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Cabal Lopez, M.A.

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“Early centralizers: Inter-provincial rivalry and elite divisions in the Yucatan Peninsula”

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Manuel Cabal
Leiden University
m.a.cabal.lopez@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract. Why are countries born with greater state capacity in some regions of their territory than others? In the developing world, state institutions often extend only to core areas, while peripheral regions are governed through intermediaries who shape the reach of national bureaucracies. This article argues that inter-provincial rivalry can drive successful state centralization in the periphery. I compare the neighboring provinces of Campeche and Yucatan in post-revolutionary Mexico, where Mexico City’s first major centralizing project (mass primary education) met starkly different responses: in Campeche, local bosses embraced national schools early and consistently, whereas in Yucatan they resisted and obstructed them. I show that Campeche’s early centralization resulted from a deal with the center (support for direct rule in exchange for protection against Yucatan’s long-standing regional dominance) made possible by a critical antecedent (Campeche’s nineteenth-century split from Yucatan) that produced chronic elite divisions. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, I contrast this power-relational explanation with an alternative based on pre-existing subnational infrastructural capacity. Moving beyond national-level accounts of Latin American state formation, the article highlights how national-subnational bargaining within ruling coalitions shapes the spatial trajectories of state-building inside countries.

Keywords. State building; Subnational politics; Education reform; Latin America.

Note for workshop participants. This is the very first iteration of this paper.¹ Target journals: specialized in comparative politics (e.g., Comparative Political Studies) or Latin American studies (e.g., Latin American Politics and Society). All suggestions and comments welcome.

¹ The draft’s writing was partially edited using Perplexity.ai

1. Introduction

Recent research on state capacity shows that (a) states' infrastructural power in the developing world varies enormously across territory and over time, (b) explanations must consider interactions between the center and "territorial actors," not just central authorities, and (c) even though historical legacies strongly shape current institutions, the origins of state capacity may differ from its contemporary drivers (Giraudy & Luna, 2017; Harbers & Steele, 2020). In Latin America, we now have substantial evidence on contemporary within-country institutional variation, but systematic work on state formation periods remains relatively scarce, especially compared to other regions.²

I address this gap by examining the centralization of education after the Mexican Revolution (1920–1940). Mexico is a particularly revealing case because centralized institutions varied widely across provinces during its two main state-building cycles: the late-nineteenth-century liberal reforms and the early-twentieth-century revolution.³ National education, in particular, defies straightforward explanation. Heat maps of national schools per capita across provinces show that the initial expansion in 1925 lacked any clear geographic pattern.⁴ Schooling provision did not cluster around Mexico City, the seat of the national bureaucracy. This absence of spatial concentration persisted over the following decade and eventually gave way to a reversal: by 1940, federal schooling was disproportionately concentrated in peripheral provinces rather than in those closest to the capital.

However, the progression was highly irregular across time, as provinces did not follow uniform paths of incorporation. Their trajectories are nonlinear and, at times, contradictory. For

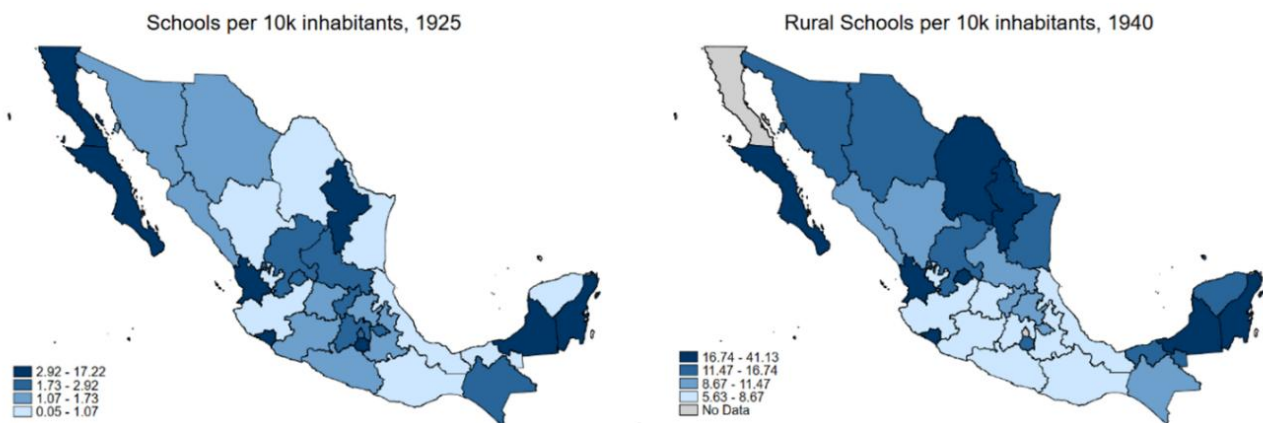
² There are exceptions like Garfias (2018) and Sanchez Talanquer (2020).

³ Throughout the article, I use the term "province" in lieu of (federative) states, to avoid confusing with the more general term "state". For the national level, I either use the adjective "federal" or "national" indifferently.

⁴ Data: federal schools in rural areas per 10,000 inhabitants. Rural areas refers to towns of at most 2,500 inhabitants.

instance, Chiapas (Mexico's southernmost state bordering Guatemala) experienced substantial federal school expansion in the 1920s, followed by deceleration and even school closures in the 1930s (Lewis, 2005). By contrast, Yucatan, also in the south, saw almost no federal presence in the 1920s but became a major recipient of investment in the following decade. Other states, such as Campeche in the south and Morelos, Colima, and Aguascalientes nearer to Mexico City, exhibit relatively stable and continuous expansion over the entire period. These divergent regional trajectories call for explanation.

Figure 1. National schools (per 10 thousand inhabitants) in rural areas



Why study education? Public primary schooling is a near-universal public service and a core instrument of modern statecraft. Since the nineteenth century, states have typically centralized education governance, making it a defining feature of state-building. Yet, as with many state institutions, centralization has not produced uniformity. On the contrary, centralized governance has generated substantial institutional variation across countries (Waldner, 1999; López-Alves, 2000). One key dimension of this variation is the uneven territorial reach of the state (Soifer, 2008).

The post-revolutionary state placed special emphasis on cultural projects, particularly the expansion of primary education (Vaughan, 1997). The American philosopher John Dewey

exalted the efforts of the Mexican Revolution as a major experiment in social transformation, comparable to contemporaneous efforts in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Revolutionary elites pursued multiple goals—economic transformation, nation-building, and social “defanatization”—through diverse pedagogies and institutional strategies. Yet one feature remained constant: marked territorial unevenness in state presence, a pattern widely observed across Latin America (Harbers & Steele, 2020) and the Global South more broadly (Giraudy & Luna, 2017; Beramendi & Rogers, 2022).

This article asks: *why do states develop greater capacity in some regions of their territory than in others?* I propose a novel explanation for subnational variation in state-building centered on a critical antecedent: the territorial split of one province from another. Using inductive process tracing (Mahoney, 2015), I evaluate this argument against a prominent alternative that emphasizes pre-existing *subnational* state capacity (Ziblatt, 2006; Gerring et al., 2011).

The question is motivated by a puzzle. The neighboring southeastern states of Campeche and Yucatan share important demographic, geographic, and historical characteristics, yet followed sharply divergent paths in the post-revolutionary state-building process. Campeche experienced earlier, deeper, and more sustained centralization than most provinces, facilitated by a segment of its political class that collaborated with the national authorities. By contrast, Yucatan's bureaucracy was centralized later and only partially. This divergence is puzzling not only because of the provinces' structural similarities, but because their political elites were initially aligned and similarly skeptic of central intervention.

I argue that Campeche's divergence cannot be understood without considering the relational context between the two provinces. A critical antecedent is Campeche's mid-nineteenth-century separation from Yucatan, after which Yucatan's elites repeatedly threatened

Campeche's control over political authority and economic rents. This persistent external pressure generated divisions within Campeche's political class. The federal center exploited these divisions, negotiating with one faction to advance centralization in exchange for protecting local rents from Yucatan's encroachment.

These bargains were struck during periods of economic downturn, which weakened provincial capacity and created openings for central intervention. However, economic vulnerability—related to the main rival explanation (Ziblatt, 2006; Gerring et al., 2011)—cannot account alone for the divergence. While such vulnerability is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient. Only in combination with sustained elite fragmentation—rooted in the province's historical split from Yucatan—does it explain Campeche's early and durable incorporation into the post-revolutionary state.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the argument and situates it within the literature. Section 3 discusses the rival explanation based on subnational institutional capacity. Section 4 examines the cases of Campeche and Yucatan, with particular attention to Campeche's trajectory of early centralization.⁵ Section 5 concludes.

2. Explaining the Centralization Trajectories

2.1 Concepts

The subnational variation under analysis concerns the *trajectories* of bureaucratic centralization, specifically the shift from indirect to direct rule in the context of primary. This process entails local centers of power ceding competences and spaces that subtract provincial autonomy. In Latin America's context of territorially dispersed political power (Mazzuca, 2021),

⁵ The reasons for Yucatan's late incorporation into the post-revolutionary state are outside the scope of this article.

state-builders pursued direct rule through two main strategies: deploying centralized bureaucracies (Soifer, 2015) and absorbing subnational bureaucratic structures into national authority (Diaz-Cayeros, 2006).

In this setting, “deployment” refers to the hiring of federally controlled teachers to establish rural schools. This strategy expanded state presence beyond urban areas, where pre-existing subnational school systems had been largely confined. “Absorption,” by contrast, denotes the transfer of administrative control over existing subnational school systems to the national government, including their daily operations.

Given these instruments, the trajectories of centralization vary along distinct patterns. During Mexico’s post-revolutionary reconstruction (1921–1940), (at least) two ideal types emerge:

1. **Early centralizers**, where centralization occurred early, deeply, and consistently across policy domains.
2. **Late centralizers**, where centralization was late and uneven across policy domains.

These trajectories can be understood along three dimensions: tempo, depth, and geographic domain. “Tempo” refers to the rhythm or the ups and downs of incorporation into the national bureaucracy. “Depth” refers to the presence of centralized bureaucracy and its effective control by the national authorities. And the “geographic domain” indicates whether the centralization happened in rural or urban areas, which had different logistics and political processes.

Reframed in these terms, the question becomes: *why do provinces follow different trajectories of centralization?* More precisely, *why does bureaucratic centralization occur earlier, more deeply, and more consistently across domains in some regions than in others?*

2.2 Explanation

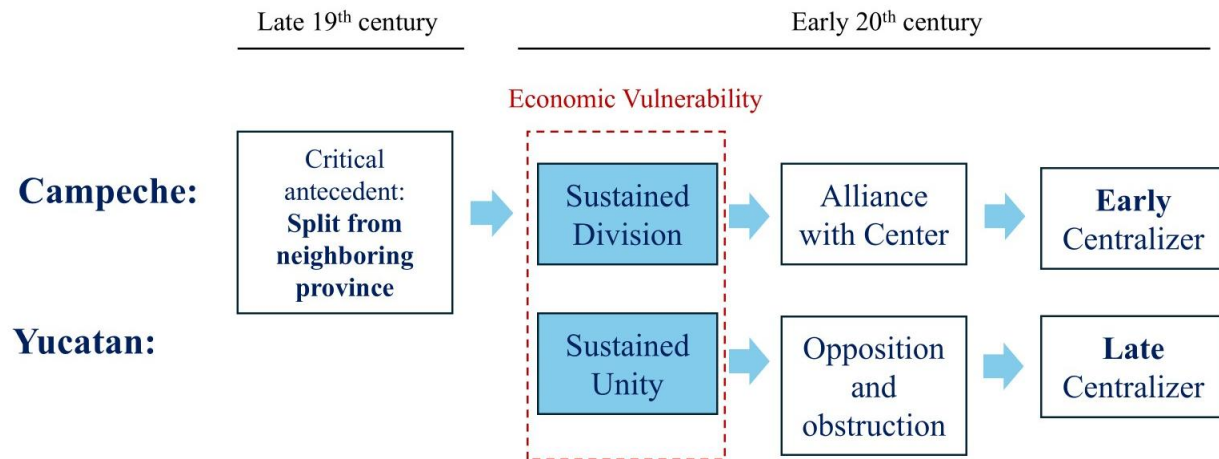
I explain Campeche's divergence from Yucatan as the result of the interaction of two factors. First, *sustained* divisions within the provincial elite enabled the center to co-opt factions and incorporate them into the national political system on its own terms. For this mechanism to operate, elite fragmentation must be durable: it requires an underlying, persistent source of conflict that allows the center to play factions against one another. As Yucatan illustrates, while ruling coalitions may fracture for various reasons, they also have strong incentives to reunify—above all, to defend their prerogatives against the center's economic and political projects.

Second, the center must find a good moment to strike a deal with a faction. In Campeche, this opportunity arose during an economic downturn that rendered the provincial government fiscally vulnerable, opening the door to bargaining with the local bosses. Each factor is necessary but not sufficient on its own; only in combination do they account for Campeche's trajectory. Together, they form an INUS condition for early centralization.⁶

⁶ INUS stands for a complex explanation comprising multiple variables, where each variable is Insufficient by itself, but it is a Necessary part of an explanation. In turn, the explanation (i.e. the combination of variables) is Unnecessary but Sufficient for causality (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

Figure 2 summarizes the proposed explanation.

Figure 2. Explanation for early centralization



Where do the two variables in my explanation originate? Both Yucatan and Campeche faced structural vulnerability due to the long-term decline in agricultural commodity prices since the late nineteenth century. Two shocks intensified this vulnerability: the disintegration of national markets in the 1920s following the Revolution and World War I, and the global downturn triggered by the 1929 crash. Because both economies depended heavily on agricultural exports, these shifts affected them similarly. Yet only in Campeche did elite divisions become chronic, owing to a critical antecedent (Slater & Simmons, 2010): its mid-nineteenth-century separation from Yucatan.

This antecedent operates as a “historical cause” (Pierson, 2011). Although the original conflict over the territorial integrity of the Yucatan Peninsula faded, it generated a persistent pattern—an enduring rivalry between the two provinces’ political classes. This rivalry was asymmetric: Yucatan’s elites acted *predatorily*, while Campeche’s behaved *defensively*.

Since the split, Yucatecan elites have repeatedly sought to appropriate Campeche’s political and economic resources. Before the Revolution, the key stakes were public-sector rents, such as control over the port of Campeche City. After the Revolution, with the rise of mass

politics, leadership of labor and peasant organizations became additional sources of power. In response, Campeche's elites recurrently aligned with the federal center to counter Yucatan's regional dominance and secure their own access to rents and political resources.

2.3 Intervention

My explanation builds on and extends existing accounts of state formation. In Western Europe, central rulers gradually transformed provincial patrimonial strongholds into modern bureaucracies, driven by the need to extract resources to wage war (Tilly, 1990). In Latin America, however, state formation unfolded in a different international context, where weak states operated within an established world capitalist system and in the shadow of great powers. As a result, provinces were often incorporated but not fundamentally transformed by the center (Mazzuca, 2021). While Mazzuca's framework captures broad regional differences, it cannot explain variation in center-province interactions or their institutional consequences within countries.

Soifer (2015) introduces inter-city rivalry as a determinant of state-building outcomes, a mechanism analogous to mine insofar as these cities function as provincial capitals. However, in his account, such rivalries tend to hinder centralization, since state-builders are embedded in one of the competing cities. By contrast, I show that under different conditions, subnational rivalries can facilitate centralization.

My explanation also builds over Diaz-Cayeros's (2006) insight that Mexico's post-revolutionary party-state emerged as the center "bought off" provincial bosses through patronage and electoral benefits, assembling a broad governing coalition that enabled (fiscal) centralization. However, Diaz-Cayeros emphasizes the role of a national party as a mechanism of credible commitment, which fully emerged *after* my period of analysis. I shift attention to an earlier

period, when key sectors (notably, education) were already being centralized, and when the party itself remained endogenous to state-building. Central bureaucrats were instrumental in assembling the coalition that would later underpin the party-state.

State centralization thus unfolded through a sequence of staggered bargains, beginning in provinces where local coalitions were easiest to divide. Where elites were unified—whether under a party or a dominant strongman—centralization happened the latest (Cabal, 2023). But this raises a prior question: why were some provincial elites more susceptible to division and co-optation than others? This article provides an answer.

The role of provincial elites as intermediaries shaping the implementation of national policies in Mexico is well established. Under Porfirio Díaz, the regime exploited elite divisions to secure compliance from otherwise resistant local bosses (Meyer, 1977). After the revolution, Grindle (1980) documented their role of policy brokers in the 1970s, and Giraudy (2015) uncovered their how democratization rejuvenated their mediating functions in the 2000s. Beyond Mexico, similar dynamics appear in studies of Brazil's military regime (Hagopian, 1996) Yet there is surprisingly little theory explaining (a) variation in these territorial intermediaries and (b) how such variation shapes institutional outcomes during state formation.

My explanation is close to the “state in society” theories of the state. Boone (2003), for example, shows how central institutions are shaped by local power configurations, particularly in rural areas. In Mexico, village-level dynamics clearly mattered (e.g., Rus, 1994; Rubin, 1997). But the “local” is multi-layered. Provincial political elites—typically organized around governors—stood at the apex of dense pyramids of informal power (Knight, 2005). Explaining subnational variation in state-building therefore requires analyzing how these apex political elites relate to the center.

3. An Alternative Explanation

What alternative explanations might account for Campeche's divergence from Yucatan? I set aside from the outset accounts based on the selective allocation of resources driven by electoral incentives (e.g., Magaloni, 2006; Díaz Cayeros et al., 2016; Treisman, 2001). First, this literature applies to contexts in which mass electorates are already incorporated into the political system. During the post-revolutionary reconstruction, however, electoral politics remained largely urban, where only about a third of the population resided.

Second, and more importantly, electoral frameworks presume a demand-driven logic in which public officials distribute resources to secure political support. By contrast, educational expansion in this period was broad rather than targeted, aimed at embedding citizens within institutionalized relationships with the state (Albertus et al., 2018), as the political economy literature acknowledges (Paglayan, 2024). This was less a process of distributive exchange than one of "inward conquest" (Ansell & Lindvall, 2020) or the "internal conquest of space" (Beramendi & Rogers, 2022, p. 26).

A more relevant alternative is offered by Ziblatt (2006) and, especially, Gerring et al. (2021), who explain (cross-national) centralization patterns through variations in subnational state capacity. In this view, central authorities impose their institutions where subnational units lack the capacity to govern effectively. This perspective aligns with the Mexican case and Latin America more broadly. Despite a strong federalist consensus (Mazzuca, 2021), national leaders have historically expanded central authority in response to the institutional weakness of subnational governments, particularly municipalities (Arnaut, 1994).

Although developed to explain cross-national variation, this logic can be extended to the subnational level. It implies that central authorities would be less likely to intervene in provinces

that already exhibit a “statelike form of rule”, and more likely to do so where “stateness” is lacking (Gerring et al., 2021, p. 380).

To what extent can we distinguish Campeche from Yucatan using this explanation? Theoretically, Gerring et al.’s framework assumes that the center unilaterally imposes centralized institutions on subordinate units. This assumption travels poorly to the Latin American context, where national integration was largely negotiated rather than imposed. The region lacked the enduring geopolitical rivalries that, in Western Europe, produced the development of Weberian bureaucracies (Mazzuca 2021). In Mexico, revolutionaries certainly subdued peripheral provinces militarily (Knight, 1986), but conquering territory is a far cry from building functioning state institutions. A relational model of negotiated power between center and provinces is more appropriate here.⁷

Empirically, as the case studies below show, crises in subnational public finances coincide with moments of centralization. Where fiscal capacity was insufficient to sustain provincial school networks, Gerring et al.’s account satisfies the timing criterion for causality: economic weakness and centralization overlapped. Yet a focus solely on subnational capacity cannot explain why Campeche was initially as wary of federal authority as Yucatan, prior to the nationwide deployment of federal schools in 1925. Both provinces had suffered economic slowdown since the revolutionary wars and the end of World War I, but only after Yucatan’s strongman exited the scene (in 1923) did a faction of Campeche’s bosses become a compliant ally of the center.

Moreover, the two provinces reacted differently once fiscal crises hit. Yucatan accepted the arrival of national schools in 1931, amid a severe financial crisis, yet refused to relinquish

⁷ For instance, Levi (1981) and Diaz-Cayeros (2006)

control over its subnational education system. Campeche, by contrast, ceded its school system to the center in the early 1930s with little resistance and without a comparable fiscal collapse. While many provinces struggled to pay their bureaucracies, Yucatan was one of only two to receive a full federal financial rescue.⁸

This article addresses the limits of Gerring et al.'s institutional theory of direct rule by offering a more complex explanation. I retain subnational weakness (economic vulnerability) as a necessary condition but combine it with a critical antecedent that shaped Campeche's elite incentives to strike a bargain with the center and accept an early transition to direct rule.

4. Empirics

4.1 Education Centralization

Public education was part of a broader effort to centralize public administration and decision-making. After the armed phase of the revolution circa 1915, public education was mainly a subnational affair, with the national government running schools only in areas of exclusive federal jurisdiction. By the end of the revolutionary cycle of institutional creation, the picture was strikingly different. In 1925, the national government managed less than 20 percent of all primary schools in the country, while subnational governments (federative states and municipalities) managed about 70 percent. In 1942, the national government had almost tripled its share (58.6 percent), and subnational governments managed less than half as before (28.9 percent).

The national authorities achieved this through different means. First, in the early years of centralization (1921-1925), the newly created Secretariat of Public Education (SEP, in Spanish)

⁸ The other one was Veracruz, which had low levels of national schooling until the late 1930s.

offered, the subsidies and technical assistance to province-level governments (federative states) and encouraging the centralization of authority within the province (away from municipalities). Soon, in 1925, SEP unilaterally introduced schools in rural areas and, during 1930s, SEP incorporated many subnational (urban) schools into the national system, and in some cases absorbed entire subnational school systems. In the 1940s, SEP organized all teachers into a single, national union and consolidated in the constitution the role of the national government as chief policymaker.

The latter information matches the image of Mexico's post-revolutionary regime as omnipotent. The recent literature on authoritarian regimes—as well as the older generations of historians (Knight, 1994)—typically translate the striking political stability of the regime into assumptions about the regime's state capacity. In terms of (Mann, 1984), they conflate the regime's "despotic" and "infrastructural" powers.

The piecemeal nature of the centralization process, the changing institutional tactics, and the varied and non-linear paths through which provinces incorporated into the national state are all symptomatic of fundamental weakness of the state apparatus. The Center never fully "overwhelmed" the provinces but achieved a balance of power in favor of the center through a process that started with pacts between central and provincial elites, and eventually the primacy of the center in controlling mass organizations (and thus, the dominant-party regime).⁹

As a result, Mexico's post-revolutionary regime was as infamous for its ability to retain power as it was notoriously dysfunctional. The functioning of the state apparatus depended on party arrangements and lacked a Weberian bureaucracy. Although the national level concentrated

⁹ The term "overwhelming" comes from de (de Figueiredo & Weingast, 2005, p. 127), who classify Mexico as a case in which the federal government took so much power from the provinces that federalism stopped effectively existing. My position is that Mexico indeed became de facto a unitary state, but a unitary governance arrangement should not be confused with an effective state apparatus.

authority and resources in relation to the subnational levels and the Executive dominated the legislative chambers, the regime's ability to project power beyond Mexico City was substantially conditioned by "territorial intermediaries" (Grindle 1980), tamed by the center's ability to provide for mass organizations who sided with the Center against local interests as long as their own interests were defended.¹⁰

In the case of mass education, why did the Center need territorial intermediaries' cooperation? The Center lacked an institutionalized presence to implement policies that require broad societal cooperation. The Center embarked on enforcing mandatory and secular primary education "on the cheap". The school calendar often conflicted with the labor that children supplied in household chores and secular and mixed-gender education was received with skepticism in rural communities. Moreover, communities were asked to donate a land plot and build and maintain the school, while the national government only paid the teacher's salaries and sent school supplies. Thus, the Center needed local political networks to mobilize social cooperation, and this initially gave provincial bosses the upper hand vis-à-vis the Center.

The latter contrasts with the assumption by Gerring et al. (2021) and Ziblatt (2006) that the Center faces the choice to centralize or not centralize by force. The case of Mexico shows that the Center cannot always *forcefully* introduce its bureaucracy, as a substantial degree of local cooperation is needed for implementing civil project like mass education. Thus, the question arises of how the Center achieved cooperation.

¹⁰ To be sure, the post-revolutionary regime deeply transformed Mexico economically, culturally, and politically. However, the state was a "jalousie" rather than a "juggernaut" (Knight 1994) with limited ability to project power across the territory, which often achieved incomplete outcomes and unpredictable consequences. For (Migdal, 1988, p. 9), the post-revolutionary state was a paradigmatic case of states with a puzzling duality: they possess "unmistakable strengths" for penetrating their societies and "surprising weaknesses in effecting goal-oriented social changes".

As in other provinces, the Center allied with the local potentates.¹¹ However, such alliance does not ensure that national policies will be enacted, as national policies conflicted with bosses' interest. In the case of education, the Center not only had a different pedagogical approach, but the presence of national bureaucracy *threatens the bosses' political dominance*. The national bureaucracy can potentially become a powerful political actor with better presence across the provinces' communities. Thus, the bosses have incentives to soft-pedal the mass mobilization required for implementing mass education and even to sabotage it.

If local power configurations, starting at the provincial level, conditioned the effective enactment of national policies, the question remains of where these power configurations come from. This paper contributes to address the origins of these power configurations and how they limit states' ability to project power across territory.

4.2 Choosing cases

Through the "method of difference", I selected the neighboring cases Campeche and Yucatan. They share important similarities that allow to highlight more easily the variable of interest for "inductive theory making" (Van Evera, 1997, p. 23). These two provinces, located in the Yucatan Peninsula, share the same history as they were part of the same province since colonial times. Since independence, the bosses of Campeche City and Merida (Yucatan's capital) have displayed political, economic, and ideological rivalry. Campeche split from Yucatan at the moment of publication of liberal 1857 constitution (and later Yucatan lost the oriental part of the Peninsula to the federal territory of Quintana Roo).

¹¹ Bosses could be newcomers from the revolutionary process, as in Yucatan. Or they could belong to established elites from pre-revolutionary times, as in Colima.

The split was an initiative of Campeche City's bosses but was achieved through an alliance with the national government. President Benito Juárez faced an unmanageable federal arrangement that hindered national coordination and policymaking. To face the situation, Juárez allied with provincial political classes through patronage and privileges, a tactic continued during the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship and the early post-revolutionary reconstruction.

Because of this shared history, Campeche and Yucatán are also substantially similar in their demography, geography, distance from Mexico City, and after the revolution, the ideological profile of their political classes (i.e., progressive and anti-clerical). Importantly, they also share a similar political relationship to the center, as they were *vocally opposed to the centralizing attempts* by the national authorities after the revolutionary flag of local governance was introduced in the 1917 revolution.

Nonetheless, their relationship with the center started to diverge in the early reconstruction years. To understand such divergence we need to divide the period in two phases, based on the institutional tactics SEP used for centralization (see section 4.1 on background information). Table 1 summarizes the events within the cases in Phases I and II.

In Phase I (1925-1931), SEP introduced national schools exclusively in rural areas, where subnational systems had very limited reach. Figure 3 captures the divergence in Phase I. Campeche received a very high level of national schools from the beginning, while Yucatán was one of the latest provinces to start receiving schools. In Phase II (1932-1940), SEP offered provincial governments to take over their school systems (funding and management) temporarily, which became a permanent arrangement. Campeche signed an agreement early in the 1930s (along a third of provinces), but Yucatán never did.

The case studies below elaborate on these ideas.

Figure 3. Location of the cases within the population, according to the trajectory in Phase I.

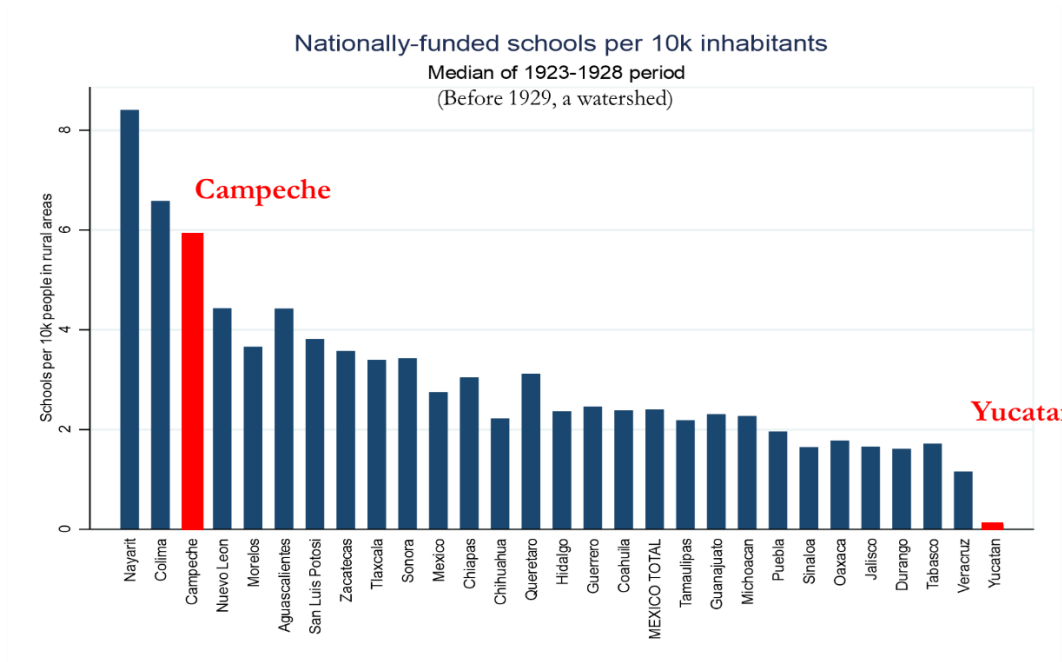


Table 1. DV characterization

Phases by national policy priority:	CAMPECHE Early centralizer	YUCATAN Late centralizer
Phase I: 1925-1931 National schools in rural areas.	Very High.	Very Low.
Phase II: 1932-1940 Centralization of subnational schools (urban areas).	Early.	No centralization.

4.3 Campeche

In Campeche, the national bureaucracy intervened earlier, deeper, and more consistently than Yucatan—and most other provinces. I argue that two conditions were jointly sufficient for this outcome: (a) an environment of economic vulnerability and (b) a fractured provincial political class. Economic vulnerability sets the opportunity for the center to manipulate

Campeche's fractured political class—specifically, a moment of downturn when local public finances are in crisis—but does not explain either what the bosses gain from an alliance with the center nor how the deal is sustained.

What do the bosses gain from an alliance with the center? One faction from the bosses achieves political dominance by expelling the influence of the neighboring bosses that dominate the region (Yucatan's bosses). In turn, such motive is explained by critical antecedent: the province's split from its neighbor at a past period (see

Figure 2 above). At the same time, the province's split from its neighbor provides the commitment mechanism for the Center-Province alliance. Without an hegemonic party that controls electoral positions to reward and punish allies (Diaz-Cayeros, 2006), the Center cannot enforce the alliance. Instead, the Center provides political protection against the neighbor in order to turn Campeche into a reliable ally for centralizing institutions.

The following lines provide details of what happened in Campeche with educational institutions and the local political class in each centralization phase.

Phase I: 1925-1931

During the early 1920s, Campeche was caught between the influence of two neighboring bosses: Felipe Carrillo Puerto to the north (Yucatan) and Tomas Garrido Canabal to the south (Tabasco). Carrillo Puerto was the patron of the provincial capital's (Campeche City) bosses, while Garrido Canabal's influence was circumscribed to the southern area (Fallaw, 2013). The local socialist party, *Partido Socialist Agrario de Campeche* (PSAC), fused with the *Partido Socialista de Yucatan* (PSY) in 1921 to become the *Partido Socialista del Sureste* (PSS). Among the Campeche City elites, there was a faction allied with the center. These were the senators. They were displaced by the Yucatan-sponsored faction (May González, 2010).

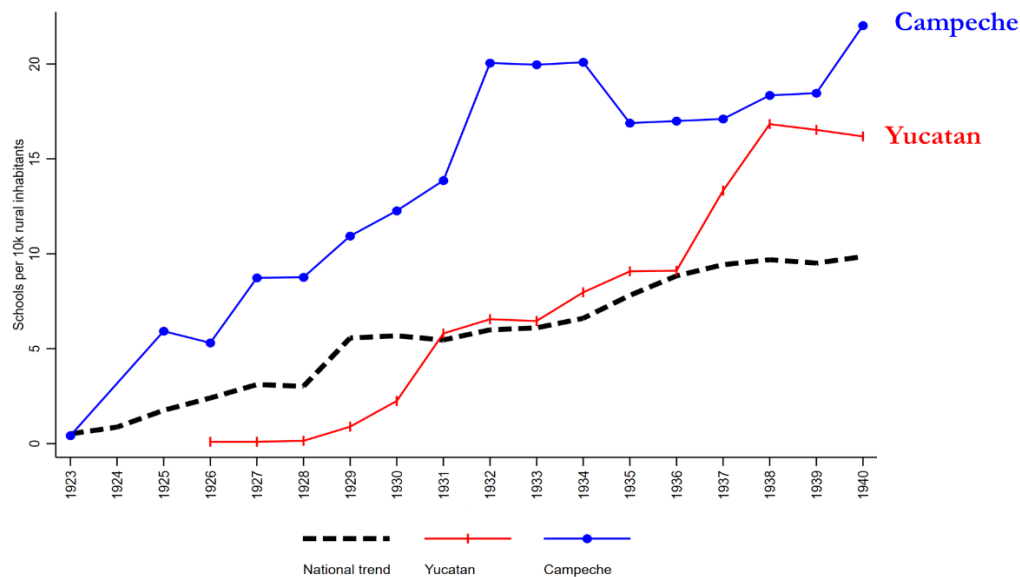
When Carrillo Puerto is assassinated, the division between Campeche's bosses comes to the front. During a moment of disorganization among the Yucatec socialists, the Center sponsors a faction that dominated Campeche politically. The losing faction (Governor Flores) does not disappear immediately. Flores is not killed in Campeche like Carrillo was in Yucatan. Exiting President Obregon sponsors the leader of the other faction (Angel Castillo Lanz) to become governor, while the socialist faction remained as the dominant force in the party. Obregon's successor, President Calles, *uses this division* to ensure the cooperation of Campeche's bosses.

Calles empowers Castillo Lanz, allowing him to take the key positions in the local government, displacing Flores's faction, while Castillo Lanz becomes a "dependent cacique".

Figure 4 below captures Campeche's trajectory through the number of national schools per capita in rural areas. SEP was present in Campeche since the ministry introduced national schools in provinces and consistently remained way above the national trend.¹²

¹² The national trend is simply the total number of national schools in rural areas in the whole country divided by rural population in the country.

Figure 4. Progress of national rural schools in Campeche and Yucatan



Phase II: 1932-1940

During the world economy recession after the 1929 Wall Street crash, many provinces struggled to pay their bureaucracy and fund public services. The national government (with access to international credit) offered to rescue them. Specifically, SEP offered to fund subnational schools in exchange for having the national bureaucracy manage them. These deals were meant to be temporary, but SEP managed to keep them down the road. Thus, subnational schools were de facto nationalized in around a third of provinces.

Campeche was one of only ten provinces to sign the deal.¹³ And by 1940, SEP documents indicate that they were absorbed by the national government. In places, like Chihuahua, the bosses put on a fight (Marak, 2009). But in Campeche there does not seem to have been any contention between the bosses and SEP.¹⁴

¹³ In total, eleven provinces (out of twenty-eight) had their education systems centralized. The eleventh is Colima, which was centralized in the early 1920s (Fell, 1989). Evidence about the other ten comes from...

¹⁴ This statement means that the secondary literature is silent in this respect and that the author has not found primary sources that indicate there was a contention similar to Chihuahua. The specifics of the case would need to be updated if new evidence is found.

The political trajectory of Campeche's bosses suggests that there was indeed no contention, specially when compared to Yucatan. In 1930, the local socialist party disappears and becomes state committee of the center's *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR) (Vega Ali et al., 2008). Campeche's bosses yielded control of all their mass organizations to agents of the center, thus becoming agents themselves. This is not to say that the Campeche bosses are perfect agents of the center. They continually negotiate their alliance, but since the very beginning, they do so in the center's terms. Campeche does not ally anymore with other bosses, they negotiate through their intermittent and fluctuating alliances with local centers of power, including Catholic organizations and bureaucrats (Fallaw, 2013), but without controlling them.

4.4 Yucatan

In Yucatan, educational centralization progressed later and with less depth and consistency than in Campeche. Yucatan was one of latest provinces in which SEP introduced national schools¹⁵ and among those which fully retained their own education system in urban areas. In this paper, I focus on why Campeche diverged from Yucatan, when they could have gone in the same trajectory. Campeche, I argue, could have followed the same path had not been for Carrillo Puerto's assassination in 1923, which broke the *Partido Socialista del Sureste* (PSS).

In Phase I, Yucatan had the lowest level of national schools of all provinces. In Phase II, SEP's rural schools finally took off, but Yucatan's bosses did not lose their subnational education system. Instead, national and subnational schools co-existed in the countryside and subnational schools persisted as the sole source of enrollment in urban areas. I argue that such outcome

¹⁵ Data not shown here. SEP took off in Yucatan later than other provinces, except the Western provinces of Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacan. The latter three are cases similar to Yucatan (in having united and popularly supported provincial bosses) with the aggravating factor of having endured a revolt of Catholic militias against secularizing measures.

cannot be understood solely with the ebbs and flows of provincial public finances. To understand Yucatan's trajectory, we must also take into account the fluctuations in the ruling coalition's cohesion; that is, how united or fractured the bosses were.

Phase I: 1925-1931

Yucatan's bosses started the post-revolutionary reconstruction united around a party with robust social bases, and as Figure 3 shows, the lowest presence of national schools. I argue that SEP failed from entering Yucatan because the national government needed the favor of Yucatan's bosses to maintain control of the region, rather than because the national authority preferred to maintain Yucatan's alleged infrastructural capacity.

To be sure, Yucatan had the strongest rural schooling enrollment of any province in the 1920s (Cabal, 2023).¹⁶ However, it should not be inferred that Yucatan had strong "infrastructural power". Just as the national government, Yucatan built schools "on the cheap". The key for spurring enrollment was party- rather than state-capacity, as Merida needed to persuade communities to cooperate not just with enrollment but material resources.

The assassination of strongman Felipe Carrillo Puerto did not alter the panorama for SEP. Yucatan's ruling coalition experienced turmoil, but the PSS stayed united around another strongman, Bartolome Garcia Correa. This leader was again an ally of the center, but managed to maintain the bosses' upper hand in the province. Garcia Correa eventually fell, and with him, the bosses' power. The PSS mismanagement of public finances and the early-1930s world economy crisis led to a federal bailout of Yucatan's finances. In turn, the bailout coincided with SEP's take-off in the province (see Figure 4 above).

¹⁶ Data not shown here.

Phase II: 1932-1940

While SEP eventually took off in Yucatan, it did so later than most provinces and in a relatively superficial and incomplete fashion. As Table 1. DV characterizationTable 1 indicates, Yucatan retained its subnational schooling system despite receiving a deep financial rescue package from the federal government in the early 1930s. The difference between Campeche and Yucatan, I argue, lies in that the Campeche's bosses had constructed a collaborative relationship with the national government since the 1920s, based on the protection of rents and patronage against the predation from Yucatan's bosses. In contrast, Yucatan's bosses were allies but not agents of the Center, as they had much to lose from cooperating with national policies such as mass education.

Yucatan's ruling coalition fractured with the fall of Governor Garcia Correa, but the coalition eventually regrouped. Not only the bosses shun SEP's offer to cover the costs of subnational education in exchange for centralizing the whole system, but Yucatan's bosses also recovered the management of the nationalized agricultural production. By 1940, provincial bosses across the country, including Yucatan, were incorporated into the post-revolutionary party-state system. However, by maintaining the control of substantial segments of the national coalition's mass bases—such as teachers and peasants—Yucatan's bosses maintained more autonomy than other provinces.¹⁷

¹⁷ An expression is that Yucatan's local party (*Partido Socialista del Sureste*) persists until the early 1940s, without losing its acronym (PSS) even if affiliated to the national ruling party, President Lazaro Cardenas's *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined why states develop greater capacity in some regions than in others by analyzing the centralization of primary education in Campeche and Yucatan after the Mexican Revolution. It has shown that, despite similar structural conditions, these neighboring provinces followed different trajectories of bureaucratic centralization: Campeche became an early centralizer, while Yucatan remained a laggard whose bureaucracy was only partially centralized.

To account for this divergence, the article advanced an explanation based on the interaction between economic vulnerability and a critical antecedent (Campeche's nineteenth-century split from Yucatan) which generated an enduring, asymmetric rivalry between their political classes. This rivalry produced sustained elite divisions in Campeche, which the center exploited during fiscal downturns to co-opt a faction of local bosses and negotiate an early transition to direct rule in education. The analysis thus underscores how relational dynamics between provinces and the center, rather than provincial institutional capacity alone, shaped the timing, depth, and consistency of centralized institutions.

The article contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it shifts attention from cross-national institutional differences in state formation to within-country variation, showing that even under a single national regime, centralization can proceed along distinct trajectories across provinces. Second, it rethinks institutional accounts that emphasize subnational capacity (Ziblatt, 2006; Gerring et al., 2011) by proposing that economic weakness is a necessary but insufficient condition for direct rule. Only when fiscal vulnerability coincides with durable elite fragmentation--in this instance, rooted in historical inter-provincial rivalry--does early and sustained centralization become possible.

Finally, the article also brings to the front an overlook variable: the internal politics of the ruling coalition as a driver of institutional outcomes. While existing work has focused more on interactions between the state and societal actors such as landlords, this analysis shows that the same national state can adopt different territorial strategies of direct rule depending on how provincial *allies* are positioned vis-à-vis one another and the center. These dynamics echo Migdal's (1988) insight that states in the Global South rule through allied intermediaries whose cooperation and resistance shape how centralized institutions take form. An important implication is that we should rethink peripheral regions. Rather than being uniformly zones of weak penetration,¹⁸ they can experience early and deep centralization when the political conditions within the ruling coalition align.

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¹⁸ For this point, see Harbers & Steel (2020).

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