy in this country, critics have been willing to concede that autonomous organisms deliver good policy results (Alcocer, 2013; Ehrman, 2016; López Ayllón, 2013; Ugalde, 2014). These concessions were even articulated as high praise, such as Ehrman (2016) declaring that

autonomous organisms represent "an area of highly effective decisions, and fast implementation." However, the critics' denunciation of the organisms as technocratic and undemocratic remained unaffected, since their decisions, as also expressed by Ehrman (2016) "are not the product of popular will." In any case, because the critics conceded this point from the beginning, the question of public policy results has not been a significant element in the controversy around autonomous organisms in Mexico.

However, the absence of public policy results from the controversy, during the last years, does not mean that they have never been important. As outlined above, the trend toward the creation of autonomous organisms in Mexico was based on the key contribution of the Human Rights Commission and the National Electoral Commission to the democratic transition, as has been recognized by supporters (Farah Gebara, 2015, p. 679) and by critics of the organisms (Alcocer, 2013; Ugalde, 2014). In sum, positive results gave this institutional design a strong initial legitimacy, and critics simply abstained from questioning results in the following debates.

Table 2 includes two sources of legitimacy associated with the collaborative tradition: public reputation, and public policy procedures. We understand reputation, following Carpenter (2010), as a set of "beliefs about an organization [ … ] embedded in a network of multiple audiences" (p. 33). Reputation has such a strategic significance, in our days, that public administration may be shifting to a "reputation era," according to a wide-ranging study by Zavattaro and Eshuis (2021), which analyses the concept from early historical research by Carpenter (2001) to its ample influence on contemporary public administration.

Public reputation management can be manipulated in such a way that image trumps substance, impacting negatively on public values (Zavattaro, 2014a). However, since reputation requires networking, it has been associated with the collaborative tradition. As mentioned above, the organizing style of networking is appropriate to this tradition, according to Stout (2013), who suggests further that in "terms of decision-making rationality, networks require a collaborative approach" (238). Regarding the issue of reputation management in Mexico, the analysis of interviews reveals a practical tension between pressures for a technical self-presentation of autonomous organisms, and the practical demands of interacting with social actors, as we will further discuss in section four below.

The last source of democratic legitimacy to be considered results from procedures employed in public administration. As referred to earlier, the collaborative tradition focuses strongly on civil society participation and engagement in the public policy process. As Stout (2013) further remarks, "through citizen participation activities, boundaries are also blurring between government and civil society" (131). Among critics of autonomous organisms in Mexico, only Fabián Ruiz (2017a) discusses this procedural source of legitimacy, which the organisms have not been able to organize effectively, in his opinion. In their study on policy analysis at two autonomous organisms in Mexico, Pardo and Dussauge-Laguna (2017) also observe that procedures to involve external actors are far from consolidated. These observations were confirmed in part by our research; the analysis of interviews, in section four, reveals a disparity between ideal principle and concrete practice regarding interactions and engagement with civil society organizations.

## Materials and methods

Key informant interviews were conducted in Mexico City between July 2016 and March 2017. At the time, autonomous organisms were under increasing criticism in the country, but the controversy had not yet entered the next—and current—phase of *open institutional confrontation*. Thus our research captures the final years of the historic period of creation and consolidation of autonomous organisms in Mexico from 1990 to 2017. As shown in our interviews, senior civil servants were still relatively unconstrained in discussing the role of professional bureaucracies in a democratic system. Open institutional confrontation afterwards, including episodes such as elimination of organisms, summary firings of senior civil servants, and others, will likely make informants more guarded, and interviews will require a different, more indirect approach.

The analysis of interviews, in the next section, reconstructs norms and values implicit in the understanding of their roles by bureaucratic officials serving at autonomous organisms in Mexico. The analysis is based on the issues raised by the controversy about the democratic legitimacy of these institutions. Therefore, interviews were focused on the sources of legitimacy that have been in dispute, including the place of autonomous organisms in the constitutional order, their reputation, and their relationships to civil society. We did not focus on public policy results, since these were not part of the controversy. As referred to earlier, while strongly denouncing the lack of democratic legitimacy of autonomous organisms, the critics rarely or never questioned their results.

The employment of the key informant technique is well-established in public administration research; informants' identities are kept confidential in professional and politically sensitive contexts—such as the present study (Yeager, 2006). Key informants are selected on the basis of their insider knowledge, and our interviews included twenty-three senior officials working at upper management levels in ten different autonomous organisms of the Mexican Federal Government, with at least five years of experience at such organisms. The sample also included three national experts on public administration, intended for triangulation—as further explained below.

Interviews were conducted in person at the informants' workplaces. Initial contacts were made via email, describing the scholarly character of the research, and explaining that our purpose was not journalistic, to make clear that we were not looking for any kind of revelation or whistleblowing. In previous communications, and during the interviews, we stated repeatedly that confidentiality was assured: informants' identities remain protected under all circumstances. As a result, we gained a relatively high level of trust, considering that all twenty-three senior officials of the sample agreed to recording interviews, which allowed complete transcriptions for subsequent analysis—experts also agreed to recordings, certainly, but their opinions are publicly known.

We employed six strategies to monitor and minimize *reflexivity*, defined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) as the inevitable influence of interviewers on informants. Three of these strategies are reviewed by Maxwell (2013, pp. 126–129). The first one was the *intensive* character of interviews: Involvement with informants included several personal communications, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and notes were taken of events observed by interviewers. The second strategy considered by Maxwell is *triangulation*, the interrelation of data from different sources, as was the purpose of interviews with experts—revealing contrasts occurred as a result, as

shown in next section. We used *quantitative support* as the third strategy, to test the "typical, rare, or prevalent" (Maxwell, 2013, 128) character of normative judgements made by informants, and our analysis provides numerical results in several cases. The fourth strategy is defined by Tufford and Newman (2010) as *bracketing* interviews; drafts questions were tested in simulated interviews with outside sources, including non- managerial colleagues and research associates. Finally, we used the two following strategies described by Parkin (2008) to minimize *priming*, the suggestion of answers by ideas or information presented in the questions. First, diverse thematic areas of interviews were introduced with neutral, open-ended questions. Secondly, several questions using relational terms, such as *excessive* or *insufficient*, contained normative/evaluative appraisals, thus assessing the influence, for example, of political actors on public policy decisions; before answering, respondents were presented—on a printed list—with the whole range of possible options for their answers.

Finally, transcriptions of interviews were examined with the approach of discourse analysis, focusing on normative assumptions and their connection to institutional practices (McSwite, 1997). Visual charts were made to organize and analyze results in diverse areas of normative significance. We did not use software for this work.

## Results and discussion

We began by asking senior officials interviewed about their knowledge of opinions in the media, and in scholarly publications, about autonomous organisms in Mexico. We wanted to know if they realized—or were prepared to admit—that their organizations had become controversial in the country. Among senior officials interviewed, a relatively ample majority, eighteen from twenty-three, stated that they were aware of criticisms against their institutions. However, only a slight majority of interviewees, twelve from twenty-three, declared further that they actively follow such discussions. In contrast, eleven informants declared that they do not follow public debates on autonomous organisms in Mexico.

We detected thus a combination of involvement, among some senior officials, but also a certain detachment, among others, from the public controversy surrounding their own institutions. We explored the reasons for this contrast in further, unstructured questions. Among key informants, there seemed to be a division, roughly into two groups, according to the position they took concerning public discussions on bureaucratic autonomy. Several officials that declared not to follow the debate emphasized the technical nature of their work; they seemed to regard public debates as beyond their area of competence. The Deputy Director of an autonomous organism stated precisely that he does not follow the controversy on such institutions, because "it is not part of our responsibility."

An Area Director at another organism declared that she follows the controversy on bureaucratic autonomy, but only "superficially."[5] She explained such relative lack of interest by describing how, in Mexico, "it has been said that everything has to serve the President" and, therefore, autonomous organisms are left in charge of those decisions which are "technical and without repercussions" [*sin compromiso*]. In other words, the debate did not seem to make much sense to this Area Director, because the President

only allows autonomous organisms to take decisions on technical matters, which are uncontroversial—in her opinion.

A Division Deputy Director indicated that some autonomous organisms, such as the Electoral Commission, impact on politics, and therefore the controversy was relevant for them. However, the organism where she served has a technical role, in her opinion, and thus she "had no idea" about how this controversy—which she did not follow anyway—could be applied to her own institution. An Office Manager at another organism commented upon the public debates around this issue by declaring, with non-intended paradoxical effect, that she did not share "from a technical point of view" the *political* criticism of autonomous organisms.

The belief that autonomous organisms should focus on technical matters, and remain aloof from anything political, was further confirmed by several senior officials in response to a specific structured question. This question asked about diverse factors that could have impacted negatively on the performance of autonomous organisms in Mexico. One of the options, chosen by seven senior officials interviewed, described as one of such factors with a negative impact on performance that "the leadership of autonomous organisms focused excessively on political issues, and did not pay enough attention to the technical component of directing these organizations." In other words, those seven key informants believed that autonomous organisms underperformed in Mexico, because the organisms' bureaucratic leadership was too concerned with political matters, neglecting the technical dimension of their work. Then again, six senior officials interviewed chose the opposite answer; in their opinion, it was *insufficient* attention to political issues by the leadership of the organisms that impacted negatively on performance. Thus, these two groups of senior officials showed a complete disagreement in regards to the issue of political versus technical concerns in the leadership of autonomous organisms. The remaining ten key-informants, from among twenty-three senior officials interviewed, believed that the attention to technical and political matters had been appropriately balanced.

Moving from the internal leadership to the political environment of the organisms, a number of senior officials interviewed expressed their frustration with external political actors, and their impact on autonomous organisms. The structured question mentioned above presented the interviewees with diverse factors that could have impacted negatively on performance. The first option, which we just considered, corresponded to the organisms' internal leadership. Another option that respondents could choose from referred to *external* political oversight or political control over independent authorities. About this second factor, nine informants expressed the opinion that *excessive* or *disproportionate* external political controls had a negative impact on the performance of autonomous organisms in Mexico. Only two interviewees, meanwhile, considered that such political controls had been *insufficient*, and thus impacted negatively on performance. The remaining 12 senior officials interviewed were neutral about this issue, they considered external political controls neither excessive nor insufficient. In sum, the criticism of external political controls as excessive outnumbered opinions in favor of stronger political controls by more than four to one; frustration with external political controls was clearly more extended than its opposite.

Additional remarks made by informants shed further light on this issue. An Office Manager complained about the fact that:

> Here we have constant supervision, and … well, political parties have the door open for anything, and this doesn't impact in the best way on performance.

A Deputy Division Director criticized the practice of supervision by means of political appointments:

> At the moment of taking decisions about the supervision of autonomous organisms … let's say that appointments tend to have a certain political momentum. There is already a weak history inside of political parties as regards such appointments, sometimes there are certain "reshufflings," which may not have necessarily an adequate impact on the performance of these organisms.

An Area Director expressed her frustration at the influence that the President of Mexico still retains on the designation of the General Director, at the organism where she serves, even after a recent reform introduced a procedure of consultation with the National Congress. The influence of the executive power "is a political problem," she declared further, because it causes "all kinds of movements that distract the institution from its true goal."

As a final statement expressing frustration with external political controls, we quote the remarks made by the Deputy Director of an autonomous organism. Talking about political influence on designations of members of the directing board, she declared that "there lies the problem, they all represent something." The Deputy Director seemed to suggest thus that members of the board are appointed to advance political interests, rather than the organism's policy goals.

Interestingly, the three national experts interviewed were far more supportive of external political controls over autonomous organisms than were senior civil servants. Two of the experts expressed the opinion that such political controls were *insufficient*, and this deficiency had a negative impact on the performance of the organisms in Mexico. The third expert was neutral regarding the issue, he considered external political controls neither insufficient nor excessive. In contrast, as outlined earlier, from twenty-three senior officials interviewed, only two believed that external political controls were insufficient, and nine senior officials declared that such controls were excessive or disproportionate.

We examined the reasons for this relative divergence of opinions between experts and senior officials in additional, unstructured questions. Both experts who described political controls as insufficient proposed a more active role for the National Congress in this regard. Furthermore, the first of these two experts supported overall coordination of all state institutions under an ultimate political authority, and he declared accordingly that:

> The State is one entity, and its members in diverse organisms should not assume competences as a hunting preserve, isolated from the rest of the process of organization of power.

Of particular concern for this same expert was the fact that autonomous organisms make public policy; he believed that their work should be purely "technical," restricted to the implementation of public policy made by political officials. The second of the

experts who described political controls over independent bureaucratic authorities as insufficient also advocated for more congressional oversight. However, he further declared that independent authorities should act "under the tutelage of the President." Even the third expert interviewed, who did not consider external political controls over autonomous organisms to be insufficient, was relatively skeptical about their public policy authority. "Without restricting the autonomy of autonomous organisms," he stated, "more intervention by the legislative and executive power in public policy decisions is necessary," and he justified the need for more intervention by political powers, "because they have been elected by the public [ … ] they are in command."

The public policy authority of autonomous organisms was the subject of a specific question in the interviews. The answers to this question showed, again, a sharp divergence of opinions between senior officials and experts. The three experts interviewed, as just described, were either strongly opposed to the notion that autonomous organisms should take public policy decisions, or they were relatively skeptical about this. The experts thought that political powers, legislative or executive, should be in command of public policy making. In contrast, from twenty-three senior officials interviewed, a wide majority of twenty endorsed the principle that autonomous organisms should be in charge of public policy decisions in their areas of competence. In fact, this was the single issue where senior officials showed the most agreement. Several informants, moreover, underlined the fact that the autonomy of their institutions is declared in the Constitution, and this seemed to give them a strong self-assurance as regards their policy-making authority.

A Deputy Division Director declared that autonomous organisms:

> Are autonomous precisely to make the public policies that can best fulfill their mandate, they have a constitutional mandate, and there is a reason for them to have a certain autonomy, which is to define the public policies they have to make, or else their autonomy would be a joke [*una vacilada*].

Even more forceful was a Deputy Area Director, who declared that autonomous organisms must have competence to make public policy, because "there has to be a total independence, and autonomy such as described in the Constitution." A Deputy Division Director declared in like manner that:

> Obviously, given the goals of the Constitution in creating autonomous organisms, public policy decisions should remain inside of the organism, so as not to be constrained by the federal executive or any other political power [ … ] the organisms have been given autonomy in order for public policy decisions to be withdrawn from the political powers, and in this way, for these decisions to be more impartial, and less manipulated.

The question of the public policy authority of autonomous organisms connects to a further area of analysis in the interviews, which included topics related to their interactions with diverse social actors. The results in this area revealed, again, interesting contrasts and differences in regard to the norms and values assumed by senior public officials. We began by asking informants about their general perception of the understanding and support—or lack thereof—that autonomous organisms receive from news media, and from civil society organizations. Interestingly, the answers to the two parts of this question were relatively dissimilar. From twenty-three senior officials interviewed, a total of nine declared to perceive insufficient understanding and support from

news media toward autonomous organisms. In contrast, as regards civil society organizations, only four officials reported a similar perception of insufficient understanding and support.

Some informants described a changing situation concerning media and civil society attitudes toward autonomous organisms, in part resulting from the organisms' own initiatives. The Secretary of the Board of an autonomous organism declared about civil society and media perceptions of the organism that:

> It was a problem. We were in a situation of insufficient understanding and support, and now we are recovering support and credibility with civil society, and with the majority of news media [ … ] there was a strong crisis in this respect. This autonomous organism, as no other public organization in my opinion, bases a substantial part of its strength on such support, and that leadership was lost. Nowadays, that leadership has been regained to a great extent.

Then again, while describing a changing situation, some informants admitted that the strategies of the autonomous organisms where they serve had failed or were not pursued with enough consistency to succeed. A Deputy Division Director stated:

> To begin with, we don't get enough coverage for our area, so the sources are very minor, and when they address some issue they misrepresent it, because we have not assumed the task of communicating in a way that can be understood. This is an internal policy matter [ … ] When we try to communicate in an everyday manner, people get angry because we take away the technicality of it, therefore we have not received enough support and understanding from the news media, because we have not inspired it.

The interviewee described thus a certain tension between the need to communicate effectively, and the pressures to keep the organism's self-presentation as technical. As we will see, other informants described a similar tension between technical demands, and the logic of interacting with social actors. Our next, structured question asked informants specifically if the organisms where they serve have a special area or unit focused on promoting contacts with civil society. A clear majority of nineteen, from among twenty-three senior officials interviewed, answered affirmatively.

The majority was not as clear, however, when we asked—more concretely—about the *personal* experience of informants with civil society organizations, that is to say, the frequency of their own contacts or work meetings with representatives of such groups.[6] Eight informants stated that they had *frequent* contacts with representatives from civil society organizations, while another eight reported that they had *never or almost never* such contacts—seven interviewees reported regular or occasional contacts of this kind. That is to say, the same number of informants reported frequent contacts with representatives of civil society organizations, as the number reporting never or almost never to have such contacts. However, this result does not necessarily mean that interactions between autonomous organisms and civil society organizations are fragmentary. The responses may indicate only that some interviewees worked in areas where contacts with civil society organizations simply did not correspond to their tasks.

Therefore, we asked informants about the frequency of contacts that their *colleagues* in the same institution had with representatives of civil society organizations.[7] Twelve respondents stated that colleagues had frequent contacts with civil society organizations, while only three declared that their colleagues never or almost never had such contacts;

seven informants reported regular or occasional contacts, and one declared to ignore this. The majority of twelve informants reporting frequent contacts was now higher, but far from the number of nineteen informants who declared that their organisms had a special area or unit that worked with civil society organizations. In sum, while the notion of interacting with civil society organizations was endorsed, in principle, by a clear majority of respondents, and it had institutional support from their organisms, the concrete practice of such work seemed not to be as strong as the principle. The disparity between ideal principle and concrete practice in this area was confirmed in further, unstructured responses by key informants.

A member of the Board of Directors of an autonomous organism, asked about his work contacts with representatives of civil society organizations, stated:

> No, that's a grave deficiency of the Board of Directors, we should be the voice of organized civil society before this autonomous organism, but we are not.

This same informant declared that the organism received *insufficient* understanding and support from civil society organizations, and he clearly blamed in part the organism—including himself—for that situation. The need to strengthen reputation as public trust was underlined by a Deputy Division Director at another autonomous organism:

> For us it would be very important for society to understand that we are independent because many people don't file requests before us, since they don't trust the government. So, if you don't trust in advance, why would you file a request?

The Secretary of the Board of an autonomous organism underlined that it is "crucial" for the organism to have strong communications with civil society. Nevertheless, asked about activities in this regard, the informant declared:

> In matters of communication, we are still just getting started. We are beginning to do it [ … ] To communicate our results, we are still … let's say that this administration is the one that has begun.

In sum, although senior civil servants regarded interacting with news media and civil society organizations as important—or even crucial—they sometimes reported that this work was not carried out properly, blaming eventually their institutions, or even themselves for the deficiency. Such discrepancy between ideal principle and concrete practice will be our last topic of analysis in this section.

A Division Director admitted that "we have to get closer to civil society, in order to begin to cover that breach of ignorance and confusion about what is an autonomous organism." Nevertheless, the interviewee added, "I think it's necessary, that's why a work area exists that is *more political than technical* [emphasis added]." While stressing, thus, the need to improve communications with civil society, the informant described this area of activity as "political."

The perception that interacting with civil society has a political character was also expressed by a Deputy Division Director:

> Autonomous organisms, no matter what is said, will always have a political component [ … ] in our concrete case, this dimension of civil society has been crucial for our feedback.

By using the expression "no matter what is said," the interviewee made implicit reference to opinions that disapprove of any "political" activities by autonomous organisms,

including interactions with civil society—although she clearly disagreed with this restrictive point of view.

The Secretary of the Board of an autonomous organism declared about interactions with civil society that:

> In our case, it is crucial. I believe that there are autonomous organisms which, due to their technical component, it makes sense for them to work facing inward. In the case of this organism, it makes a lot of sense for us to work facing outward.

The statement conveys the perception by the informant that some autonomous organisms, because their mission is more "technical," are justified in working only "facing inward," thus not focusing much on interactions with civil society. The informant, again, excluded his own organism from such a distant relationship to civil society, but he showed clear awareness of the influence of a technical perspective on certain autonomous organisms.

To conclude this section, interviews show that the work of autonomous organisms with civil society organizations can have controversial implications in Mexico. Understood as "political," such work will be condemned from certain points of view. Several senior officials interviewed did not share the opinion that autonomous organisms must be confined to purely "technical" activities, but they showed awareness of such restrictive understanding of their work. Controversial implications can have a discouraging effect, particularly considering that some of the senior civil servants interviewed did indeed subscribe to the notion that the work of autonomous organisms has to remain "technical." All this suggests a possible explanation for the reported shortcomings regarding the organisms' initiatives toward strengthening their communications and interactions with media and civil society organizations: many senior officials can feel discouraged from pursuing those activities, precisely due to their controversial, "political" character.

## Conclusions

The first conclusion of the present study is that normative arguments against autonomous organisms must be taken seriously. As outlined above, supporters of autonomous organisms in Mexico have sometimes dismissed critical arguments by pointing out that they are based on wrong or biased factual assumptions. However, the key arguments deployed by critics are *normative*, predicated on specific interpretations of democratic principles. The notion, generally assumed by critics, that majoritarian popular will is the fundamental source of democratic legitimacy, cannot be considered wrong or factually mistaken. Even if we do not agree with this normative conception of democracy, it is logically consistent, and quite extended in Latin America (Caramani, 2017).

Moreover, our results show that public officials serving at autonomous organisms in Mexico are widely aware of the normative arguments around their institutions, and that this awareness affects how they perceive their work and, most significantly, it influences their assumed norms and values about public policy authority. Despite hostile criticism in the media, informants expressed a strong self-confidence as regards their institutional role. On this specific matter, senior officials showed the most agreement: twenty from twenty-three informants declared that autonomous organisms should be in charge of

public policy decisions in their areas of competence. Interviews indicated, furthermore, that this self-assurance is connected to the fact that autonomous organisms have been established by constitutional amendment.

The impact of constitutional legitimacy leads to our second conclusion. We observe, in response to the question we formulated in the introduction above, that the creation of autonomous organisms does not conflict with democratic principles in Mexico. Even if we accept a majoritarian understanding of democracy, as assumed by critics, the granting of autonomy to specific organisms has been certainly a decision of the popular will, as expressed by the Constitution of Mexico, amended for this purpose with the support of ample, qualified political majorities.

In summary, our first two conclusions call attention to normative principles involved in the debate on autonomous organisms, and their impact on the understanding of senior officials about their public policy authority. Then again, the analysis of interviews shows that normative principles also affect the willingness and commitment of senior officials to promote the public reputation of their institutions, and to engage in interactions with civil society organizations. On the one hand, critics of autonomous organisms emphasize that the authorities must be confined to a purely technical role, and thus removed from any matter that can be considered political. On the other hand, the work of autonomous organisms with media and civil society organizations, as expressly mentioned in interviews, can be regarded as a "political" activity. Given the controversial character of anything political in their work, therefore, some senior civil servants are discouraged from promoting interactions with media and civil society organizations, thereby negatively affecting the reputation of their organisms, as well as the openness and participatory character of their public policy procedures.

Our results show a strong and articulate democratic self-understanding among the bureaucratic leadership of autonomous organisms. And yet, a diminished willingness to promote their public reputation, as well as to engage in interactions with civil society organizations, undermines the legitimacy and authority of these organisms, rendering them more exposed to political interference, and reducing social cooperation with public policy implementation. Therefore, our third and last conclusion is that a purely "technical" perception of their work, among senior civil servants, negatively affects the public policy authority and the performance of autonomous organisms in Mexico.

We believe, finally, that the conclusions of the present article can further inform the discussion about autonomous public agencies in other Latin American cases beyond Mexico. The creation of such public organizations in this country has been probably the most widely debated in the region. Nevertheless, other Latin American states have attempted, over the past years, to establish and consolidate similar institutional designs, under different national designations.[8] The challenges confronted in these other cases have been relatively similar to the issues considered here for Mexico.

However, as pointed out recently by Bauer et al. (2021, p. 5), much of the scholarship on public administration reforms continues to avoid issues related to democratic government and political legitimacy, and such an omission affects also studies that focus on societies where transitions to democracy took place in recent decades, such as in Latin America and other regions of the world. The present paper contributes to the conceptual discussion of the democratic legitimacy of independent bureaucratic

authorities, and we hope that our proposal shall be useful for the general theoretical treatment of these issues.

## Notes

1. We translate with "autonomous organisms" the designation employed in Mexico, *organismos autónomos* (*constitucionales*). Independent "authority," "agency," or "commission" are standard terms employed in the literature for this kind of bureaucratic organizations, which have been "freed in principle from party control" (Carpenter, 2001, p. 9). In Mexico, it has been underlined similarly that autonomous organisms are "not subordinated to the political priorities of the government of the day" (Dussauge-Laguna, 2015, p. 226). We use "autonomous" and "independent" as synonyms for the purposes of the present research.
2. The first independent commissions were created during the Progressive Era in the United States (Carpenter, 2001). Rosanvallon (2011) provides a comparative perspective, including France and other European countries. Legal guarantees of bureaucratic independence seek to protect senior leadership from dismissal for political reasons. However, as both Carpenter and Rosanvallon point out, the autonomy of bureaucratic organizations is not assured by mere legal declaration, but rather by their democratic legitimacy—more on this below.
3. Zacka (2022) describes the work of Rosanvallon as one of the main contributions leading political theory to *rediscover* public administration.
4. Regarding the influence of Duguit in Latin America, including on the Mexican constitution of 1917, see Ankersen and Ruppert (2006, p. 96); see also Babie and Viven-Wilksch (2019).
5. Public institutions use multiple non-standard designations for their component administrative units. We standardize designations as follows and translate, accordingly, Spanish terms: divisions are the main administrative units; institutions can have one or more divisions. Areas are secondary units inside divisions; divisions can have one or more subordinate areas. In most cases, key informants interviewed for this article were either directors or deputy directors of autonomous organisms, divisions, or areas. Units outside the hierarchical structure—frequent at independent bureaucratic authorities—we designate as "offices," and the persons in charge as "office managers."
6. Aberbach (1990) thoroughly explored contact patterns between representatives of diverse organizations as an indicator for the strength of institutional connections; we use a simplified four-point scale based on Aberbach: we define "frequent" as one contact weekly at least, "regular" as one or two contacts monthly, "occasional" as two or three contacts yearly, and "never or almost never" as one contact yearly or less.
7. Contacts with civil society representatives can be controversial for civil servants in Mexico, as we will discuss below, because this activity is perceived as "political." Around controversial issues, it is a well-known resource for interview questions to refer to behavior by "indeterminate colleagues" of respondents (Sandhu et al., 2011, p. 219).
8. Among relevant national cases in the region, see, for the case of Chile, Vergara Blanco, 2018; for Brazil, see Correa et al., 2019; for Perú, see Orihuela et al., 2021.

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