

# Public Opinion, Organized Crime, and National Security In Mexico

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Rashide Frías/Cuartoscuro

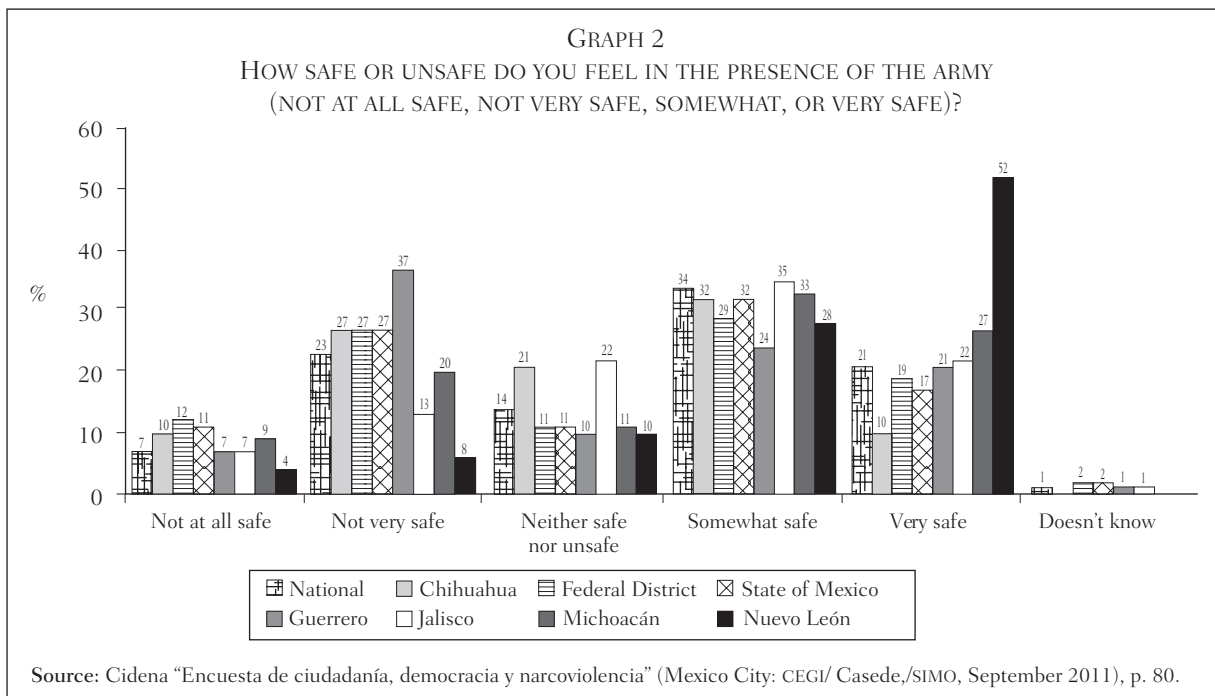
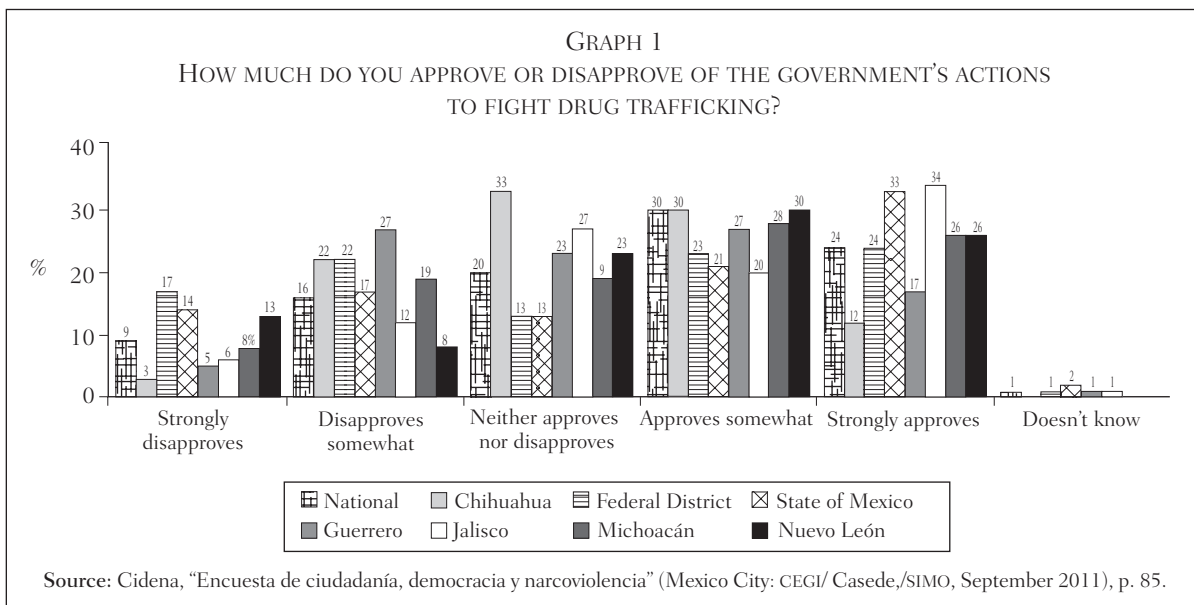
Mexico will be holding federal elections July 1, 2012, including the balloting for the presidency. So, public opinion polls as a means to ascertain what political issues interest the population will become more important in the coming months. Also, debates about matters important in national life are beginning to develop, and one is the discussion on security. There is no doubt that the fight against organized crime has been the distinguishing issue of President Felipe Calderón's administration. Also, both in Mexico and the United States there are those who affirm that the fight against the drug cartels will continue to steer coop-

eration between the two countries no matter who the next president of Mexico is.

The aim of this article is to review Mexican society's perceptions about federal actions against crime and their effects on democracy and the rule of law. To do that, I will use the results from the "Survey on Citizenship, Democracy, and Drug-Trafficking-Related Violence" (Cidena, 2011), carried out by the Collective for the Analysis of Security with Democracy (Casede), Intelligence Systems in Markets and Opinion (SIMO), and the Panamerican Institute of High Entrepreneurial Leadership (IPADE) Study Center for Institutional Governance (CEGI). In that exercise, 7 416 people were surveyed, both nationally and specifically in the states of Chihuahua, Mexico, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Nuevo León, and in Mexico City's Federal District.<sup>1</sup>

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THE FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME

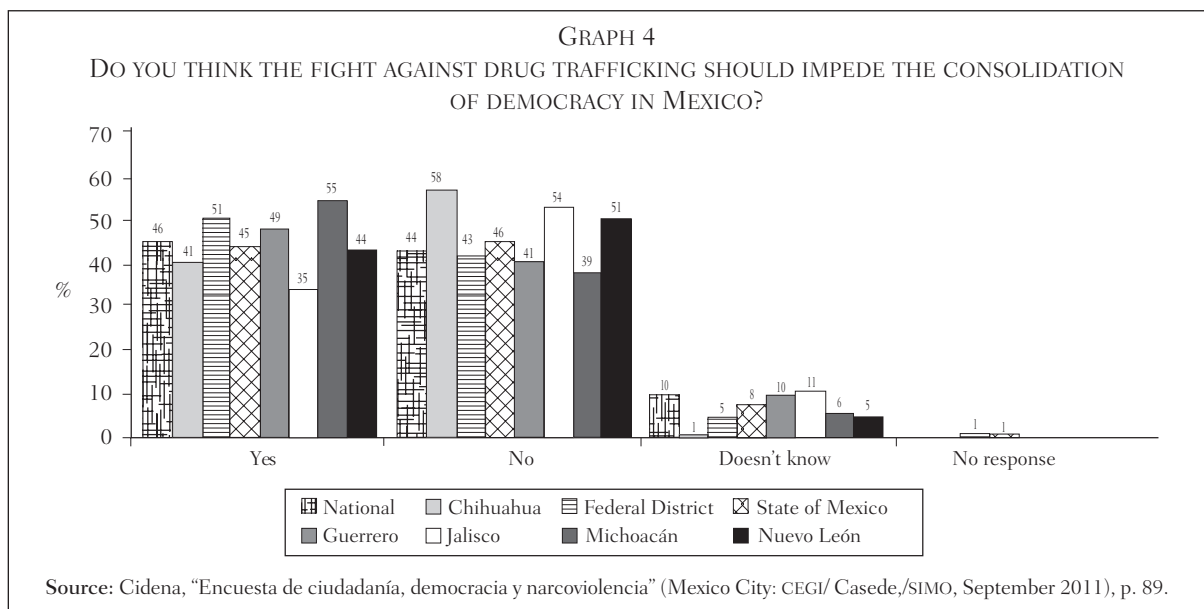
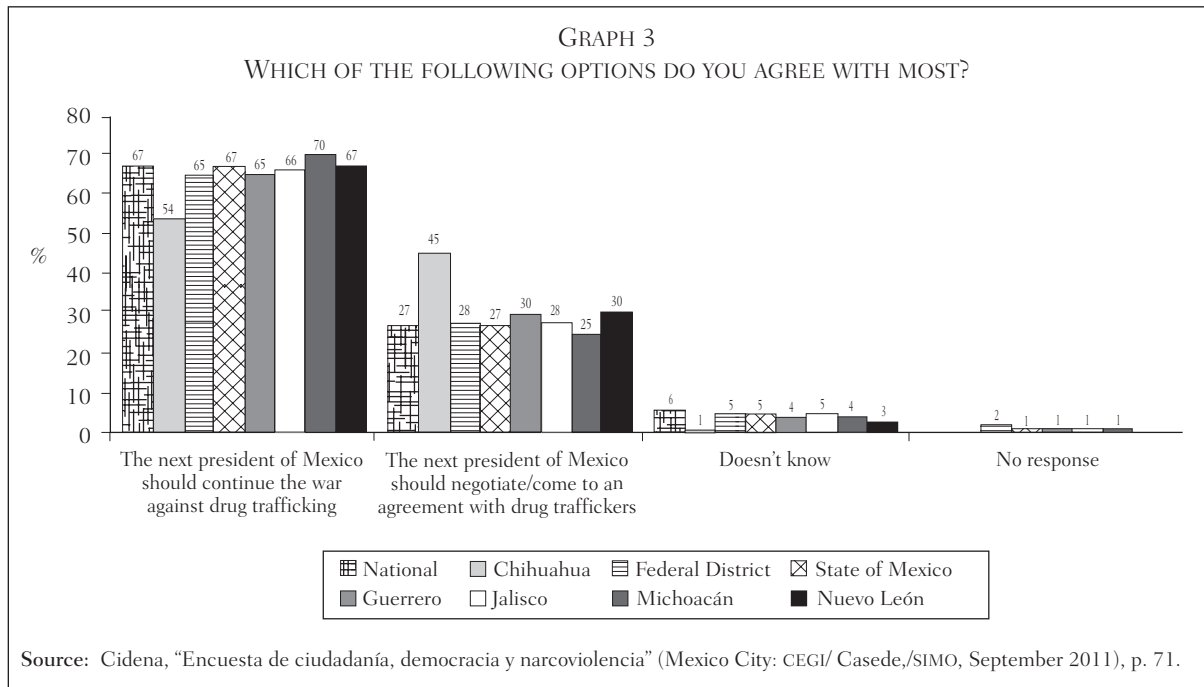
In the five years the strategy against organized crime has been in place in Mexico, people in different intellectual circles have questioned its efficacy and even its very nature.<sup>2</sup> For some, the strategy has failed because it is based on the intensive use of the armed forces, and, year after year, this has caused an increase in violence expressed in the number of homicides linked to organized crime, which totaled about 50 000

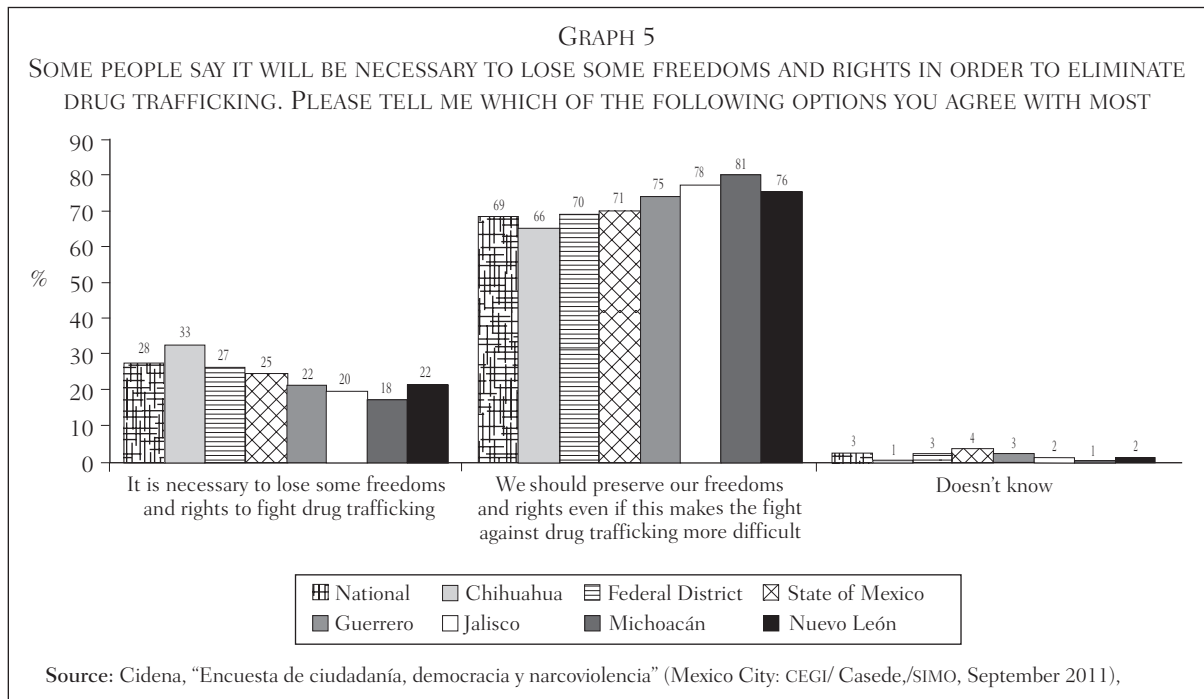
in December 2011. For others, the strategy is oriented to attacking the structural causes that generate that violence, that is, the dispute over territorial control among drug cartels, and in this area, the government has gotten important results, if we take into account the number of capos captured.

Broadly speaking, the strategy has been based on deploying the armed forces in states like Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Baja California, Nuevo León, Michoacán, and Veracruz. The army has mainly carried out public security tasks and, in some cas-

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es, like Tijuana and the rest of Baja California, investigative activities. Despite the arguments that government actions have sparked an explosion of violence, Graph 1 shows that public opinion tends to approve them for the fight against drug trafficking. At a national level, 54 percent of the population approves these actions a great deal or somewhat, while 25 percent disapproves strongly or somewhat.





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When asked whether the presence of the army increased a feeling of safety, 55 percent of those polled answered that they felt somewhat or very safe, while 30 percent said they felt not at all or not very safe (see Graph 2). It should be added that in Nuevo León, 80 percent of those polled said they felt somewhat or very safe, the highest levels of this response. In the state of Guerrero, by contrast, 44 percent of the population said they felt not at all or not very safe.

The fact that this percentage is registered in Guerrero can be explained by historical factors that have very little to do with the federal strategy against organized crime. Since the 1960s, military personal deployed in that state, mainly in the mountains, have perpetrated abuses of power and violated human rights.

In other words, more than 50 percent of the population surveyed not only approved the actions of the federal government to combat drug trafficking, but they also felt safer

because of these actions in the places where the deployment of the armed forces is key. In that context, 67 percent nationwide thinks the next president of Mexico should continue with the war against drug trafficking. It is worth mentioning that Michoacán has the highest and the lowest percentages in the responses to this question (see Graph 3).

Based on these figures, we can observe that in the realm of public opinion, the federal government's actions to fight organized crime and guarantee the population's security have more than acceptable approval levels. This is clearer in the states most affected by violence, like Chihuahua or Nuevo León, than in Mexico City's Federal District.

#### DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW

Violence and the perception of insecurity often have negative effects in the population's political behavior. One of these is when they make their political decisions as a function of the primordial need to restore the levels of security needed to carry on daily life. Another is the isolation of the political community, out of fear or mistrust of it. In this kind of scenario, liberties and rights are structural victims because they have an impact on the individual and on society. In a country like

Mexico, where mainly institutional and legal deficiencies have made it impossible to consolidate democracy, the scenario of violence described above is a powerful factor for further impeding that consolidation.

Civil society and public opinion (as a manifestation of the former) should be aware of the effect this factor has for countering the violence through political practices. However, according to the results presented in Graph 4, perceptions are divided around whether drug trafficking can hinder the consolidation of democracy in the country. One outstanding point is that in Guerrero, 55 percent of those polled thought that it could, while in Chihuahua, 58 percent thought it could not. At a national level, the percentages are as follows: 46 percent think that drug trafficking does affect democracy, while 44 percent think it does not. However, it is clear that for the majority of the population in Mexico, the fight against organized crime and guaranteeing national security do not imply a sacrifice of liberties and rights (see Graph 5). It would seem that we are in the presence of a society that, while it does appreciate the freedoms and rights democracy offers, it is not aware of the way in which insecurity and violence affect it.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Cidena 2011 results presented here are only a portion of the 80 questions included in the survey. However, the graphs selected give us certain elements that could be interesting for understanding the context in which the electoral process is developing in Mexico, particularly with an eye to the presidential race.

In the first place, public opinion puts a positive value on the federal government's actions, but clear differences exist between states experiencing the violence and those that are not, which is reflected in the percentages from Chihuahua and Nuevo León, compared to Mexico City. This implies that the violence and the perception of insecurity are decisive factors in the population's political practices in at least two senses, based on what has been presented here.

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On the one hand, the demand for security is also conditioned by immediate results. However, even if there is no drop in the perception of insecurity or violence, the demand for greater security ends up backing actions involving the use of force. On the other hand, this does not imply that any less importance is placed on liberties and rights sanctioned by the national legal system. In other words, support for government actions has the clear limitation of the need to respect individual guarantees and human rights.

Without any doubt, this difference is something that presidential hopefuls must have very clear for the July 2012 elections. It is not enough to include this in their political discourses; it is even more important that they include it in the formulation of concrete security policies that aim to strengthen democracy and not endanger its foundations, even despite public opinion. **NM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This research was made possible thanks to support from the people of the United States through the Agency for International Development (USAID); its content is the responsibility of the institutions and academics in charge of it and does not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or the U.S. government, <http://www.seguridadcondemocracia.org/encuestas/encuestas/encuesta-de-ciudadania-democracia-y-narcoviolenca-cidena-2011.html>.

<sup>2</sup> About this, I recommend Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, Alejandro Hope, Denise Maerker, Ana Laura Magaloni, Héctor de Mauleón, Natalia Mendoza Rockwell, Guillermo Valdés, Joaquín Villalobos, "Nuestra guerra: una conversación," *Nexos en línea*, <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2102417>, as well as the articles by Joaquín Villalobos and Eduardo Guerrero published in the same journal from 2010 to 2012.

