Religion is at once everywhere and nowhere in contemporary Mexican politics. Since the return to democracy in 2000, when the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) ended the long hegemony of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), debates associated with religion, most notably regarding reproductive rights and same-sex marriage, have become increasingly prominent in the public sphere (Blancarte, 2009). While the direct influence of the Catholic Church on Mexican society has diminished in many ways since the 1960s (Loaeza, 2009), most Mexicans consider religion very important to their lives, attend church regularly and express a high degree of confidence in their churches (Inglehart et al., 2014), creating conditions that potentially enable religious political engagement. Mass demonstrations for and against abortion and same-sex marriage, with those opposed often presenting their arguments in explicitly religious terms, have become regular occurrences and politicians on both sides of the ideological spectrum regularly participate in these events.

However, despite its political salience, the relationship between religion and political parties is difficult to pin down. Nowhere is this more evident that in the case of the PAN, which has complex and often ambivalent ties to religion. On the one hand, the party functions as a reliable defender of conservative Catholic policies with regard to abortion and same-sex marriage (Beer, 2017; Beer and Cruz-Aceves, 2018), and its candidates are significantly more religious than those of other major parties (Magaloni and Moreno, 2003; Camp, 2008: 54–55). Moreover, from a historical perspective, Catholic activists played central roles in the formation of the party (Loaeza, 1999), lay Catholic organisations have been an important part of its elite recruitment strategies (Mantilla, 2016), and Catholic social thought is deeply embedded in its doctrine (Blancarte, 2009). On the other hand, the party does not recognise any formal connection to Catholicism or the Catholic Church and has persistently rejected any notion that it is a confessional party (Shirk, 2005). Moreover, the Catholic Church does not provide the PAN with explicit backing (Camp, 1997), and the party does not enjoy a disproportionate appeal among self-identified Catholics (Magaloni and Moreno, 2003; Camp, 1997).

As a result, scholars are often at odds over whether the PAN is a religious party, driven in part by the aspect of the party they choose to emphasise. Camp, emphasising the behaviour of Catholic voters, draws on a wealth of survey data to challenge the notion that there are any
links between the two, conceding only the coincidence of ‘some ideological tenets’ (Camp, 1994: 75). In contrast, Beer, focusing on the role of the party in policy debates, does not hesitate to describes the PAN as a ‘conservative Catholic party’ (Beer, 2017: 50). While other parties have periodically attempted to emphasise religion and appeal to devout voters, they have rarely met with any degree of lasting success. Thus, despite its ambivalent ties to religion, or perhaps because of them, the PAN is consistently at the centre of debates about religion and politics in Mexico.

This situation is the result of the evolution of Mexico’s religious–secular cleavage, its distinctive institutional arrangements and its gradual process of democratisation. It is also a consequence of the preferences of the Catholic Church hierarchy, which seeks policy influence but avoids partisan entanglements (Grzymala-Busse, 2015), and the strategic choices of parties under democracy, whose members have often personal cultivated ties to religious groups and constituencies even as party leaders carefully protect the secular autonomy of their organisations (Loaeza, 1999). Understanding the relationship between religion and political parties thus requires awareness of the long history of religious political mobilisation in Mexico, the ways in which it was transformed by the process of democratisation, and its subsequent evolution under democratic rule. The rest of this chapter explores each of these elements in turn, concluding with a brief analysis of the 2018 presidential election.

**Historical foundations**

Religious cleavages in Mexico run deep. As Kuru points out, *ancien régimes* are often a key factor in shaping modern patterns of religious politics (Kuru, 2009), and Mexico is no exception. Mexico, or New Spain as it was then known, was a crown jewel of the Spanish colonial empire and the Catholic Church played a critical, though often contentious, role in the legitimation and administration of the viceroyalty (O’Hara, 2010). This made the status of the Church a key point of contention in the post-colonial period. Indeed, during much of the nineteenth century Mexico was riven by civil wars between conservatives tied to the Catholic Church and increasingly anticlerical liberals. These post-independence struggles culminated with the period known as the Reforma (1857–1861), when liberals led by Benito Juarez implemented a series of major institutional reforms broadly aimed at separating Church and state and more specifically reducing the social, economic and political influence of the Catholic Church. The subsequent dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz struck a more pragmatic tone, allowing the Church to regain much of its prestige and informal influence even as growing disenchantment with the regime’s economic policies led many Catholics to embrace the ideals and activist stances associated with Catholic social thought (Andes, 2012).

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 reignited partisan struggle over the role of the Catholic Church and cemented the modern secular–religious cleavage (Camp, 1997). The revolution did not initially focus on issues of religion, and its first president, Francisco Madero, allowed the electoral participation of the Partido Católico Nacional (PCN), a party that brought together conservative ultramontanists and rising social Catholics (Andes, 2012). The decision of the PCN to support Victoriano Huerta’s anti-revolutionary coup in 1913, which was also supported by the Catholic hierarchy, contributed to the sharp anticlerical turn of many revolutionary leaders. As a result, after Huerta’s defeat, the PCN was banned and victorious revolutionaries set up one of the most assertively secularist regimes in the world (Kuru, 2009; Fallaw, 2013).

The 1917 Constitution set limits on the number of priests, banned political speech and action by clergy, ended religious education and deprived the Catholic Church of legal standing, placing its finances and property under state control (Fallaw, 2013). In addition, it explicitly banned
confessional parties. Many of these articles were not immediately enforced as struggles among various factions continued to devour the energies of the revolution. However, the anticlericalism of revolutionary leaders like Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, who emerged as the architects of the post-revolutionary era, ensured that these articles would not long remain de jure. When a Catholic activist assassinated Obregón, President Calles (1924–1928) pushed for effective enforcement of the constitution, expelling priests, seizing property and closing churches (Fallaw, 2013).

In response to these developments, Catholics in the conservative Bajío region in central Mexico engaged in a campaign of violent resistance known as the Cristiada (Meyer, 1973). The intensity and duration of the conflict, which raged from 1926 to 1929, cost tens of thousands of lives and involved atrocities by both sides, alarmed the Catholic hierarchy and led it to rein in the Cristeros. Negotiations with the Mexican government led to a cessation of hostilities. However, President Cárdenas (1934–1940) steered Mexico to the left in ways that once again alarmed a broad range of conservatives, liberals and social Catholics. This led to a second, smaller, armed insurrection by Catholics triggered by his administration’s efforts to implement ‘socialist education’ from 1934 to 1938 (Meyer, 2003). Once again, the conflict ended after negotiations between the state and the Catholic hierarchy, this time leading to a more durable peace.

The informal commitment to peaceful coexistence between the Catholic hierarchy and the Mexican state became known as the modus vivendi. There was no official recognition of the Catholic Church, but it would be allowed to effectively govern itself and engage in core functions like education. Open religious political engagement, whether by clergy or party, would remain effectively banned. Mexico’s ruling party, renamed the PRI in 1946, was thus allowed to operate relatively unchallenged by the Catholic hierarchy for decades (Blancarte, 1992).

The modus vivendi was a profound disappointment for many devout Catholics, particularly those associated with the Cristiada. In the Bajío region, the Sinarquista movement arose to challenge the revolutionary state, relying on religious symbols to organise mass protests and eventually organising a political party called Partido Fuerza Popular (PFP) in 1945 (Meyer, 2003). The party, which had limited electoral success, was banned in 1948 after its members placed a black hood over a statue of its old anticlerical foe, Benito Juárez, in Mexico City. Critically, the Catholic hierarchy systematically starved these efforts of support and undermined its leaders, leading to the fragmentation and effective collapse of Sinarquismo by the 1950s (Meyer, 2003). In contrast, Mexican Catholic Action, the umbrella association set up by the hierarchy to oversee lay engagement in society, steered its members away from contentious political action and encouraged spiritual activity. The stability of the modus vivendi and the growing capacity of the Mexican Episcopal Council (CEM) allowed bishops to more effectively coordinate their actions and thus constrain lay attempts to mobilise Catholicism without their consent (Manz, 2012).

The PAN, formed in 1939, reflected the possibilities and constraints of this complex scenario. It was initially designed as a broad anti-Cárdenas coalition that included Catholic activists, liberals, business leaders and disaffected revolutionaries, held together by the skill and influence of its main founder, Manuel Gómez Morín (Mabry, 1973; Shirk, 2005). Abiding by the law and reflecting the diversity of its founding coalition, the party declared itself strictly non-confessional. However, as the PRI moved to the centre and actively sought to co-opt moderate conservatives and business leaders, the PAN’s coalition became increasingly dominated by its Catholic faction (Loaeza, 1999; Shirk, 2005). Religious activists within the party, initially sceptical of political engagement, were won over by the argument that electoral action could be primarily proselytist and serve as a unique avenue to expose ordinary Mexicans to the values and principles of the party (Mabry, 1973: 37–41).

From the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, the party endured largely as a result of its ties to Catholicism, but this reliance was always fraught with tension. The PAN’s ability to appeal to devout Catholics, its informal ties to Catholic Action and other lay movements, and its
alternative programmatic vision rooted in Catholic social thought allowed the party to survive its long ‘journey in the desert’ (Loaeza, 1999), a time when the party was perpetually bankrupt and electorally marginal. However, there were associated costs, as its doctrinal orientation alienated pragmatists and thus cemented its status as a minor party during those decades (Greene, 2007; Mantilla, 2016). The influence of religion within the PAN ebbed and flowed, peaking with the selection of José González Torres, a Catholic intellectual and leader of multiple conservative lay associations, as party president in 1959 (Pérez Franco, 2007: 164). However, even at its height, Catholic influence in the PAN was never hegemonic, as Gómez Morín and other prominent party leaders repeatedly signalled discomfort with the direction the party had taken and undermined the formal authority of González Torres (Loyola Pérez, 2000: 279–284). The pragmatic factions of the PAN worried that the growing salience of religion within the party would limit its electoral effectiveness, eventually forcing the replacement of González Torres and provoking a schism that cost the party a number of prominent youth activists that hoped to align the PAN with Christian Democracy (Fuentes Díaz, 1972).

As a result of these processes, twentieth-century Mexico possessed a religious–secular cleavage and a party rooted in Catholicism, but the salience of religious issues was limited by institutional constraints, partisan strategy and the unwillingness of the Catholic Church hierarchy to enable assertive religious mobilisation. This delicate equilibrium was disrupted by the growing competitiveness of elections in the last decades of the twentieth century, a trend that eventually led to Mexico’s democratisation.

Religion and democratisation

As in other Catholic-majority contexts (Driessen, 2014), the process of democratisation in Mexico transformed the relationship between religion and political parties in profound ways. Increasingly contested electoral contests, often marred by visible fraud, a major constitutional reform of religion–state relations, the growing willingness of the Catholic hierarchy to speak about social, economic and political affairs, and the mounting electoral successes of the PAN combined to increase the salience of religion in Mexican politics (Camp, 1994: 70–72). Yet this combination of factors also contributed to the maintenance of formal differentiation of partisan and religious organisations, such that the PAN and the Catholic Church maintained a careful distance even as they pursued similar goals (Shirk, 2005).

The dominant party regime led by the PRI had always allowed opposition parties to participate in politics, but by means of patronage, institutional design and outright fraud did not allow them to secure more than a handful of seats (Greene, 2007). Limited electoral reforms in 1964 and 1977 marginally expanded the electoral opportunities available to the PAN and other opposition parties, but it was not until the financial crisis of 1982 deprived the PRI of much of its elite support and patronage advantage that meaningful opposition electoral victories became possible (Magaloni, 2006). Many of these businessmen and defectors from the PRI switched to the PAN, where they came to be known as neopanistas and became increasingly powerful within the party (Shirk, 2005). However, it was only the fracturing of the PRI in 1988 that led to the first gubernatorial victory by a PAN candidate (1988) and its first senate seat (1990), both in Baja California.

Electoral participation under hegemony gradually enhanced the PAN’s ability to be a more effective political contender, but also led to conflicts within the party regarding its doctrinal commitments and its role in the hegemonic party system (Mantilla, 2018). Ideologues were often on the losing end of these debates, leading to periodic and symbolically important elite defections. The most visible of these crises came in 1976–1978, when open conflict between ideologues and pragmatists led to the resignation of the party president and prevented the party
from fielding a presidential candidate (Reveles Vázquez, 2002). The process continued with smaller schisms in the 1980s and into the early 1990s that both reflected and contributed to the diminishing influence of doctrinal Catholics within the organisation (Loaeza, 1999; Mantilla, 2016). Together with the influx of neopanistas, this meant that by the 1990s, Catholic doctrines and associational ties had been relegated to a secondary role in the PAN, even as they retained symbolic importance among cadres (Shirk, 2005).

Beyond the PAN, the 1980s were a period of growing Catholic political engagement. The long-simmering pot of Catholic discontent in the Bajío led to the formation of the Partido Democrata Mexicano (PDM) in 1979, heir to Sinarquismo and the PFP, which rapidly emerged as a contender in the region and was able to secure seats in the national legislature (Aguilar and Zermeño, 1992). Although short-lived, the PDM demonstrated the limits and possibilities of reactionary religious mobilisation. Like the PAN, the PDM did not, and indeed could not, openly present itself as a Catholic party. However, the PDM drew far more explicitly on Catholic symbols and doctrines, and relied directly on its ties to the remnants of Sinarquismo in the Bajío to mobilise voters (Tagle, 1984). However, the persistent inability of the party to build upon its toehold in the legislature, along with internal conflicts among its leaders, led to a catastrophic decline in its voter share in 1988. The infusion of a handful of disaffected PAN elites in 1990, including the aging González Torres, did little to resolve the crisis, and the party lost its registration in 1994 and again in 1997 (Aguilar and Zermeño, 1992).

Of more lasting consequences was the growing willingness of the Catholic Church hierarchy to become more active in Mexican politics. This process, which reflected a broader turn towards democracy by the global Catholic Church (Philpott, 2004), took distinctive forms in Mexico. Spurred in part by growing competition from Protestants, Catholic bishops became increasingly willing to express their anxiety regarding the economic and social crises the country endured in the early 1980s (Trejo, 2009; Mackin, 2003). They also began to voice discontent about the increasingly visible reliance on electoral fraud that accompanied the PRI’s diminishing patronage and loss of appeal among the electorate (Camp, 1994).

Facing an increasingly discredited regime, the CEM issued statements calling for adherence to democratic norms and denouncing particularly egregious examples of fraud. While it declared itself to be speaking for Mexican Catholics in general and thus to be above partisan concerns, bishops’ moves into electoral oversight were not free from critique. Indeed, some of the hierarchy’s most notable protests came when PAN candidates were seen as victims of electoral fraud. In one particularly noteworthy instance, the bishop of Chihuahua called for a suspension of the mass to protest the flawed 1986 gubernatorial race in his state, which had deprived the PAN candidate of a plausible victory (Blancarte, 1992). This gesture, which recalled the events that initiated the Cristiada, led to vehement protests by the Mexican government, which in turn led the Vatican nuncio, Girolamo Prigione, to intervene and countermand the bishop (Loaeza, 1996: 114).

President Salinas (1988–1994), seeking to boost his legitimacy after his unexpectedly competitive and possibly fraudulent election, opted to ‘modernise’ religion–state relations by removing or revising the constitution’s most anticlerical articles (Loaeza, 1999: 484). Although the plan resembled proposals that had long been advocated by the PAN, the latter party was not invited to participate in the process. Similarly, although Protestant churches were included in the negotiations, many complained that the Catholic Church, and more specifically Vatican nuncio Prigione, dominated the discussion (García Ugarte, 1993: 105–106). The result was the constitutional reform of 1992, which did away with the most anticlerical, if long unenforced, language in the constitution, while retaining the ban on confessional parties and placing limits on explicit church engagement in politics.
This change in religion–state relations improved the regime’s ties to the Vatican but had limited consequences for the PAN. Its leaders expressed annoyance that they were locked out of negotiations that they had long advocated, but in many ways the reforms resolved an issue that had historically caused tension within the party, namely the extent to which the party should campaign on the electorally marginal issue of religious freedom. Indeed, they had few reasons to complain, as 1994 was a remarkable year for the PAN, with its candidates achieving a degree of electoral success that would have been almost unimaginable a decade earlier (Loaeza, 1999). A critical component of its success was its ability to secure reforms to Mexico’s electoral governance mechanisms, most critically the independence of the body tasked with electoral oversight. As fraud became less likely, the PAN was able to leverage its experience with electoral competition to win a string of electoral victories as the local, state and national level (Shirk, 2005; Mantilla, 2018).

The party therefore reached the 2000 general election with realistic hopes of capturing the executive. The election was a momentous one for Mexico, as the PAN’s presidential candidate, Vicente Fox, mounted a formidable challenge to the weakened PRI. While not a dominant factor, religion played a noticeable and often controversial role in this effort. As part of this campaign, Fox engaged in more explicit displays of personal religious devotion than Mexicans were used to seeing from a major party candidate. However, these were different from the strategies used by the PAN during the mid-twentieth century. Rather than imbue his platform with references to Catholic doctrines and ideals, or propose explicit changes to the status of religion in Mexico, Fox emphasised his own personal beliefs and alignment with popular traditions. This was consistent with his overall strategy, which was built around the ‘Amigos de Fox’ fundraising network, rather than the PAN, and generally emphasised his personal qualities over his party affiliation (Shirk, 2000). Among his most contentious displays of religiosity was the use of the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which provoked a cautious reaction from some members of the hierarchy who saw this as a bridge too far in terms of partisan religious appeals (Reveles Vázquez, 2002: 367). The Fox campaign also articulated a ten-point promise to promote religious freedom and uphold religious values, most notably a commitment to protecting life from conception. Notably, these statements were presented in an ecumenical context that aimed to appeal to a broad range of religious conservatives rather than exclusively to the Catholic Church, and as a personal promise by Fox rather than a formal political platform (Blancarte, 2006: 433). This was important insofar as it maintained the official distance between Church and party.

The Catholic hierarchy put forward its own efforts to facilitate a democratic transition. Thus, in the lead-up to the election, Mexico’s bishops issued a series of statements that clearly signalled their preference for partisan alternation at the presidential level, as well as for a candidate that would defend values associated with Catholic teachings. Secularist critics argued that the list of candidates that plausibly fit this description was rather brief (Blancarte, 2004: 254). Nonetheless, the hierarchy staunchly and plausibly defended both its non-partisan status and its willingness to speak out in favour of democracy, religious freedom, and the sanctity of life.

The process of democratisation, linked to the reform of religion–state relations, therefore substantially altered the relationship between religion and political parties. As electoral competitiveness increased, the PAN moved away from explicit and doctrinal approaches to religious mobilisation and instead relied on the personal reputation of its candidates to appeal to devout voters. The Catholic Church hierarchy became more active in political affairs, sometimes in ways that benefited the PAN, but sought to remain above the fray by consistently rejecting the notion that it was in any way a partisan actor.
Religion and democratic politics

Since the victory of the PAN in 2000 religion has become increasingly salient in Mexican politics, but not in the ways that many of that party’s conservative supporters may have hoped it would. The success of the PAN raised fears among secularists that there would be efforts to expand the role of religion in public affairs (Shirk, 2005; Blancarte, 2006). This contributed to pre-emptive mobilisation by progressive activists who waged successful campaigns to expand reproductive rights and extend legal recognition of same-sex unions. The Catholic hierarchy and the PAN worked to counter these efforts, but met with mixed results. Somewhat ironically, through this process of heightened awareness and contestation religion became too politicised to be appealing to political parties.

The politicisation of abortion was a gradual process. The Catholic Church had been concerned with potential liberalisation of abortion in Mexico since the 1970s. Until that decade, abortion was banned across the country with the only exemptions being to protect the life of the mother and in cases of rape (Beer, 2017: 49). During the 1970s and 1980s, government efforts to promote population control led to some state-level reforms in abortion regulation, as part of a major push for family planning (Loaeza, 2009: 121). These early efforts triggered reactions by the PAN and the Catholic hierarchy, most notably the formation of ProVida, an anti-abortion organisation, in 1978 (Beer, 2017: 50). While feminist organisations had mobilised to push for enhanced reproductive rights as early as the 1970s, it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that they began to play a prominent role in national debates (Lamas, 1997).

The subnational electoral successes of the PAN in the 1990s changed the nature of the debate. As the PAN came to power in different states, their governments began to play a key role in the development of anti-abortion legislation, as in Chihuahua 1994 and (unsuccessfully) in Baja California and Guanajuato in 1999 (Beer, 2017: 52–53). This alarmed secularist activists, but these struggles did not become a central point of political contention until 1999, when the case of Paulina, a 13-year-old rape victim who was effectively denied access to an abortion by PAN officials in Baja California, became a major national scandal (Taracena, 2002). PAN state officials made her talk to a priest, brought ProVida members to her room and made her watch anti-abortion films (Beer, 2017: 53). The case became a major news event at the time and further ignited the emerging national debate on abortion and reproductive rights.

Given that the Fox campaign had made explicit commitments to protect life from conception, the PAN’s victory provoked fears of a full-fledged return to conservative policies among reproductive rights advocates. Although the PAN’s direct ties to religion were much weakened, the party continued to have a reputation as a bulwark of conservative Catholicism, one that had only been deepened by the increasingly partisan debates around abortion. The reality proved more complex, in many ways reflecting Fox’s unorthodox and personalistic style (Shirk, 2000). Despite his willingness to display his Catholic faith and his promises to religious groups, Fox appointed a progressive secretary of health, Julio Frenk, who was not a member of the PAN (Amuchástegui et al., 2010). After prolonged consultations with a broad range of civil society groups, Frenk opted to include emergency contraception in public health services in 2004. The ensuing controversy witnessed severe conflict within the Fox administration, as conservative PAN ministers openly criticised the decision, and in the public arena, where Catholic activists and members of the hierarchy expressed their dismay at what they saw as state sanctioned abortion. The controversy only simmered down after Fox expressed his personal support for the policy (Amuchástegui et al., 2010), and led many conservative Catholics to become disenchanted with his administration.
The narrow presidential victory of long-time PAN leader Felipe Calderón in 2006 resulted in a government more willing to consistently defend Catholic positions. Yet under his presidency the conflict around reproductive rights deepened as left-wing government in Mexico City moved to liberalise abortion policies. The decriminalisation of first trimester abortion came in 2007, shocking many conservatives and leading to a widespread reaction. Predictably, the Catholic hierarchy and conservative Catholic groups in civil society expressed dismay at the development and mobilised against it. There was also a political reaction, and the PAN played a central role in this process at the local, state and national level. The administration of President Calderón challenged the constitutionality of the policy in the Supreme Court, but its challenge failed in 2008. Yet that same year, 14 states passed foetal life amendments to their constitution, with the PAN playing a central role in these efforts, where it was opportunistically joined by the state-level PRI representatives (Amuchástegui et al., 2010). By 2013, when the PAN had been replaced by the PRI as the national governing party, the number of states with similar amendments had increased to 17 (Beer, 2017).

While the political struggle surrounding abortion had been in many ways anticipated by the Catholic Church and the PAN, the advance of same-sex marriage caught them largely by surprise. Led by the small, progressive Partido Socialdemócrata (PSD), the government of Mexico City passed a civil unions bill in 2006. In 2009, the PSD put forth a bill that made marriage laws gender neutral, thus effectively legalising same-sex marriage in that jurisdiction (Beer and Cruz-Aceves, 2018: 14). The speed with which the law was passed contributed to the relative lack of reaction in terms of popular mobilisation, even as it was vocally opposed by both the PAN and the archbishop of Mexico City, Cardinal Norberto Rivera. The administration of President Calderón challenged the law in courts. However, the Supreme Court upheld it and went further, ruling that all other Mexican states had to recognise the marriages that had taken place in Mexico City, dealing a blow to an administration increasingly embattled on other fronts.

While the controversies over abortion and same-sex marriage roiled many Catholic activists, they paled in comparison to the escalating security crisis surrounding Calderón’s decision to escalate the war against drug cartels. The sharp rise in violence brought about by the conflict, which saw homicide rates more than double between 2006 and 2011 (Shirk and Wallman, 2015), drove a further wedge between the PAN and many Catholic voters. The PAN thus entered the 2012 electoral contest in a severely weakened position. Seeking to appeal to a base of conservative voters, its candidate, Josefina Vázquez Mota, waged a campaign that was criticised for its reliance on Catholic values and rhetoric (Prados, 2012). Vázquez Mota came in a distant third among voters, contributing to the perception that religious political mobilisation was, at best, a double-edged sword.

The winner of the 2012 election was the charismatic governor of Mexico State, Enrique Peña Nieto, of the once-hegemonic PRI. The return of the PRI to power prompted fears of democratic erosion, but President Peña Nieto proved unable to guide his party to electoral dominance. Despite passing some important pieces of legislation, notably in terms of energy sector reform, the new PRI administration struggled on many fronts. Religion-state relations, though hardly at the centre of the action, was one of these. Peña Nieto personally advocated a constitutional reform recognising same-sex marriage, which he argued would recognise the legal status quo. However, the move met spirited opposition from the Catholic Church, the PAN, and within his own party (Beer and Cruz-Aceves, 2018). The magnitude of the counter-mobilisation, which involved well-coordinated mass demonstrations across the country, signalled that religious conservatives would not be caught unprepared on this front again. Peña Nieto was forced to abandon the project, leading to a de facto stalemate that endured for the remainder of his administration. If campaigning for religion was not an avenue to political success, neither was campaigning against it.
Conclusion: the 2018 elections

Religion has a complicated relationship with political parties in Mexico. The country has deep reservoirs of religious feeling and a historic religious–secular cleavage that, while altered by growing religious diversity and shifting social norms associated with secularisation, remains a potentially powerful motivator for political activism. However, the PAN, which by its history, doctrinal principles and conservative policy preferences would appear to be the most likely candidate for the role of religious party, maintains an ambiguous and often conflicted relationship to religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular. This situation is a consequence of Mexico’s distinctive history of religious–secularist struggle and accommodation, its gradual process of democratisation, and the strategies and preferences of key actors, both partisan and religious, under democracy.

Many key features of this scenario can be grasped by considering the 2018 presidential election and its aftermath. In an effort to appeal to a broader swath of the electorate, the PAN’s presidential candidate and ex-party president, Ricardo Anaya, organised a coalition with his party’s long-time rival, the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). Unsurprisingly, and perhaps by design, this alliance of rivals that straddles the religious–secular divide remained largely silent on religiously charged issues during the campaign. The PAN’s main opponents pursued a similar strategy, avoiding issues of religion as much as possible. The PRI, acutely aware of the divisions within the party that had been revealed by Peña Nieto’s ill-fated constitutional reform, predictably steered clear. More surprisingly, the man who ultimately won the election, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, opted to form a coalition between his own leftist Morena party and the tiny, ultraconservative Encuentro Social (ES) party, provoking scathing critiques from many progressive circles. Reflecting the incongruities of this partnership, Lopez Obrador avoided taking clear stances on same-sex marriage, abortion, and other topics potentially linked to religion during the campaign.

The situation in 2018, in which major parties refused to position themselves on issues of religion and politics even as they remained important points of political contention, in many ways reflects long-running complexities of Mexican religious politics. Having learned from decades of conflict and accommodation, the Catholic Church hierarchy remains committed to maintaining its autonomy and moral stature, even as it seeks to project its values and principles onto the political arena. The PAN, though consistently willing to defend policy positions associated with Catholic doctrine, studiously rejects the notion that it is in any way a Catholic party. The PRI, once a staunch advocate of secularism, has adopted a pragmatic stance aimed at appealing to both socially conservative and progressive voters. Even parties on the left, which played a key role in advancing progressive policies resisted by the Catholic Church, have been hesitant to campaign on these issues at the national level. Religious politics may bring Mexicans to the streets but experience has taught political parties to treat it with caution.

References

Religion and political parties in Mexico