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**Votes, Drugs and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico. By Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-108-79527-2.**

Howard Campbell  
*University of Texas at El Paso*

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pp. 161-163

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***Votes, Drugs and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico.* By Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-108-79527-2. Maps. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. vii, 349. \$21.49.**

Review by Howard Campbell  
University of Texas at El Paso

Rampant criminal violence is the most pressing problem in Mexico today. Each year more than 30,000 Mexican succumb to homicides, many of them linked to organized crime and drugs. Trejo and Ley argue that politics are a primary cause of this violence. I agree, as would most Mexicans I have known.

So how did political problems contribute to the vast scale of drug-related murder? According to the authors, a “gray zone of criminality” in which political actors and outright criminal actors collude is the source of much of the violence in Mexico. This was the case for much of the twentieth century during which the country was essentially a one-party state until the democratic opening. However, the transition to a more real electoral democracy in Mexico in 2000, not only did not resolve the problems of criminal violence, but even exacerbated them.

“Post-authoritarian” Mexico, although no longer dominated by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), was even more violent than what came before it. That is the case, per Trejo and Ley, because as the PRI released its grip over elections and federal, state, and regional control, criminal wars broke out as drug cartels, now not protected by the patronage of the PRI-*gobierno*, formed private militias which became the primary means of asserting power and control instead of the previous system of graft, patronage, and state-cartel collusion. Drug cartels began to murder their political opponents, and although lacking explicit political ideologies, installed themselves and their proxies as the *de facto* regional authorities. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the one-party state was mirrored by the fragmentation of criminal organizations, which moved from being a united federation of sorts to out-of-control warring cartel and gang factions and sub-factions that fought between and among themselves

and produced staggering casualties. Sadly, the freer environment post-autocracy, coupled with the lack of real reform of the military and police forces, led to a competitive environment of illegal commerce and political arenas that exacerbated violence and essentially civil war-like conditions.

The strongest part of the book and its primary contribution is in terms of theorizing and explaining the role of formal politics in the creation and evolution of criminal networks and the ways organized crime groups and individuals become political actors. Another key contribution is the deeply researched and convincingly explained account of and the reasons why criminal wars break out in post-authoritarian democracies such as Mexico, and how and why they intensify and expand. Valuable case studies of Jalisco, Michoacán, Chihuahua, Guerrero, Baja California, and other criminal hotbeds bolster the arguments. Nonetheless these revealing case studies suffer the limitations of a generalized perspective, far from the ground and the actual people involved in the violence.

Moreover, a clear limitation of the book is the failure to interview any cartel or gang members from the “gray zone of criminality.” Instead, the usual talking heads—high-ranking government officials, journalists, politicians, law enforcement officials, NGO leaders, victims, religious authorities, etc.—get their say. One may counter that talking to criminals is dangerous and they are notoriously unreliable. My view is that some risk is necessary to obtain deep knowledge of the “gray zone,” and “criminals” are no more or less inherently untrustworthy than politicians (perhaps a belly laugh is warranted). In this book, the “gray zone,” although heavily discussed, remains too gray. For greater insight into the criminal zone, we may want to turn to other recent studies, such of those as James Creechan’s *Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds: The Transformations of Mexico’s Narco Cartels* (2021), or Benjamin Smith’s *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade* (2021), on the history of the drug business in Mexico.

These caveats aside, this is a solid, thoroughly conceptualized study which, in addition to its main arguments, provides many minor insights into the problems of the political/criminal intersection. Among these is the need to shift from a primary focus on either national or local (municipal) politics to understand how states have become a main battleground for the expansion or narco-control. Rotation from one party to another at the

state level in Mexico broke the existing chains of graft and corruption leading to outright competition among political and criminal groups and civil strife. Central players in this transition, according to Trejo and Ley, were state-level judicial police who as “state specialists in violence” set the tone for the spiraling violence as criminal groups, aligned with distinct political factions, realigned. This perspective is critical to understanding the problems of Mexico today. The book is sure to become a staple of graduate seminars and undergraduate courses concerned with Mexican politics, drug trafficking, and the relationship between formal politics and criminal violence.