

The Retreat to Method: the Aftermath of Elite Concession to Civil Society in India and Mexico

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Abstract The literature on democratic accountability assumes that alternative institutions can make state practices more transparent and thus enhance accountability. In this paper, we problematize the celebration of alternative institutions by comparing the cases of Mexico and India. Why, we ask, given the popular support for a caste census and a rights-based approach to poverty alleviation in India and Mexico, respectively, did these initiatives lose steam soon after political elites conceded to civil society demands? In answer, we argue that alternative institutions may become conduits to undercut accountability under the guise of expertise through a mechanism that we call the “retreat to method,” in which political elites channel substantive public debate into abstruse disputes over methodology. As the task of measuring poverty and caste retreats into backrooms, vertical accountability between the state and civil society in our two cases has weakened. Horizontal accountability mechanisms—in which one arm of the state (e.g., the bureaucracy) provides checks and balances on another (e.g., the legislature)—may be exploited to undercut vertical accountability in cases where expertise is valued over democratic deliberation.

Keywords Democratic accountability · Alternative institutions · Expertise · India · Mexico

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There are two questions here. The first question is, “whether it is desirable to enumerate the caste of each member of the household?” The second question is, assuming that it is desirable to do so, “is the census the vehicle to carry out the enumeration?” I do not wish to enter into a debate on the first question, There can be different views on the subject and we must respect each other’s views. In fact, Hon’ble Members who said that “caste is a reality” also acknowledged that caste is a divisive factor and that we are nowhere near establishing a casteless society. It is the second question that is relevant for the present discussion. The Registrar General has pointed out a number of logistic and practical difficulties in canvassing the question of caste while conducting the census...

—Indian Home Minister Chidambaram, May 7, 2010 (Press Information Bureau 2010)

Any decisions you make, you make with data. We can’t just make decisions because some approach occurs to someone. In social policy, those of us that took up the issues, we couldn’t conceive of not having the data. And some said, ‘but there are 50 ways to think about poverty’ but we had to move things along, we wanted answers...It’s all about the numbers, limited to the indicators, all decisions that you make...It’s about getting everyone to agree. Here’s the methodology, tell me what the rules are, tell me how many poor there are. Thanks to this we were able to move things in ways that maybe those very close to the issues would not have – they would have seen so many problems.

—Mexican Undersecretary of Social Development (2001-2002)¹

Introduction

Peter Evans and Barbara Stallings (2016) recently observed that research on democracy has shifted from examining the dynamics and causes of democratic transition to positing conditions that enable democratic accountability. The shift is in part the result of large-scale social transformation: whereas the transitions literature emerged when relatively few nation-states were democratic, research on the quality of democracy has taken hold in the “third wave,” when liberal democracy became the modal political system. Though third wave nation-states check off the formal requirements of democracy, the latter approach points out that popular participation and social outcomes are uneven across cases.

The inaugural wave of research on the quality of democracy therefore centered on the institutional preconditions of democratic accountability, especially interelite competition (vertical accountability) and checks and balances across state institutions (horizontal accountability). More recent work has placed further scope conditions on

¹ Interview, September 12, 2012.

the possibility of effective democracy such as a strong civil society, high voter turnout, and the proximity of subnational polities to state power.

This newer literature has refined our conception of democratic accountability but nevertheless assumes that alternative institutions, by making state practices more transparent and participatory, enhance accountability. Drawing on a comparison of India and Mexico, we problematize the celebration of alternative institutions, which we define here as mechanisms that seek to realize the promise of democracy by increasing vertical or horizontal accountability. The puzzle that animates this paper centers on two such institutions: Why, given the popular support for a caste census and a rights-based approach to poverty alleviation in India and Mexico, respectively, did these initiatives lose steam soon after political elites conceded to civil society demands?

In answer, we argue that alternative institutions, especially those that value expertise over democratic deliberation, create opportunities to undercut vertical accountability through a mechanism that we call the “retreat to method.” The mechanism is processual in nature, entailing a walking back from civil society demands. It consists of three phases. The first is a “genuflection to inclusion”²: the state responds favorably to demands from civil society, thereby appearing legitimately democratic. Next, elected officials and other state actors channel public debate into abstruse disputes over methodology. Finally, the retreat to method culminates in “expert closure,” the limiting of non-expert participation in subsequent deliberations over public policy (Latour 1987 in Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016).

As the tasks of debating and measuring poverty and caste retreat into backrooms, vertical accountability between the state and civil society in our two cases has weakened. Moreover, horizontal accountability mechanisms—in which one arm of the state (e.g., the bureaucracy) checks another (e.g., the legislature)—may be exploited to undercut vertical accountability in cases where expertise is valued over democratic deliberation. Under these conditions, civil society organizations may be limited in their ability to act as a watchdog of democracy, because state actors may circumvent civil society through cross-agency coordination. In India, political leaders publicly agree to demands for updated caste data but behind-the-scenes intentionally push the enumeration of caste out of the widely respected decennial census and into a different state project, with a history of producing unreliable data. This protects the status quo with regard to caste data and the implementation of affirmative action. In Mexico, the retreat to method occurs first in an effort by the executive to protect poverty policy from the opposition and then by experts concerned with protecting poverty measurement from manipulation by the executive. In creating a knowledge-making space free from interference by political elites, experts’ retreat to method institutionalized a subsequent pattern of policy formation in which substantive participation from non-experts is limited.

The paper makes three contributions. First, with the existing literature, we find that interelite competition is a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic accountability. Elites compete for the support of various constituencies who are represented by civil society organizations and are therefore willing to make concessions in order to win. However, in both India and Mexico, concession was only the first in a series of moves that culminated in the watering down of civil society demands. Second, qualifying Tocquevillian claims that civil society is a bulwark against state power, we

² We are grateful to an anonymous SCID reviewer for suggesting this phrase.

find that civil society organizations were relegated to a narrowly defined role of commenting on method in policy formation and implementation. Third, in relation to horizontal accountability, our work reveals that the supposedly countervailing arms of the state were complicit in undercutting vertical accountability by initiating the retreat to method.

We press this claim in three parts below. First, we undertake a critical review of research on democratic accountability. Second, in our empirical section, we show step by step how the substantive debate over public issues is subsequently relegated to the unaccountable backroom of methodology. In this, the process was neither smooth nor inexorable: there was observable pushback from civil society and allied state actors along the way. For each case, we provide background on the political project in question, document the demands of civil society and the initial concession of state elites, and elucidate a two-step process by which state elites displace demands to a debate over method. Third, we conclude with directions for future research on the problem of expertise in democratic governance.

Alternative Institutions, Expertise, and the Retreat to Method

Research on the troublingly uneven “quality of democracy” (QOD) has focused on the institutional conditions enabling democratic accountability. These include vertical and horizontal accountability (O’Donnell 1998, 2001), the strength of civil society (Heller 2000), and mechanisms to enhance public deliberation (Evans 2004). Revisions to this second generation of scholarship have emerged to place further scope conditions on the degree to which the foregoing institutional arrangements in fact favor democratic accountability. For example, Grimes (2013) has argued that a robust civil society may increase accountability only in the context of political competition, press freedom, and government transparency. Similarly, Korolev (2016) contends that too much interelite competition correlates with lower social outcomes, whereas robust voter turnout is associated with higher social outcomes. Though the most recent generation of scholars has added considerable nuance to the original QOD framework, most share the assumption that alternative institutions will bridge the gaps in accountability left by more traditional mechanisms such as interelite competition.

Our own theoretical framework builds upon scholarship that begins to document the limitations of alternative institutions. We conceptualize alternative institutions as mechanisms that seek to realize the promise of democracy by increasing vertical or horizontal accountability. Common examples of alternative institutions include public participation mechanisms, advisory or regulatory organizations, and policy instruments (Ackerman 2004; O’Donnell 1994). Abers and Keck’s (2006) research suggests that traditional institutions operating alongside institutional innovations (e.g., regional governance bodies) can make effective water policy in Brazil difficult to make and pass. Taking aim at similar participatory governance structures, Houtzager and Lavalley (2010) observe that it is unclear whether this “new layer of representatives” is any more or less responsive or accountable than their traditional counterparts (2010: 3–

4). Nor does transparency between civil society and technocrats necessarily improve social outcomes. Lee (2010) has found that bringing together sectoral-level unions with government experts in the former Eastern bloc increases support for and accelerates privatization (Lee 2010: 30).

Another intellectual tendency in this body of work problematizes the rise of elite- and expert-dominated participatory institutions. For instance, Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016) show how celebrated democratic reforms (like participatory budgeting) can become delinked from administrative reform projects and emancipatory goals. Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker (2015) focus on the engineering of participation in tightly controlled spaces of public deliberation, which tend to be dominated by technocrats, philanthropists, and politicians. Thorpe (2010) likewise theorizes public engagement in the formation of British science policy as a mechanism through which participation services the post-Fordist vision of a knowledge economy (also Thorpe and Gregory 2010). Scholars focused on the production of democratic input have also shown how quantitative technologies may structure supposedly transparent participatory processes to undercut accountability. Espeland (2000) observes that alternative institutions such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, though designed to introduce transparency into the work of government agencies (such as the US Bureau of Reclamation), in fact privilege the participation of established interest groups and quantify public input in ways that are at odds with how the least powerful stakeholders frame the issues. This dynamic points to the well-documented tension between democracy and technocracy,³ and how the increasing power of technocrats, along with the quantification efforts they introduce, shape democratic input, limit substantive debate, and minimize the opinions and participation of those affected by public policy.

While we echo these concerns about the role of alternative institutions in ostensibly enhancing vertical accountability, we emphasize a different moment in the process, namely, the *aftermath* of public input when state actors metabolize the demands posed by civil society and competing branches of government. This prompts us to focus on knowledge-making practices—or the ways social knowledge is produced, evaluated, and used (Camic, Gross and Lamont 2011). Jasanoff (2011: 27) focuses on the production of regulatory policy through practices dispersed across institutions and traces how knowledge claims are presented “in the mantle of objectivity” in part because of “the neutrality of knowledge claims in the laboratory sciences.” Jasanoff’s case also highlights how knowledge-making occurs in “relatively porous” social locations, which requires attention to both concrete places and an “intricate spider web of practices” stretching across locations and institutions (25, 27). As social knowledge-making is far from non-ideological and apolitical, we remain attuned to how knowledge-making practices become the foci of political alliances and conflicts. As Fourcade (2009) argues, the development and dissemination of statistical measures can become sites of politics in the sense that “it requires the enrollment of political

³ The scholarship on technocratic politics highlights the competing logics of democracy and expert-based decision-making and traces the tendency of experts to shift the debate to one where technocrats rule (Mitchell 2002; Centeno 1994; Jasanoff 2003). While democracy seeks to broaden the arena for public debate and participation, technocratic expertise values the voice and participation of those with the specialized skills and knowledge to achieve outcomes that will ostensibly benefit the public (Collins and Evans 2008; Brown 2009).

allies, the alignment of various interests, the settlement of credibility struggles among economic experts” (294).

We examine the political work done as methodology becomes the terrain of struggle. The *retreat to method* that we observe in our two cases begins with state elites appearing to produce or implement legitimately democratic reforms. But as substantive public demands are channeled into abstruse disputes over methodology, new categories of expertise are elevated and the participation of non-experts in deliberations over public policy narrows. By focusing on how this process unfolds within state institutions, we show how the core—in our cases executive bureaucracies—is shielded from challenge.

Case Selection and Method

We compare alternative institutional projects in India and Mexico, two large, middle-income democracies in the Global South. These countries have different colonial histories, post-colonial trajectories, and paths towards formal democracy (Hamilton 1982; Chatterjee 1986; Knight 1986; Frankel and Rao 1989; Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993; Kohli 1999). These important differences notwithstanding, both countries have relatively strong formal political institutions and procedures, including strong rights-granting constitutions and a recent history of relatively peaceful elections and transfers of power. In addition, both have experienced ongoing struggles to consolidate and deepen democracy and enhance active citizenship (Fox 1994; Heller 2000; Kohli 2001; Houtzager and Acharya 2010). In India, participation among historically oppressed groups has steadily increased (Yadav 1996; Yadav 2002), and there is growing representation of these groups in local, state, and national legislative bodies (Jaffrelot 2003; Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009; Witsoe 2013). Likewise, in Mexico decentralization contributed to a gradual thickening of rural civil society (Fox 1994). Since 2000 civil society demands have turned from electoral reform to efforts to consolidate democracy, increase inclusion and participation in politics, and build and strengthen ostensibly autonomous institutions of accountability (Ackerman 2004; Fox 2007). We focus our comparison of these two cases during ongoing democratic consolidation in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. During this period, the struggles for political equality occurred alongside civil society efforts to introduce alternative institutions that seek to strengthen vertical accountability and challenge the historically dominant party (the Indian National Congress and Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party) with the goal of deepening social democracy.

As the foregoing similarities suggest, our logic of comparison is what Skocpol and Somers (1980) call “parallel demonstration of theory,” which seeks to showcase the fruitfulness of a concept as applied to distinct but similar trajectories. In both cases, we see previously excluded actors call for the strengthening of democratic institutions, and state actors publicly conceding to civil society demands, only to undercut those demands in the retreat to method. That process unfolds differently in each case, especially in the displacement of demands and the motivations for expert closure. However, it is precisely this variation, according to Skocpol and Somers that demonstrates the strength and versatility of a theory.

The questions explored in this paper emerge from larger research projects on the caste census in India and the poverty expertise in Mexico (Vithayathil 2014; Graizbord 2017). Each project involved semi-structured interviews (90 for the caste census and 75 for the poverty expertise) and a review of documents collected between 2011 and 2016. Here we draw on a subset of the documents and interview data (approximately 20 interviews from each project). We selected interviewees using purposive sampling, with the goal of interviewing key actors across relevant fields and institutional settings. Interviews lasted between 30 min and 2 h and included questions about the political context in which the project unfolded, details about the project, and the interests and participation of various stakeholders, including the interviewee's own role. In both cases, we also analyzed government documents and transcripts of congressional hearings, newspapers and other media, and scholarly papers and books produced by experts.

India

Demands for a Caste Count

Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a leader of the anti-caste untouchable movement, Chair of the Drafting Committee of India's Constitution, and India's first Law Minister, famously warned that India should "not to be content with mere political democracy" but must make its "political democracy a social democracy as well" (Constituent Assembly of India 1966). He argued that the long history of caste discrimination and humiliation had created two distinct nations based on caste and threatened the possibility of nationhood across caste divides (Guru 2016). During the colonial period, anti-caste social movements sought to enhance vertical accountability to ostracized castes through the implementation of separate electorates (which was blocked by Mahatma Gandhi) and reserved seats in legislative councils and government jobs (Jaffrelot 2003; Zelliott 2013). The 1950 Constitution institutionalized affirmative action for Scheduled Castes (i.e., ex-untouchables) and Scheduled Tribes in central government jobs, parliament, and tertiary educational institutions. It recognized a wider category of "backward classes" in Articles 15, but "backwardness" was not clearly defined. Constitutionally sanctioned expert committees, tasked with defining a wider category of backward groups in the early 1950s and late 1970s, desired census data on caste to complete their work. In their recommendations, they sought the expanded enumeration of caste in post-colonial decennial censuses and asserted that the additional categories of backward classes should be eligible for affirmative action (Kalelkar 1955; Mandal 1991).

The successful implementation of affirmative action policy was reliant on the decennial census, as the size of each group's reservation quota is proportional to its population. The leaders of independent India had shunned the counting of caste—trying to distance themselves from elaborate tables on caste and religion produced in late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial censuses (Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001). As such, census enumeration on caste was limited to data required for the administration for affirmative action, or the enumeration of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Caste would no longer be a central category of the census or state administration as the Congress leadership sought to cultivate a national Indian identity (Natarajan 1972).

At the same time, the decision to limit the census enumeration of caste meant that the social, political, and economic positions of most subcastes could not be differentiated from one another. The change in post-colonial census policy paralleled the strengthening of castelessness, which Satish Deshpande (2013) defines as the invisibility of caste for caste elites and the hypervisibility of caste for lower castes. While castelessness obscures the advantages of caste elites (Deshpande 2013), it is unstable and contested (Subramanian 2015).

By the end of India's second decade of independence, an emerging caste-based populism supported by democratic elections started organizing against upper caste hegemony in the north. Jaffrelot (2003) describes this transition as India's "silent revolution," which saw the entry of a new political elite from lower caste backgrounds into electoral politics, beginning in the late 1960s (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009). These movements and political leaders played an important role in the expansion of affirmative action policies first at the regional level and eventually in the central government (Galanter 1984; Jaffrelot 2003). The expansion of central government affirmative action benefits to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the 1990s sought to further increase vertical accountability to new groups.

These changes set off new demands for updated caste data. Efforts stalled in the lead up to Census 2001, but Census 2011 became a rallying point for groups desiring a full caste count. Regional political parties, caste-based organizations, and NGOs inaugurated an early effort to pressure the Congress leadership to change census policy, largely through the courts (Venkatesan 2009, 2010). The tide began to turn with a more coordinated campaign in late 2009. Janhit Abhiyan, a local civil society organization in Delhi advocating on behalf of OBCs, began organizing in favor of a caste census. Janhit Abhiyan sponsored several public forums to discuss the enumeration of caste and garner support across organizations representing the interests of Dalits and lower castes. Raj Narayan, the convener of Janhit Abhiyan, publicly argued for a full caste count as

necessary for collecting reliable and accurate data relating to economic, social, educational, and political status of different castes...It is not a question of collecting data about the status of only backward castes but also relating to economically poorer sections among the upper castes. The government can redesign its welfare schemes based on the latest data. (Kumar 2009)

Raj Narayan's statement corresponded with a shift in the framing of the caste-wise census from an OBC issue to a broader social justice concern relevant to caste- and class-based groups. Over the next several months, the organization met regularly in Delhi and collaborated closely with OBC activists, politicians, and a broader set of allies in support of a caste count. Janhit Abhiyan worked to expand the base of support to include SC and OBC government employees through its partnership with the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF).⁴ Janhit Abhiyan already had legitimacy in civil society before working on this issue, as a journalist who participated in the caste census campaign explains:

⁴ Interview, June 22, 2015.

Janhit Abhiyan did not just pop up for the caste census; if they did they wouldn't have been able to garner support from a wide constituency. They wouldn't have been taken seriously. They had been involved in several campaigns related to the implementation of reservations and increasing the caste quota.⁵

In early 2010, Janhit Abhiyan and its collaborators met with over 300 Members of Parliament (MPs) across the political spectrum to mobilize support. Several MPs who had been central to the caste census campaign, and who were recognized nationally as OBC political leaders, brought the debate to the lower house of Parliament in May 2010. More than 40 MPs took the floor and put pressure on the Congress-led coalition government to change its position. Nearly all of the MPs who spoke desired census data on caste to understand and address caste-based inequalities (Government of India 2010).

While most of the speeches emphasized why the data should be collected, a few MPs also suggested how to collect the data. MPs from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra among others suggested that caste data could be collected as part of the population enumeration phase of the decennial census, which was scheduled to occur in February 2011 (*ibid*). A notable voice in the growing chorus of MPs who spoke out in favor of the caste census was Gopinath Munde, deputy leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was the main opposition party at the time (*ibid*). The Congress leadership was trapped amidst the emerging interparty bloc in favor of a caste count. In his brief statement before Parliament on May 7, 2010, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who headed the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in power between 2004 and 2014, made a commitment to finalize the decision. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee told reporters the following day that “caste would be included in the present census” (Express News Service 2010; Correspondent 2010). The Congress leadership's inclusion of the alternative institution of the caste count within the decennial census was a genuflection to inclusion to OBC activists and their allies.

Genuflection to Inclusion

Caste census advocates desired data to support the implementation of policies that attacked structural inequalities, while the executive conceded out of political expediency. Public pressure by leaders with a sizable regional OBC voting bloc, along with cross-party support on the floor of the lower house of Parliament, forced the Congress leadership to change its position.

Congress leaders took several steps to ensure that there was widespread consensus for the caste census and used this consensus-building process to reframe what they had agreed to do. Prime Minister Singh created a Group of Ministers to determine the details of the caste census and assigned Finance Minister Mukherjee to head the group. The Group of Ministers had three meetings between July and August 2010 (PTI 2010; Gupta 2010a). The Congress leadership also met separately during this period to discuss and finalize recommendations emerging from the Group of Ministers. Thus, the formal executive leadership and party leadership led by Sonia Gandhi worked

⁵ *Ibid*.

closely to shape the final outcome. At the same time, the interests and motivations of census bureau officials played a central role in this process.

During the first meeting of the Group of Ministers on July 1, 2010, the group remained ideologically split on how to proceed and decided to solicit the views of other political parties to ensure that there would be no dissenters at a later stage. However, instead of simply asking whether each party supported a caste count in the census, the Group of Ministers posed two questions that created operational latitude (Vyas 2010). The wording of the first question presented Census 2011 and the National Population Registrar (NPR) as inter-changeable options to collect caste data, even though the two efforts are legally distinct and have different histories and reputations. Decennial census data are confidential and collected under the 1948 Census Act; the NPR generates data without the same confidentiality restrictions. Decennial censuses have a 120-year history and produce widely respected data; the NPR is a new project aimed at creating a system of national identification. The second question sought to confirm that “the caste of the respondent should be canvassed in such a manner and at such a stage that it does not affect the integrity of the headcount (census)” (ibid). If political parties assented to the second question, the bureaucracy had leeway to collect the caste data outside the decennial census and census bureau’s jurisdiction altogether. Caste census advocates specifically advocated for the collection of caste data in the decennial census. Shifting the venue for the caste count avoided the alternative institution demanded by caste census advocates. These questions reveal the interests and stamp of the census bureau, which remained strongly opposed to a caste count in the decennial census.⁶

Of particular concern to the Congress leadership was whether the BJP, the main national-level opposition party, would support a policy change. While the Hindu nationalist position of the BJP put them in opposition to a caste census, electoral politics and the power of the OBC voting bloc similarly caused them to concede (Vyas 2010). Thus, interelite competition forced the two national parties to agree to the public demands for an expanded caste count. The Group of Ministers, in fact, secured support from every political party through a seemingly inclusive policymaking process. However, consensus building also started the retreat to method by elevating the need to “protect” the decennial census and by introducing alternate venues to collect the caste data.

Displacing Demands

The cross-party consensus that caste data should be collected but “the integrity of the decennial census data should not be affected” provided operational latitude for the executive bureaucracy. Following a meeting of Congress leadership, the Group of Ministers recommended that a full caste count occur during the biometric phase of the National Population Registrar, which was scheduled to start by December 2010 (Chhibber 2010; Gupta 2010a). In his public announcement, Finance Minister Mukherjee described the decision as including a caste-wise enumeration in the census; this language continued to conflate two operationally and legally distinct projects. In reality, this new policy pushed the alternative institution of the caste count into a project

⁶ Interview, June 20, 2015.

that neither fell under the 1948 Census Act nor had the authoritative status of the decennial census.

Caste census advocates challenged Mukherjee's announcement that the caste count would occur in the National Population Registrar (Dhar 2010). They argued that the Office of the Registrar General of India (ORGI), or the census bureau, "is the only competent agency in the country with the necessary expertise and experience to undertake this gigantic task" (Vijayanunni et al. 2010a). In response to a month of organized criticism, the Home Minister announced that the caste data would instead be collected in a standalone census (Gupta 2010b). In this third "home" for the caste count, the ORGI would oversee field operations and the central government would constitute an expert group to classify the data. However, caste census advocates argued that a second standalone census by the ORGI immediately after the decennial census seemed financially and logistically impractical (Vijayanunni et al. 2010b). While the census bureau's new plan was in line with the revised consensus solicited from political parties, the decision to include the caste count in a standalone census failed to satisfy the central demand to include a caste-wise enumeration in the decennial census to produce data for affirmative action and other state policies. The debate over why the data should be collected was sidelined into discussions over operationalization of the caste count.

Expert Closure

In the months that followed, the public story remained that the census bureau would collect caste data in a separate exercise, even as details remained sparse. Meanwhile, the executive bureaucracy made a series of behind-the-scenes moves to develop a different plan. Sonia Gandhi, chair of the National Advisory Council and Congress Party President, sought to combine the caste census with the Below Poverty Line (BPL) survey, which had been conducted three times previously by the Ministry of Rural Development to identify rural households living below the poverty line. The National Advisory Council recommended that the ORGI oversee a joint BPL-caste census to reduce the previous errors of identifying BPL households and to save resources by combining the two projects. Given the high profile of the BPL survey and related Food Security Bill, Prime Minister Singh sought the advice of an expert panel, which included several senior economists and officials from the ORGI. The expert panel disagreed with the National Advisory Council's recommendation to combine the caste census and BPL survey, and sided with the public position of the Home Ministry. The ORGI had little interest in overseeing a joint BPL-caste census, as the BPL survey had been previously criticized and was seen as "too political" for the supposedly apolitical census bureau (Parsai 2011).

After data collection for Census 2011 was complete in March 2011, the central government made a public statement that the caste count would occur as part of the BPL survey, which was renamed the "Socio-Economic Caste Census" (Press Information Bureau 2011). The executive leadership designated the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation as nodal agencies for the project, while the ORGI would provide technical assistance, maps, household listings, enumerator training, and preliminary data.

The Socio-Economic Caste Census was conducted between July 2011 and April 2013 and the processes of data collection were slow and fraught as predicted by former

Census Commissioner Vijayanunni (2011). More than six years after the project started, the data from the caste count have not been published (apart from SC/ST data). The census bureau succeeded in limiting its role in the caste count, while successfully protecting the “integrity” of Census 2011. Moving the caste count into a revamped BPL project signaled the leadership’s disregard for the quality of the caste data. Caste census advocates desired caste data to facilitate the successful implementation of expanded affirmative action benefits and other government programs seeking to address structural inequalities; the alternative institution of the caste count sought to strengthen vertical accountability by deepening social democracy. The retreat to method by the executive bureaucracy successfully thwarted these demands from parliament and activists.

Mexico

Demands for Rights-Based Development

The modern Mexican Constitution of 1917 is remarkable for its universal promise of social, political, and civil rights (Knight 2001). However, though the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) made commitments to the Mexican Revolution and a rights-based mandate, in practice, Mexico developed a clientelistic and conservative-corporatist welfare mix (Barrientos et al. 2004) which resulted in a system of “differentiated citizenship” (Holston 2008). Under the PRI, formal-sector workers received state social insurance and employment protection, while the majority of Mexico’s poor were excluded from social welfare (Barrientos et al. 2004). The urban poor relied on private and church-based charity while the rural poor depended on piecemeal policies aimed at protecting smallholder production; this appeased peasants and ensured their loyalty to the party (Barrientos et al. 2004; Cornelius, Craig and Fox 1994; Fox 1994). Politically motivated strategic arrangements rather than rights structured the relationship between the one-party state and civil society (Davis and Brachet-Márquez 1997).

A protracted process of incorporating the poor as rights-bearing citizens paralleled the transition to democracy. By the mid-1960s against civil society mobilization, party elites sought new social policies to alleviate popular pressures (Fox 1994; Haggard and Kaufman 2009). One such response was the introduction of a multidimensional anti-poverty agenda by the Echeverría administration (1970–1976) that included provisions for expanding political and social rights (Yaschine and Orozco 2010). Reformist civil servants and academics who gained influence within the Echeverría administration began experimenting with new methods for identifying and measuring poverty. As the administration attempted to reframe poverty as an issue that went beyond income, debates about method were subsumed under a broader political agenda of transforming social development (Cernea 1987). These early reforms resulted in expanded infrastructure, rural health and education services, and mechanisms for increasing political participation and direct citizen control over development projects (Grindle 1981; Fox 1994).

Since the 1970s, civil society organizations and opposition parties have continued to demand broad-based poverty alleviation, the expansion of social and political rights and state accountability. These demands took on renewed significance in the mid-1990s

as the PRI regime descended into crisis. In response, reformers within the PRI (e.g., in President Zedillo's 1994–2000 administration) promised to alleviate poverty by expanding access to education, health, and nutrition. The centerpiece of these efforts was a targeted means-tested conditional cash transfer program called PROGRESA, which promised to improve the “capabilities” of the poor (Fizbein and Schady 2009). Though PROGRESA received much praise, some program beneficiaries, civil society actors, academics, and members of the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) were critical of the program's neoliberal underpinnings and its potential politicization (Molyneux 2006; Valencia Lomeli 2008; Yaschine and Orozco 2010).

Opposition to the PRI's official poverty and social development agenda got institutional traction during the 1997–2000 legislature when the PRD, in consultation with civil society organizations, introduced the first social development bill to Congress. This bill sought to reframe development by replacing targeting and means-testing with instruments aimed at advancing a rights-based poverty agenda. To safeguard these goals, the PRD recommended the establishment of two citizen councils to oversee social policy. These councils would audit and monitor social policy with the goals of reducing corruption, improving program delivery, and adjudicating rights-guarantees and violations of social programs (Maldonado Valera 2013). The bill, in short, sought to strengthen vertical accountability by realizing the promise of social development, and horizontal accountability by serving as a counterweight to the social development agenda of the PRI-controlled executive branch.

By the late 1990s, civil society had successfully pushed to create a number of alternative institutions to enhance accountability. However, efforts to bring these institutional innovations into social development policy failed to materialize. In congress, interparty competition and ideological differences blocked the bill. In 2000, the two other major parties introduced social development bills to challenge the PRD. The PRI's bill focused on strengthening the role of the executive and governors (still mostly in the hands of the PRI), while the conservative National Action Party (PAN) favored a technical rather than citizen commission, and opposed the PRD's emphasis on universal programs (Maldonado Valera 2013). Paradoxically, increased party competition within the legislature ultimately undermined vertical accountability on this policy front.

Genuflection to Inclusion

With Vicente Fox's win in the historic 2000 election, the PAN seemed to concede to demands for greater participation and a reformulation of social policy by establishing spaces for participation and expert consultation on several key policymaking fronts. In practice, however, the shift was a genuflection to inclusion that resulted in the displacement of substantive demands and a retreat to method.

First, during the presidential transition, Fox assembled a small team of experts to serve as poverty and social development advisors. This team included non-PAN loyalists and was headed by the sociologist Julio Boltvinik, a staunch critic of neoliberal approaches to poverty. The work of this expert advisory group was politically sensitive not only because of the history of politicization around poverty policy but also because of the political juncture this administration represented. Having won the election in part on an anti-PRI good governance agenda, the PAN had to balance the

need to distance itself from its predecessor, while at the same time strengthening some of the PRI's own reformist projects, including PROGRESA. While PROGRESA was locally divisive, the program was internationally lauded as a non-political, non-partisan solution to poverty and corruption (Valencia Lomeli 2008; Fizbein and Schady 2009). Under intense political pressure, this advisory council debated PROGRESA along with other approaches in order to evaluate the outgoing administration's policy and help draft the Fox administration's own National Development Plan.⁷

The administration ultimately succumbed to pressures to keep PROGRESA (renaming it *Oportunidades*), thereby institutionalizing this neoliberal anti-poverty agenda. However, bending to pressures from civil society, Fox appointed a number of left and center-left civil society leaders to high-level positions within the Secretariat of Social Development and PROGRESA/*Oportunidades*' administrative structure. This move, which Hevia de la Jara calls the "civic current" (2009), resulted in a number of mechanisms that aimed at ostensibly increasing accountability. Most notably, new civil society leaders-cum-bureaucrats pushed for enhancing the interfaces between the PROGRESA/*Oportunidades* program and its recipients; expanding coverage to seniors and urban populations; and strengthening a Senian capabilities rather than social rights approach within the PROGRESA/*Oportunidades* structure (ibid). In sum, though Fox bent to incorporate civil society actors into the governance of social development, this strengthened the status quo, further institutionalizing the PRI's (and now PAN's) social development agenda.

Displacing Demands

The incorporation of civil society into the PROGRESA structure was touted by the administration as a way to democratize policy from the inside out. At the same time, the administration initiated a series of public consultation exercises that helped displace substantive debate about social policy to a narrow focus on methodology.

One such exercise conducted just months after Fox was inaugurated is noteworthy. In March 2001, the administration hosted an international symposium entitled "Poverty: Concepts & Measures" convened by the Secretary of Social Development and a group of Mexican academics headed by Julio Boltvinik and Enrique Hernández Laos. Among the attendees were representatives from the state population and statistical councils, policymakers and high-level bureaucrats, academic experts, and representatives of leading Mexican civil society organizations. This public consultation, which was held on the very same day that the indigenous social movement, the Zapatistas, was presenting their case to Congress, was framed by the administration as an opportunity for civil society to participate in the reformulation of national poverty policy. Indeed, President Fox's opening remarks helped frame the event as the beginning of a more participatory, inclusive, and rights-based social policy agenda:

We're being very attentive as a government to the ideas that are presented here to overcome poverty in our country. Just like what is happening in Congress in a similar way on this very day, this meeting is not the end-point. The goal is not to measure poverty but to eradicate it. That's why this event will be considered the

⁷ Interview, July 24, 2013.

point of departure in Mexico, to assure that we put concrete actions in place so that each person has the opportunity, dignity and capacity to overcome poverty. (Presidencia de la República, 2001)

Moreover, in his remarks, Fox stressed the PAN's commitment to a "radical" and "redistributive" reform that would break with the legacy of the PRI, attend to human development broadly defined, and bring "justice" and inclusion of those "most historically excluded from development" (ibid).

The experts invited to participate in these and other similar forums welcomed the task and took the consultative role seriously. However, some attendees remembered this and other similar seminars as marked by a tension between problematizing the meaning of poverty and arriving at an official poverty measure.⁸ Indeed, during this seminar, the Secretariat of Social Development pressured the attendees to arrive at consensus over the right way to measure poverty, arguing that this was the key to future policy decision-making and design.⁹ One economist and poverty expert, who had helped convene the symposium, remarked that for him the objective of the seminar was to "bring democracy to poverty measurement."¹⁰

In July 2001, the Secretariat of Social Development assembled a smaller more permanent team to continue the work that had begun in the public symposiums. Tellingly named the Technical Committee on Poverty Measurement (CTMP), the team was entrusted to Fernando Cortés Cáceres, a prominent sociologist and statistician with expertise in poverty and inequality, who was joined by six other academic experts, two representatives of the state's semi-autonomous population and statistical agencies, a member of the presidential Social Development Commission, and two high ranking officials—one from *PROGRESA/Oportunidades* and another from the Secretariat of Social Development (Cortés Cáceres 2005). The CTMP was given the task of understanding the magnitude of poverty as an input into policymaking and evaluating the impact of poverty policies and programs (CONEVAL 2014). The academic experts on the team were chosen because of their technical expertise; they were not overtly partisan and thus were deemed objective. Notably, by then Julio Boltvinik who had served on the earlier advisory council and had been a strong critic of the neoliberal development paradigm represented by *PROGRESA/Oportunidades* had been sidelined despite his expertise in poverty measurement.¹¹

Expert Closure

From the start, the CTMP developed an uneasy relationship with the administration and the media. They worried that their work would be undermined if seen as too political and that they would be pressured by the administration to produce a certain (lower) poverty count or otherwise manipulated. As a result, the CTMP was given the authority to conduct their work semi-autonomously (state officials were given voice but no vote or final decision-making power), and experts themselves strongly defended the CTMP

⁸ Interview, March 3, 2013.

⁹ Interview, May 24, 2013; interview, September 20, 2012.

¹⁰ Interview, March 3, 2013.

¹¹ Interview, February 29, 2013.

as an independent lab-like space for knowledge production. By the time the committee began their work, substantive debate about social policy had been actively displaced to a focus on methodology. In their own defense of the CTMP as a space for expert participation, experts helped crystalize the retreat to method.

In order to preserve the integrity and legitimacy of their work, the CTMP developed a set of ground rules and working strategies that had the effect of deemphasizing broader debates on poverty policy and privileging the methodological and technical work. Among these strategies was barring the use of what they saw as politicized “concepts” (e.g., “basic needs” or “capabilities”) that had been used in Mexico as shorthand for various approaches, and prohibiting the use of real data until consensus had been reached that the methodology was sound (Cortés Cáceres 2005). The rationale was that in this way, the participants would not be swayed or pressured by state officials to censor methodologies that yielded particularly high or low poverty rates and that might upset politicians in either party or substantiate claims that the committee was an instrument of the PAN. Cortés explained this as follows:

We decided on something really important. To never discuss the numbers or name [the poverty measures], so we discussed methodology in the abstract. And once we had reached an accord, we calculated the poverty figure. The numbers could quickly be politicized. So, we gained credibility. And the committee dissolved soon after, when we’d finished our work around 2003. Which is the moment that the [Social Development] Law came out.¹²

As Cortés describes, the team anticipated politicization and therefore focused exclusively on methodological debates as a way to enhance objectivity and perform the work as apolitical.

Despite their best efforts, however, the work of the TCPM became overtly political upon the release of the methodology by the Secretariat of Social Development in 2002. Though the team had deliberately refused to name the measures, Secretary of Social Development Josefina Vásquez Mota renamed the measures linking them to political concepts and existing programs.¹³ The most controversial measure was released as a measure of “capabilities” which discursively linked the measure to the PROGRESA/*Oportunidades* program and to the PAN. Many in the academic community were outraged, including former members of the committee who disavowed the measure after claiming that their work had been corrupted by its subsequent naming.¹⁴

Despite the pushback, the measures were adopted as official, but the controversy intensified efforts to protect and defend poverty measurement methodology from political manipulation. This paradoxically worked to further displace substantive state-society dialog on poverty and increase expert closure on narrow and abstruse methodological debates. When the CTMP dissolved, controversy over the now official policy and measures was taken up once again in Congress. During the LVIII Legislature (2000–2003), all three major parties presented a bill to reform social development

¹² Interview, August 29, 2012.

¹³ The measures were named provisionally by the TCPM—L1, L2, and L3. The Fox administration named these measures of “food”, “capabilities”, and “assets.”

¹⁴ Interview, August 29, 2012.

with the PRD reintroducing a rights agenda. Leading the charge along with the PRD congresswoman Leticia Burgos was newly elected congress member Julio Boltvinik who was recruited by the PRD to help craft the technical portions of the bill and a social scientific appendix that emphasized the importance of establishing an official, multidimensional poverty measure, specified a set of the social rights indicators to be calculated into a global poverty index, and outlined a methodology (Maldonado Valera 2013).

After much debate, the Social Development Law passed unanimously in both houses in 2003. The Law framed universal social rights as indispensable for social development and enumerated a number of rights necessary for overcoming poverty, vulnerability, and marginalization including the right to health, nutrition, housing, education, work, social security, a healthy environment, and protection from discrimination. Moreover, the bill explicitly outlined the responsibility of the state to guarantee these rights and created a new independent organization charged with producing and evaluating policy in the hopes of increasing public accountability.¹⁵

Many see this law as a successful democratizing force, but in fact, it restricts non-expert participation in subsequent policymaking processes. Whereas the failed 2000 PRD proposal included participatory mechanisms and direct civil society oversight, this version and the decree that followed limited participation to knowledge-making, which in turn establishes it as the main instrument of horizontal accountability. The bill's technical appendix—which was crucial for obtaining consensus in Congress—specifies the importance of establishing an official poverty measure and reduces discussion of social rights to a set of indicators to be calculated into a global poverty index. Moreover, rather than a citizen commission charged with adjudicating the rights-guarantees and violations of social policy programs (as the original bill had promised), the law includes a provision for a council of experts—later named the National Council for Social Development Policy Evaluation. The law emphasizes expertise and the technical autonomy on matters of evaluation and measurement, conferring upon the Council the highly technical task of establishing the proper metrics for measurement and evaluation. The bill's proponents defended the law's focus on methodology as a way to ensure that rights would be integrated into social policy, and the creation of an expert council as a mechanism for increasing vertical and horizontal accountability. If the central goals of the PRD's original 1997 bill—which more closely reflected civil society demands—were to increase the role of citizens in policymaking and to introduce a rights-based approach to social development, the Social Development Law elevated the role of experts and institutionalized expert closure. By inscribing rights as indicators and creating a council tasked with poverty measurement and evaluation, Congress bypassed the opportunity to challenge the status quo with alternative approaches to poverty alleviation and narrowed the scope of potential participation and public accountability. Indeed, as the Council formalized their work, the focus over the coming years turned to the technical task of revising the poverty methodology before arriving in 2010 to a new multidimensional poverty method (CONEVAL 2014).

¹⁵ The Social Development Law can be accessed here: http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/ref/lgds/LGDS_orig_20ene04.pdf

Conclusion

In contrast to existing scholarship, we argue that alternative institutions—the Social Development Law in Mexico and the caste-wise enumeration in India—may fail to bridge gaps in democratic accountability through the retreat to method. Thus, the caste census, whose original intent was to give an accurate count of all castes for the purposes of affirmative action reservations in India, was relegated from the widely respected decennial census to a revised BPL count, where it has since languished and produced no concrete caste-wise numbers as of this writing. Likewise, demands to strengthen social rights and expand participation has turned into a much narrower program that is perhaps faithful to methodological heuristics and innocuous to competing political elites, but serves far fewer Mexicans than once envisioned. Much of this took place after state elites had conceded to grassroots demands for fear of losing ground to opposing party and civil society actors. From that point onward, the demands were debated in terms of methodological concerns that formed the rationale for changing those demands during policy formation and implementation. Meanwhile, civil society actors were at best consigned to an advisory position, in which their role was limited—once again—to commenting on issues of method.

In sum, our findings suggest that alternative institutions may be structured to short-circuit demands from below, especially when countervailing arms of the state are complicit in undercutting vertical accountability. In keeping with the quality of democracy tradition, we must continue to scrutinize the extent to which government transparency and institutional innovation make the state responsive to the people. This is more than exposing “how the sausage gets made” in that it illuminates a pattern of practices across disparate cases that unnecessarily undercut efforts to strengthen social democracy.

Future research in this area should center on variation in outcome and case selection with a mind towards disrupting the retreat to method. With respect to outcome, the retreat to method in our cases succeeds over the objection, and sometimes even with the support, of civil society actors. What are the conditions under which the retreat to method succeeds or fails? The answer seems to turn on how far civil society makes it through what Antonio Gramsci might call the “trenches” of the system. In this paper, we compare cases in which excluded groups successfully negotiate the terrain of civil society and the related arena of legislative politics only to encounter centralized bureaucratic institutions that are resistant—ostensibly for reasons of methodology—to carrying out civil society demands.

Further, we might ask whether success or failure depends on the particular policy arena. Our preliminary impulse is that the retreat to method is more likely to occur in the realm of social policy, or policy efforts to redistribute resources away from elites. In both cases, the implemented democratic reforms fall short of intentions after experts retreat into backrooms to make decisions, which paradoxically bear the mark of democratic legitimacy. Policy centered on the expansion of political rights is less salient in our cases. For instance, India has universal suffrage and voter turnout is relatively high. More contentious and thus more vulnerable to the retreat to method are policies designed to reduce structural inequalities, which are not necessarily addressed by formal juridical rights under liberal democracy. These questions and more comprise the horizon for research at the intersection of democratic accountability and the sociology of knowledge and expertise.

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