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Weathering the Storm: Navigating Political Transitions During a Research Project

Partnering with governments on research projects is a great way to ensure buy-in to rigorous research from policymakers, but it comes with a unique challenge: **those policymakers can change due to political transition or staff turnover in the middle of a study**. When that happens, what does that mean for the research? Months of organizational planning typically go into a research project, and the prospect of blowing it up and doing something new can be daunting. In this blog post, we discuss IPA Mexico's experience working through a political transition and what it's taught us about how to effectively partner with policymakers more generally, and outline a few strategies that may be applicable to other contexts as well.

On July 1, 2018, a wave of political change crested in Mexico, with elections introducing a new president, new majority in Congress, and a new mayor of Mexico City. These elections occurred in the midst of a series of research activities on policing led by researchers Rodrigo Canales and Mushfiq Mobarak and IPA in close cooperation with government agencies in Mexico City.

Whether political transitions result from elections, an administration's reshuffling of its appointees, or any number of other causes, they can throw a wrench in researchers' best-laid plans. Evaluating public programs at scale, providing technical assistance to government units, or working with policymakers to consolidate and scale effective new ideas all take place slowly and methodically, and they depend on strong, lasting relationships with partners in governments. In the best case, a transition means that those relationships need to be reaffirmed and rebuilt, even if a project remains a policy priority; in other cases, a new decision-maker can deprioritize the project or bring it to a halt altogether.

In Mexico, the research team was able to continue its projects as the new government arrived. In fact, as work winds down on the original two streams of work, IPA and our

affiliated researchers are now embarking on two new studies informed by the new government's priorities (at both the national and city levels). One study, which includes a staff member working on a daily basis with Mexico City's Ministry of Citizen Security, is working to adapt and implement the California Partnership for Safe Communities' "Ceasefire" model in Oakland, CA in Mexico City. The other evaluates community outreach through a model of community policing with problem-oriented policing.

While we were able to continue and expand IPA's work with the government during this transition, it was (and continues to be) a challenge. Below, we outline a few strategies that we've found effective for maintaining and furthering our relationships with policy partners during turbulent times.

Understand the possibility of change, and prepare ahead of time. Research projects are full of unexpected challenges. For example, one that the team encountered in the course of this study was an earthquake in Mexico City in September 2017. Compared to a natural disaster, elections come with plenty of warning, and there are steps a research team can take to prepare for them. In this case, the research team decided at the beginning of the project in 2016 to sign an agreement with the government spanning three years—knowing that the elections would come in 2018 and fully intending for the project to continue afterward. Putting this agreement in writing helped to build the case for continuing the work after the changes in leadership in 2018.

Another step the team took was following developments in the election closely and connecting with each party's candidates' teams before the election to provide non-partisan information about the state of the research and the evidence around public security before the election happened. These conversations with the competing parties were a way to discuss the ongoing work and build buy-in for its continuation. We emphasized that the research itself is non-partisan, dedicated to the common goals of improving policing and reducing crime.

Be open to new priorities. Any time a new government is elected, they'll likely have a set of policy priorities that's different from their predecessors'. In our case, we found that the new city government's chief priorities were straightforward interventions to reduce crime and violence. These weren't incompatible with ours, but it meant refocusing our work and reorienting the new projects we were developing. For example, while we had invested lots of time and effort to produce recommendations for improving implementation of the CompStat system, we put this work on hold for a few months based on the feedback we got about what would be feasible and useful from the government's perspective. The result has been a pair of exciting new projects on problem-oriented policing and focused deterrence of violence, and opportunities to forge new relationships while answering questions that are urgent for the government.

Know when to back off. Many government units deal with an overload of urgent priorities, and this is especially acute for security and police departments. Research projects are often competing with violent crime, gangs, and natural disasters—so knowing when to push and when to wait is a vital skill for the success of a project. This is especially heightened in times

of political transition, which come with added stress and activity. In this project, it has sometimes meant maintaining our relationships and demonstrating our value in low-touch ways as we wait for the dust to settle. A couple of the specific ways we did this here were to produce a model for a georeferenced crime prediction system, and to proactively document existing government work on the issue of citizen participation in security. While these had not initially been part of our work plan, they each used the tools we had to address issues that the new government considered urgent, building buy-in for further work down the road. Governments are used to researchers trying to access data without offering much that's tangible in return, and offering to collaborate in a way that's genuinely helpful for them can generate lasting positive relationships.

Cultivate champions in the government—and understand their limits. Our engagements in the Ministry of Citizen Security have been structured around one high-ranking political "champion" who acts as a key point of contact and advocates for our work, as well as other champions in middle management who help us move forward with our agreements in practical ways. Having figures like these has been vital, and we have worked over the long run to establish trust.

Champions also each come with their own strengths and weaknesses. Some have lots of political power but may not be completely on board with the research priorities, while others who understand the research deeply may not have the same sway with their colleagues. It is important not only to think about who your allies are and what they can do, but also where their weaknesses lie and how you can shore them up elsewhere while retaining the important relationships. For example, a low-level staffer with high knowledge of the research process may not be able to ensure that their higher-ups buy in, but they can point you to the people you need to convince and provide strategies for connecting with them based on their expertise.

In general, we are always on the lookout for allies who are excited about the research we're doing, both within the teams we're working with directly and beyond them, and we take the time to communicate about our work with most anyone in the government who's interested.

Prepare for uncomfortable situations, and know how to stand your ground. The world of policing in Mexico City is dominated by men with a very specific worldview. As a young woman with a background in policy, Marina, the Policy Manager has had to work hard to be heard by people who've built their careers very differently. One thing she has learned over time is that they speak in a complex set of jargon and idioms, and she has spent a lot of time inside this world learning through trial and error, so that when she needs to explain something like experimental design, she can communicate in a way that earns their trust.

In sum, our experience has taught us that as researchers, it can be best to go into policy engagements with a flexible model. Some things are non-negotiable—namely, the rigor, relevance, and impartiality of the research itself—but within these bounds, we have found success in being responsive to changing priorities from our partners. We believe that planning for this kind of flexibility from the beginning can help researchers create lasting, impactful policy engagements.

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