

Indicators of Democracy: The Politics and Promise of Evaluation Expertise in Mexico

Diana Graizbord. Redwood City, CA, Stanford University Press, 2025.
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Mexico's democratically elected government recently decided to dismantle many of the relatively autonomous public oversight bodies that were created as part of its gradual regime transition. This action highlights tensions between majority rule and public accountability. Advocates of this rollback underscore those oversight bodies' limited results, whereas critics see evidence of authoritarianism. Democratic reformers had high expectations of those oversight bodies, including the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), the subject of Diana Graizbord's book *Indicators of Democracy: The Politics and Promise of Evaluation Expertise in Mexico*. For example, an opposition senator charged that the government wanted "to disappear CONEVAL because they don't want a third party to review whether [they] are stealing from social programs, or whether they are using them for electoral purposes"¹. This accusation reflects the tone of the debate, yet it is puzzling for two reasons. First, that senator represented a former ruling party that was infamous for both corruption and political use of social programs; second, in practice, the government's social policy evaluation agenda was quite technical and never considered either corruption or political manipulation to fall within its mandate.

This contemporary debate underscores the relevance of *Indicators of Democracy*. This important and original study uses institutional ethnography to shed light on the inner workings of one of Mexico's premier "technodemocratic" institutions. In a country where changes in poverty levels and the performance of social programs are highly politicized, CONEVAL's mission was to use its relative institutional autonomy and high levels of technical expertise to measure both—becoming a global thought leader in the process. This study effectively situates these institutional dynamics in the broader context of a state that sought to bolster public sector legitimacy and effectiveness via a wide range of agencies that included nonstate notables in leadership or advisory positions—known in Mexico as "citizenization."

Indicators of Democracy unpacks the agendas and production processes that drive evaluations, emphasizing the sense of mission of technodemocratic reformers who envisioned "evaluation as the ethical practice of a responsive state promoted by civic-minded civil servants" (106–107). The study addresses "what it takes to

¹ Mayumi Suzuki y Mayolo López, "Avala Senado extinción del Coneval; pasan funciones a Inegi," *Reforma*, June 26, 2025.

produce social program evaluability” and examines “the intra-bureaucratic struggles to render programs visible and measurable” (166).

Originally propelled by the high-profile impact of Mexico’s foundational conditional cash transfer program, the government’s subsequent two and half decades of investment generated an evaluation industry. Government evaluators, academic experts and specialized civil society actors formed a community of practice that treated beneficiaries of social programs as targets, and only occasionally as data sources. For CONEVAL’s methodologists, to engage with citizens more substantively would “compromise the objectivity of M&E and the legitimacy of the technodemocratic project” (167–168). In contrast, evaluators assumed official government program data were valid. Graizbord also identifies tensions between evaluators’ career aspirations and their democratic ethos, especially regarding how to assess impact, as well as whether to promote public engagement. Conflicts of interest also emerge, insofar as external evaluators have a stake in getting rehired for future evaluations.

CONEVAL’s work gained significant uptake, as shown by the growing number of collaborating federal and state programs, and, most notably, by high profile national media coverage of CONEVAL’s reports on the ups and downs of poverty trends. These poverty trend data were widely seen as an indirect assessment of government performance, so they had potential accountability effects. The contribution of CONEVAL’s program evaluations to public accountability was less clear.

Indicators of Democracy offers a balanced and compelling analysis of the politics of policy evaluation, shedding light on continuity and change in Mexican politics more generally.

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