

Special Issue

Navigating Public Administration Reforms and Democracy: Toward a Neo-Weberian State in Mexico

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This study critically examines Mexico's public sector reforms. Through an analysis of the trajectory of public administration reforms, the research reveals a historical trend characterized by mixed logic, weak institutions, and limited capacity. Recent reforms have exacerbated these issues by centralizing power within the executive, militarizing the administration, and heightening concerns about democratic backsliding. The study underscores the need for Mexico to enhance state capacity and democratic governance, as these issues are persistent and escalating. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the applicability and readiness of countries like Mexico to adopt the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) model. The study also outlines an overarching agenda for advancing a more coherent and democratic approach to public sector reform inspired by the NWS framework, offering strategic insights for policymakers and scholars.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Latin American governments have attempted to grapple with complex issues that have threatened to destabilize societies in ways akin to “system quakes,” a sequence of crises undermining public administrations’ capacities to cope with unexpected events (Bouckaert & Galego, forthcoming). These challenges range from mass migration, environmental decay, and public health emergencies to violent crime, endemic corruption, and entrenched social inequalities. Moreover, recent political developments in countries such as Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Argentina have raised further doubts about the region’s capabilities to navigate and overcome social and political problems effectively (Cárdenas, 2010; González-Vázquez et al., 2023; Lotta, Morales, et al., 2023; Piccone, 2019). Understanding institutional and organizational change patterns in the region remains crucial in this context. Examining how these countries adapt their government structures and processes can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms that induce or prevent change and, more critically, into the persistent weaknesses that characterize many Latin American public administrations (Peeters et al., 2024).

Political dynamics have largely shaped patterns of institutional change in the public sector in Latin America within a context of democratic instability (Hammergen, 2018; Peters & Filgueiras, 2022). Bureaucratization has also played an important role in guiding public administration reforms in line with strong presidential systems prevalent in the region (Polga-Hecimovich, 2021). Despite these challenges, the trajectory of reforms in the region, at first glance, seems to mirror those seen in other parts of the world. In Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, for example, many reforms after democratization in the 1980s initially followed a New

Public Management (NPM) approach, emphasizing privatization and market-oriented strategies. By the 1990s, the focus began to shift toward network governance. The New Public Governance (NPG) movement, in particular, championed reforms aimed at enhancing “institutional mechanisms to coordinate social actors in a network to change the decision-making process and influence policy construction” (Peters & Filgueiras, 2022, p. 300).

As an alternative to the NPM and NPG models, researchers have proposed the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) to analyze public sector reforms (Drechsler & Kattel, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The NWS emphasizes democratic principles, innovation in governance, effective delivery of public services, and the active involvement of citizens in the policymaking process (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). However, while governments have successfully applied the NWS framework in some European contexts, its application in the Global South, and particularly in Latin American countries, has been very limited (an exception to this are the cases of Uruguay and Costa Rica; see Ramos & Milanese, 2020, and Pallavicini, 2021). And, more recently, the case of Brazil is presented (Lotta & Gomide, 2024). In the broader Latin American region, there have been some attempts to explore similar agendas, often through the lens of the “Neo-Developmentalist State” (Boschi & Gaitán, 2009; Bresser-Pereira, 2011). However, these efforts have been relatively uncommon and have predominantly focused on specific political movements in South America (Boschi & Gaitán, 2009; Ramos & Milanese, 2020). Furthermore, Pollitt and Bouckaert’s (2017) examination of public administration reforms among countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) excludes those from Latin America.

This study fills this literature gap with a preliminary examination of Mexico’s public sector reforms through the lens of the Neo-Weberian State. We address questions regarding the alignment of Mexico’s public sector reforms with the NWS model, the preparedness of the Mexican public sector to manage ongoing challenges, and the potential for adopting the NWS as a template for future reform in Mexico. Our analysis delves into the historical and current reform efforts within Mexico’s public sector, revealing a nuanced evolution of changes. By conducting a historical and qualitative content analysis of reforms to the Law of the Federal Public Administration (LOAPF, its acronym in Spanish), we identified 77 reforms. Given the accelerated pace of reforms during the last two governments, this paper focuses on the reforms between 2012 and 2024 by content-analyzing 39 instances classified as organizational, incremental, and radical.

These reforms have generally navigated between attaining elements of the traditional Weberian State and incorporating some aspects of NPM and other post-Weberian approaches (Arellano-Gault, 2000; Cejudo, 2003). Yet, they have struggled to effectively address the country’s long-standing challenges in the public sector. Moreover, recent initiatives by the current administration have raised new concerns, including further erosion of state capacity, the weakening of democratic institutions, and an increased militarization of the public administration. This blend of historical and contemporary reform patterns cast doubt on the immediate applicability of the NWS model in Mexico.

Based on the previous analysis, this paper outlines a vision for a viable NWS in Mexico, promoting an agenda for future public sector reforms to drive meaningful, coherent, and enduring transformations. This strategy envisions a democratic, strong, and capable state that effectively collaborates with private and societal stakeholders, guaranteeing resilient public governance to resolve the country’s many urgent problems. The following section contextualizes the NWS and its applicability in Latin America by situating this theoretical debate in the region. Next, we present our methodological approach and data. We then provide a historical overview of public administration reforms in Mexico, covering the period from 1920 to 2024. We discuss specific reforms to the Law of Federal Public Administration (LOAPF) to understand current changes and challenges. Finally, we offer a discussion and concluding remarks on the pathways toward the NWS for Mexico.

2. Contextualizing the Neo-Weberian State and Its Application to Latin America

As Bouckaert (2023) pointed out, researchers have misleadingly simplified public sector reforms as a shift from the bureaucratic “old model” to the neoliberal “new model.” Notably, the NPM emerged as a significant force in late 20th-century public sector reforms, particularly endorsed by the OECD’s “Modernising Government: The Way Forward” (2005) as a framework for understanding and guiding governments through modernization initiatives and capacity-building. However, it has become increasingly clear that relying predominantly on market mechanisms

(NPM) or network-based approaches (NPG) to navigate crises —ranging from natural disasters and pandemics to financial turmoil— is often inadequate and can even be detrimental (Bouckaert & Galego, forthcoming). Furthermore, scholars have disagreed on whether NPM or NPG provide adequate models for explaining or characterizing public sector reform in countries like Mexico (Cejudo & Pardo, 2016). Bouckaert (2023) advocates for a more integrated public governance model that harmoniously incorporates three foundational elements: hierarchy, market, and network. This triadic approach forms the essence of the Neo-Weberian State, emphasizing a balanced and effective public governance structure capable of addressing complex challenges.

As conceptualized by Pollitt and Bouckaert, the Neo-Weberian State incorporates new elements into the Weberian model, extending beyond the traditional bureaucratic logic behind modern public administration (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Originally a descriptive concept rather than a normative paradigm, researchers have used the NWS to analyze public sector reforms as an alternative to New Public Management and New Public Governance (Byrkjeflot et al., 2018). The model comprises two main theoretical assumptions:

- (a) the State remains a strong steering and regulating presence within society, and (b) the State is consistently modernizing, professionalizing, and seeking improved efficiency. The core claim is to modernize the traditional state apparatus for enhanced professionalism, efficiency, and responsiveness to citizens (Pollitt, 2008, p. 14).

Although scholars have predominantly explored the NWS model within European settings, its relevance and effectiveness in other contexts, such as Latin America, warrant further empirical investigation. Specifically, when considering Mexico and other countries within the Latin American region, it is essential to account for the unique political and institutional histories that have shaped state development in the region (Peters & Filgueiras, 2022). These patterns often diverge significantly from those observed in Western countries. Understanding these differences is key to assessing the potential for adopting and adapting the NWS model to address the specific governance challenges and opportunities in countries like Mexico.

Factors such as military competition, economic consolidation, and the homogenization of populations have primarily shaped state formation in Western Europe. In contrast, colonial legacies, reliance on commodity-based economies, and deeply rooted social and economic disparities affected state development in Latin America (Saylor, 2014). Against this backdrop, public sector reform in the region has frequently been reactive and prompted by crises (Ramió, 2001; Ramos & Milanesi, 2017). The necessity to establish a manageable and responsive public sector in the face of institutional fragility, a patrimonial culture, low professionalization and high politicization of the public administration, and limited public trust in government have been the typical drivers of reforms (Cejudo & Pardo, 2016; Grindle, 2012; Nef, 2012; Pardo, 1991; Peeters & Campos,

2023). More recently, the rise of (neo-) populist politics in Latin America over the past decade has coincided with an increased risk of democratic backsliding, including a trend toward limiting citizens' rights, implementing or deepening austerity policies, and sidelining or dismantling traditional administrative structures (Pinheiro-Machado & Vargas-Maia, 2023), which may have likely hindered accountability and effectiveness, and eroded the rule of law throughout the region (Corrales, 2020; González-Vázquez et al., 2023; Hunter & Vega, 2021; Lotta, de Lima, et al., 2023).

Adopting the NWS framework without carefully considering the previous context may lead to a distorted analysis, potentially overshadowing the unique challenges and characteristics of the Mexican public sector. An alternative approach to assessing the NWS's viability in Mexico involves examining the country's public sector development and its present capabilities. This investigation begins with analyzing the historical trajectory of institutional reforms leading up to the current state. Subsequently, we focused on reforms to the Organic Law of the Public Administration occurring in the last two governments to understand Mexico's current political, bureaucratic, and administrative scenario.

3. Methodology and Data

In the following sections, we first introduce a historical analysis of the trajectory of public sector reform in Mexico. We then analyze and provide evidence of recent changes in the public sector using a discourse content analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Gee, 1999; van Dijk, 1997). Researchers use this method to analyze policy frames, which are content-specific regarding policy issues, stakeholders involved in policymaking, and ideas expressed in policy documents. Implementing a similar method of sequencing policy documents developed by Galego (2023), this paper presents a sequencing of the reforms made to the Mexican Ley Orgánica de la Administración Pública Federal (Law of the Federal Public Administration or LOAPF by its acronym in Spanish). The sequencing basis is the date of issue and publication of these documents. The current LOAPF, established in 1976 during President José López Portillo's administration (1976–1982), has undergone numerous amendments accessible via the Congress digital repository.¹ The government reformed the law 77 times between 1976–2024, evidence of a trajectory of continuous change (Table 1).

However, per Table 1, the bulk of reforms (~50%) concentrates between 2012 and 2024. From these, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) under Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency enacted 25 reforms, while the Movement of National Regeneration (MORENA) during Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration implemented 14 (Figure 1). This situation means that for the second part of our analysis, from the 77 reforms, we examined 39 in detail. We

coded each document and examined the main objectives of each reform using content discourse analysis, which helped identify three categories of reforms: organizational, incremental, and radical. *Organizational reforms* involve changes to the federal administration's structure, processes, and functions, such as modifying personnel, ministries' attributes, and federal-level functions. *Incremental reforms* are gradual amendments to laws and policies, adjusting some content to align with current discourse. *Radical reforms* are comprehensive and fundamental, addressing systemic issues by revoking articles and paragraphs to propose new content for the law.

4. Historical Trends of Public Sector Reform

Before analyzing recent reforms, it is essential to outline the historical trajectory of public sector reform within the Mexican federal government, which "operated through different political logics," that is, different underlying models of change and modernization (Becerra et al., 2000; Pardo, 2021, p. 220). This historical perspective provides context and depth to the analysis. We can divide the evolution of reforms into three phases, each integral to understanding the broader landscape of public sector changes (Table 2). By examining these phases, we can better comprehend the shifts in governance strategies and their implications for contemporary reform efforts.

The initial phase consists of reconstructing the central administrative state after the Mexican Revolution and its expansion during the second half of the 20th century. Next, to some extent, neoliberal ideas and NPM influenced a second phase, spanning almost four decades following the structural reforms of the 1980s (Muñoz, 2004). The deliberate yet conflicting development of a public sector that displayed a mix of traditional Weberian and post-Weberian (NPM) attributes predominantly characterized this period, marked by Mexico's transition toward multiparty democracy.

In contrast, the third period following 2018 marks a clear departure from the previous reform path. The principal characteristics of this phase included a diverse and sometimes incongruent assortment of disruptive reforms rather than incremental changes. A populist sentiment and a yearning for the pre-1980s reform paradigm propelled these reforms. Notably, this period exhibits, at least rhetorically, a rejection of NPM and the global reform model endorsed by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (cf. Knox & Sharipova, 2023). This shift reflects a broader reassessment of Mexico's reform trajectory and calls for a reflection on the applicability of the NWS model.

¹ <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/ref/loapf.htm>

Table 1. Reforms to the LOAPF made by each administration since 1976

Presidents/Political Party	Period	Number of Reforms
José López Portillo (PRI)	1976–1982	3
Miguel de la Madrid (PRI)	1982–1988	6
Carlos Salinas de Gortari (PRI)	1988–1994	6
Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (PRI)	1994–2000	7
Vicente Fox Quesada (PAN)	2000–2006	9
Felipe Calderón (PAN)	2006–2012	7
Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI)	2012–2018	25
Andrés Manuel López Obrador (MORENA)*	2018–2024	14
TOTAL		77

Note: *Reforms happening in 2024 are only until June 1, before the general elections.

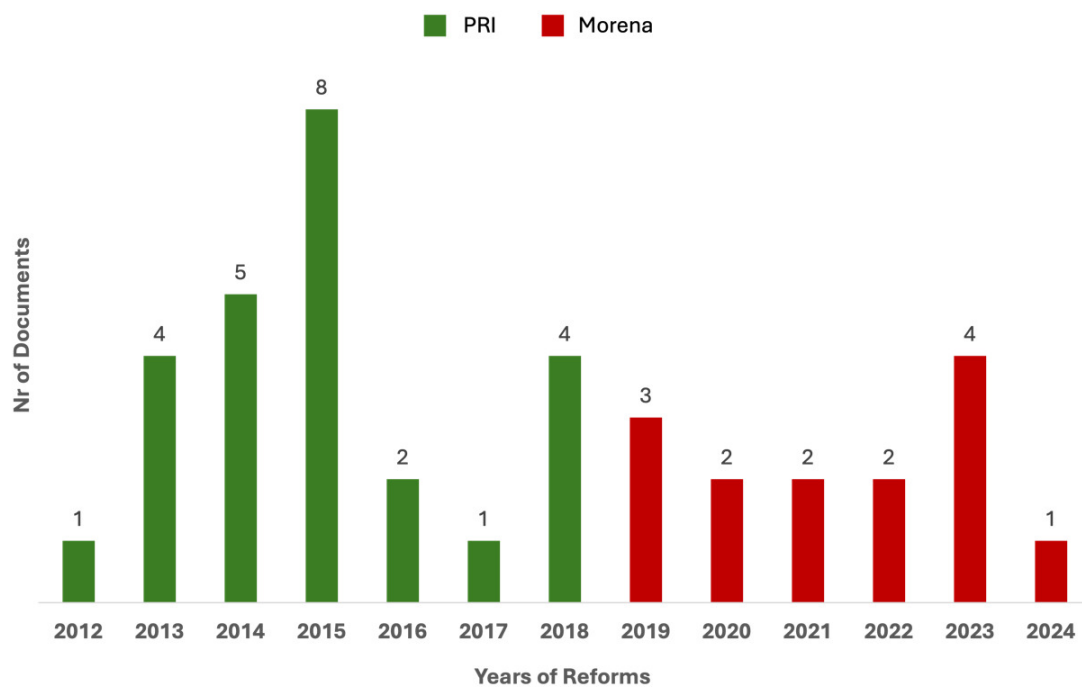


Figure 1. Frequency of reforms made between 2012–2024

Table 2. Overview of the Mexican public sector reform trajectory, 1920–today

Period	Public Sector Reform
1920s – 1982 Post-revolutionary authoritarian regime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Re)construction and expansion of the central administrative state • Corporatism, patronage, and subordination of the public administration to party politics
1982 – 2018 Neoliberalism and democratization period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mix of Weberian and post-Weberian reforms • Fiscal reform, state retrenchment, and (some) NPM-inspired reform programs
2018 – today	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Return to the state,’ militarization and illiberal reform

4.1. Post-revolutionary period and authoritarian regime

The early decades of the 20th century were a period of profound upheaval and transformation for Mexico. The Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920, one of the deadliest

conflicts in the Americas, and the economic recession from 1929–1934 presented the nation with formidable challenges. During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), the political landscape underwent significant change. Cárdenas transformed the ruling coalition into the

Partido de la Revolución Mexicana, structuring it on a corporate model. This evolution eventually led to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, by its Spanish acronym), which assumed a dominant position in Mexican politics. PRI effectively governed Mexico as a one-party, authoritarian state from 1946 until the end of the 20th century.

Under PRI's rule, a sturdy presidential regime with a strong central government emerged, led by civilians—a notable deviation from the military-dominated governments common in many Latin American nations (Aboites & Loyo, 2010; Córdoba, 1972). However, this consolidation also stifled the development of a robust and independent civil society (Somuano, 2011). The 20th-century Mexican State also inherited and perpetuated specific characteristics from its past, including deep-rooted patrimonial norms, widespread corruption, hyper-legalism and formalism, and deep regional and social inequalities (cf. Nef, 2012).

The post-World War II era marked a pivotal juncture in Mexico's political and economic landscape. The government embarked on rapid industrialization, catalyzing a significant societal shift. Over a few decades, Mexico transitioned from a primarily rural society to an increasingly urbanized one. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the country experienced brisk economic growth and fiscal expansion during the "Mexican miracle" (Sherman, 2010). However, this era ended abruptly with the 1982 economic crisis, which heralded a radical shift in the country's economic model and precipitated a wave of structural changes in the public sector (Ai Camp, 2010). The end of the century saw economic turbulence and the decline of the authoritarian system, the weakening of PRI's political machinery, and growing electoral competition in the political system (Merino, 2003). This period set the stage for significant reforms, reshaping Mexico's political system and laying the groundwork for the public sector transformations that would follow in the subsequent decades.

4.2. Trends of public sector reform – Neoliberalism and Democratization, 1982–2018

Over the ensuing decades after the 1980s, which witnessed Mexico's transition into a competitive multiparty democracy, public sector reform adopted a more comprehensive and, at times, radical character, aiming to establish a more manageable, modern, effective, and democratic public administration (Cejudo, 2008). Four main change trends emerged during this period, delineating the country's public sector reform trajectory (cf. Cejudo & Pardo, 2016).

First, paralleling developments in Western states, the government emphasized the efficiency and effectiveness of public bureaucracies. Economic liberalization and Mexico's integration into the North American economic sphere primarily propelled this initiative, sometimes justified in contemporary models like NPM (Aguilar, 1994; Loaeza, 1994). These changes entailed a series of structural modifications within the public sector, such as aggressive downsizing of the central government, privatization of public enterprises, and the decentralization of social services toward subna-

tional governments aimed to increase efficiency and reduce bureaucratic burden.

Second, another significant trend observed was the strategic retraction of the State, paralleled by the establishment of new regulatory regimes and increasing government regulatory capacity (Jordana, 2010). This shift also involved encouraging private and social sectors to get involved in areas traditionally dominated by the public sector, and pendular movements of deregulation and reregulation (Snyder, 1999). New legal frameworks and semi-independent or fully independent regulatory agencies (IRAs) characterized this trend. These entities, operating in critical sectors such as economic competition, telecom, and the oil and energy markets, were responsible for ensuring more efficient and effective regulation. This expansion marked a significant transition in the State's role from direct provider to overseer, at least in some critical policy arenas.

Third, there was a concerted effort to develop and fortify the technical capacity of key public agencies responsible for strategic policies and state functions, such as implementing monetary policy, guaranteeing freedom of information, or organizing and overseeing national elections. This trend focused on creating technical specialization and promoting independence from the executive branch, leading to the creation of initially decentralized and later fully autonomous institutions like the Central Bank of Mexico, the National Institute of Transparency and Access to Information (INAI), and the National Electoral Institute (INE). This move toward bureaucratic autonomy marked a significant shift from the traditionally centralized and "hyper-presidential" Mexican public administration.

Finally, the democratization process catalyzed diverse reforms to render public organizations more controllable, accountable, and responsive to transparency and public integrity demands. These reforms addressed entrenched issues of corruption, malpractice, ineffectiveness, and mismanagement within the public sector. Strategies employed included enhanced congressional oversight, the introduction of performance evaluations, professionalization of the civil service, transparency, open government rules, and various anti-corruption initiatives. While these reforms partly reflected global trends in public administration reform, they also echoed a classical Weberian ethos, prioritizing the rule of law and vertical oversight over agencies and public servants.

These reforms achieved mixed outcomes. Some initiatives, like freedom of information reforms, succeeded notably (Berliner, 2014). Others, such as anti-corruption and professionalization efforts, yielded limited results (Valverde, 2018), and the government discontinued them over time or ended in disappointment (e.g., attempts to establish a central civil service; see Grindle, 2012; Mendez, 2016). However, these trends brought about significant changes within the Mexican public sector, fundamentally altering its functioning, significantly reducing its size, stabilizing public finances, and redefining the State's regulatory role.

Mexico's reform trajectory from 1990 to 2018 exemplifies an incremental, "layered" approach to public sector change

(cf. Knox & Sharipova, 2023). More importantly, however, it highlights a tension between two fundamentally different models: while some reforms reflected a post-Weberian and NPM model prioritizing flexibility, effectiveness, responsiveness, and enhanced regulatory state capacity, many others were traditional Weberian, emphasizing hierarchical control, development of classical line bureaucracies and adherence to the rule of law. Rather than a clear departure from traditional, centralized models to more decentralized, autonomous structures, Mexico's reform trajectory exhibits conflicting logics, neither altogether abandoning a Weberian model nor fully embracing NPM or other post-Weberian approaches (cf. Bouckaert, 2023). This tension has two critical implications. First, as several scholars noted, the impact of NPM reforms in Mexico was limited (Cejudo, 2008). Second, public sector reform produced inconsistent and often weak administrative institutions (Brinks et al., 2020).

4.3. Mexico Today: Between the “Return of the State” and Democratic Backsliding

Since the current government's election in 2018, it has implemented several reforms, signaling a departure from liberal democratic principles (Talanquer, 2020). Notably, the government has dismantled public institutions and reduced budgets allocated to key policies, including environmental protection and education. A more significant concern is the president's assault on some fundamental institutions, including the judiciary, as evidenced by a proposed constitutional reform advocating for the general election of judges to the Supreme Court, bypassing the traditional process of presidential appointment and Senate confirmation (Reuters, 2023). These patterns of change indicate a democratic backsliding trend in Mexico, aligning with broader patterns observed in Latin America, where electoral shifts from center-left to populist politics have fueled democratic erosion (Corrales, 2020).

The presidency of López Obrador marked a notable shift from the patterns of public sector organization and public governance established by previous Mexican administrations. From the beginning of his term, López Obrador adopted a stance often critical of established institutions, employing populist rhetoric characterized by intentional polarization, nationalistic appeals to sovereignty, and a tendency to oversimplify complex government issues. His daily press briefings transformed into forums for critiquing governmental and non-governmental actors that diverged from his perspective, including the judiciary and the media. Further, López Obrador frequently confronted civil society organizations involved in anti-corruption, women's rights, and human rights defense. Additionally, he demonstrated a marked skepticism regarding the effectiveness and role of key regulatory agencies. This break with the past has also manifested in actual and attempted public sector reforms. We can identify at least five trends post-2018, reflecting the distinct direction of the López Obrador administration.

First, there has been a conspicuous re-centralization of administrative power in the president and an erosion of independent checks and balances. López Obrador revitalized the patronage-based spoils system and established parallel

structures that bypass traditional bureaucracies (González-Vázquez et al., 2023). Further, the president has attempted to reduce the autonomy of different constitutionally autonomous organizations (like the electoral authority) and has proposed a sweeping reform of the Supreme Court and the judiciary (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021). The previous represents a return to strong presidentialism and a significant change in the public sector's balance and distribution of power after democratization.

Second, contrary to his campaign promises of reducing military involvement in civil affairs, López Obrador expanded it significantly. The military, already engaged in emergency management and public safety tasks in previous administrations, now takes on a broader spectrum of responsibilities. These include constructing and managing public infrastructure, distributing fuel and medicines, and overseeing customs and seaports. This extension of military duties into civilian domains marks a profound change in the role of the armed forces in the Mexican public administration.

Third, the government has strategically reallocated public funds under the guise of austerity. This reallocation favors infrastructure projects and direct cash transfer social programs that have become a flagship for López Obrador's political movement. At the same time, austerity measures and changes in policy priorities have decreased the real value of public wages and have meant dismantling some key public services (most notably in the healthcare sector) and eliminating longstanding programs, such as the social inclusion program PROSPERA (Dávila Lárraga, 2016).

Fourth, there is a rhetorical shift toward a “return to the state” and explicitly rejecting neoliberal reforms. This shift is evident in recent reform proposals advocating for the State's role, often at the expense of the private sector. Efforts to provide more favorable terms to the State in contracts and public works have been notable. The government has also proposed unilaterally revoking public contracts to suit governmental interests and introduce the “administrative trust” principle. This principle would allow for an exception regime, facilitating the development of public projects without (initial) compliance with environmental or security regulations.

Finally, several administrative reforms initiated during the previous decades have stagnated, or the government has reversed them. Notable examples include the educational reform of 2012, the anti-corruption reform of 2015, and the creation of independent regulatory agencies. This approach included questioning, interfering, or threatening to eliminate organizations such as the National Electoral Institute (INE), the Federal Antitrust Commission (COFECE), and the National Institute of Transparency and Access to Information (INAI). This reversal might indicate a significant transparency, accountability, and bureaucratic autonomy setback.

5. Recent Patterns of Reform in the Federal Administration

Beyond the general trends previously identified, the content analysis of the reforms to the LOAPF can provide fur-

Table 3. Contents of the reforms to the LOAPF, 2012-2024

<i>Types of Reform</i>	<i>Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018)</i>	<i>Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024)</i>
Organizational	Organizational changes to the composition of ministries; Amendments and transference of specific attributions of the Ministries of the Navy and the Interior. Reinforcement of the organizational structure of the executive branch by shifting attributions, personnel and their functions. Reforms also specify the organization of accounting commissions, committees, and councils in the different administrative units.	Organizational changes intended to increase the functions and authority of the Ministries of Defense, the Navy, Communications and Transportation, and the Public Service.
Incremental	The government made incremental changes to improve services, coordination, and collaboration among ministries. Reforms included developing and implementing professionalization initiatives and changes to telecom service provision and regulation.	The government made incremental changes to transfer functions from one ministry to another, adding Indigenous and Afro-descendants as explicit beneficiaries of services and programs. The inter-ministerial strategy included the Army for climate change mitigation. The Ministry of Communications was responsible for access to digital information and school connectivity.
Radical	The government introduced reforms to “Amparo,” limiting its application; it created the Ministry of Culture.	Reform of the National Administration of Assets. The Ministry of Defense will lead the national strategy for public safety.

ther insights into current changes that characterize the Mexican public administration. In particular, reforms implemented during the last administration of the neoliberal period (2012–2018) and the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) can illustrate recent tensions and challenges. For both administrations, we highlight the main topics of reforms and their objectives (Table 3). We identified and analyzed trends in reform types according to the categories previously introduced (organizational, incremental, and radical changes).

5.1. Peña Nieto’s Reforms

After the PRI returned to power in 2012, Peña Nieto’s government implemented extensive administrative reforms that altered part of the federal public administration’s organizational structure and procedural rules. These changes began early in his administration by reorganizing some of the 16 ministries. One controversial reform in this regard involved amendments to Article 27 concerning the powers of the Ministry of the Interior, granting it the authority to present executive decrees and bills to Congress and to nominate public servants and diplomats (Reform of April 20, 2014). This reform sparked a judicial conflict that ultimately led to its repeal by the Supreme Court.

Other reforms further modified and reorganized various ministries’ organizational structure and authority. For instance, the government tasked the Ministry of the Navy with the surveillance and protection of coasts and ports (which was previously the responsibility of the Ministry of Communications and Transport). At the same time, the Ministry of the Interior became responsible for the online platform where merchant laws would be published (previously done by the Ministry of Economy). Additionally, reforms to the General Law of Accounting and the Federal Law of Budgeting introduced new accounting procedures and structures, including creating accounting commissions, committees, and councils.

Incremental reforms refer to gradual and evolutionary changes to laws and policies. Peña Nieto’s administration saw several reforms introduced to foster collaboration and professional development within the federal public administration. For example, reforms proposed the creation of a collaborative inter-ministerial commission to enforce the new General Law for Climate Change. Other reforms aimed to enhance the professionalization of public servants by providing better training and courses. Additionally, reforms to Article 31 altered the procedures for procurement, contracting services, and managing COMPRANET, a central registry for all public purchases made by the federal authority. Further incremental reforms sought to strengthen the regulatory powers of the federal government. For instance, the Ministry of Communications and Transportation received new powers to oversee the telecom market. At the same time, the Ministry of the Interior was responsible for monitoring media content to ensure compliance with children’s and human rights protections.

Radical reforms fundamentally alter structures or create entirely new procedures or responsibilities. For example, a reform to the use of the legal protection resource (Amparo) limited its application in cases where Congress opposed the nomination of federal public servants, thereby curbing the executive branch’s power to appoint key positions freely. Another radical reform involved Articles 26 and 38 changes, which established a new Ministry of Culture with independent functions, mission, and organizational structure, responsible for developing a new cultural and art policy.

During Peña Nieto’s administration, the pattern of reforms primarily focused on reorganization and incremental changes within the federal administration. These reforms aimed to consolidate preexisting systems and enhance various ministries’ and administrative units’ autonomy and authority. The nature and extent of the reforms during this period primarily reflected a strategy of consolidation and gradual improvement rather than sweeping, radical

changes. The relative absence of radical reforms underscores the incremental and layered character of the administration's approach, prioritizing stability and continuity while making targeted enhancements to the existing framework.

5.2. López Obrador's Reforms

As previously discussed, President López Obrador pursued an agenda of radical reform driven by a vision of a historical mission and the necessity for rapid and effective change. His administration implemented several significant changes to the public administration, many of which marked a departure from established trends within the federal government. Notably, López Obrador's reforms prominently featured the empowerment of the armed forces and the increasing militarization of the public sector.

During López Obrador's administration, *organizational reforms* significantly restructured the federal administration by reallocating responsibilities to the armed forces. For example, he transferred the administration of ports of entry and merchant seaports from the Ministry of Communications to the Ministry of the Navy. Additionally, his government added Paragraph XX to Article 29 of the LOAPF, establishing a new collaborative framework where the Ministry of Defense took on responsibilities related to environmental protection.

In line with the administration's militarization, López Obrador's administration introduced new regulations to govern the organization of the Air Force and the administration of airspace, including commercial and civil air traffic, which became the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense. Other significant organizational reforms included creating the Units of Administration and Finance, which centralized all administrative responsibilities of federal ministries and agencies under the Ministry of the Treasury, while the Ministry of Public Service retained some supervisory powers.

Incremental reforms during this period focused on enhancing ministerial functions and clarifying and extending rights and obligations. For instance, the most recent reform, issued on April 1, 2024, explicitly included Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities as beneficiaries of 47 benefits across various policy sectors, including education, social assistance, human rights, banking, and housing. Other incremental reforms introduced new responsibilities, such as granting the Ministry of the Interior authority over archives and data storage. Additionally, the Ministries of Communications and Transport and Defense received new infrastructure construction and protection responsibilities. The government also introduced a new coordination mechanism for climate change mitigation. Furthermore, amendments empowered the Ministry of Communications and Transport to provide digital information access and connectivity to public schools, reflecting a commitment to bridging the digital divide.

Regarding *radical reforms*, the administration introduced a new system to manage federal properties and assets, including those seized during criminal procedures. This reform transformed the National Administration of Assets

into the "Institute to Return What Was Stolen to the People." The new provisions allowed for the use of federal property and funds to finance social programs when necessary. Another radical and controversial reform involved designating the Ministry of Defense as the leading agency for implementing the national public security strategy. This strategy included transferring the civilian National Guard into the military sphere. However, the Supreme Court ultimately deemed this reform invalid on April 25, 2023. By combining these reforms with incremental and organizational changes, the government aimed to centralize control and enhance the efficacy of key areas of the administration. However, they also sparked significant debate and legal challenges.

6. Toward the Neo-Weberian State in Mexico

Given the characteristics of the reform trajectory outlined previously, we can aptly describe Mexico as an incomplete Weberian state. There have been notable constraints in the impacts of reforms inspired by New Public Management (NPM) post-democratization, leading some experts to argue that NPM in Mexico remains more of a theoretical concept than a practical administrative approach (Cejudo, 2008). Additionally, the prevailing conditions within Mexico's public sector, characterized by increased militarization, centralization of power, and antagonism toward technical autonomous institutions, cast a shadow over the prospects for a more democratic and open future administration. Consequently, Mexico's transition to a post-Weberian state, let alone a Neo-Weberian State (NWS), is far from complete.

Nevertheless, we believe the NWS framework offers a promising avenue for public administration, particularly in countries like Mexico, where it can bolster state capabilities. The NWS framework emphasizes hierarchical leadership and advocates for a more synchronized and cooperative approach to public governance that integrates market dynamics (NPM) and network collaboration (NPG). This model's design withstands the pressures of turbulent times, including unpredictable events, cascading crises, and conflicting solutions to pressing policy problems.

Mexico, currently at a crossroads due to limited state capacity and the threat of democratic backsliding, urgently requires a strategic and transformative response. As the Mexican public sector grapples with an incomplete transition to a (post-)Weberian state, issues such as limited professionalization in the public sector, weak rule of law, fragile procurement systems, unstable democratic norms, and inadequate crisis preparedness signal a public sector in distress, prone to inefficiency and dysfunction. Despite some international reports painting a rosier picture of public management reforms in Mexico (e.g., OECD, 2011, 2023), the reality often contradicts, with crises frequently mismanaged and fundamental rights overlooked.

Addressing these challenges by adopting the NWS model could pave the way for a more robust, efficient, and democratic public administration in Mexico. The new federal administration could leverage NWS principles to craft policies and promote reforms that reorganize and enhance public

sector management, strengthen democratic principles, and foster collaboration with private and social sectors. Drawing from this analysis, we propose three pillars for Mexico's future public sector reforms:

1. *Strengthening democratic foundations.* Recent trends in Mexico toward the (re)centralization of power within the executive branch and the diminishing autonomy of bureaucratic and judicial entities pose significant threats to the country's young democratic life. This drift from democratic norms and principles necessitates an urgent and deliberate reversal. The government must strengthen the foundational structures that ensure democratic accountability to counteract this trend effectively. The NWS model offers a blueprint for such a transformation. It advocates for a governance system that is robust and authoritative yet progressive and adaptive, mirroring the needs of a modern democratic state. This model underscores the importance of upholding and advancing democratic values and advocating for specific strategic interventions. Realigning Mexico's governance with democratic ideals requires enhancing the legitimacy and reliability of institutions to reinforce the framework of checks and balances that prevent the concentration of power. The government must safeguard the independence of the judiciary and key Independent Regulatory Agencies (IRAs) from political or external pressures to ensure they can operate impartially and effectively. These institutions are the bedrock of impartiality and fairness; their integrity is paramount for the rule of law. Furthermore, these measures are not merely corrective but are integral to nurturing a dynamic, adaptable, and resilient democratic system. A governance structure where transparency, openness, accountability, and the rule of law are central builds public trust and creates an environment where citizens feel represented and heard. By adopting the principles of the NWS, Mexico can chart a course back to a governance model that respects democratic norms, encourages public participation and ensures that the mechanisms of the state function as intended for the benefit of all its citizens.
2. *Boosting crisis management and adaptability.* Limited state capacity questions Mexico's preparedness and agility in facing emergencies. This deficiency underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive overhaul of the nation's crisis management infrastructure, guided by the forward-thinking principles embodied in the NWS model. A multifaceted strategy is essential to fortify Mexico's resilience against crises. This strategy involves a significant bolstering of state capabilities, including the professionalization of the civil service, to anticipate potential emergencies and mount rapid and effective responses. Enhancing the agility and adaptability of policy mechanisms is another critical component, ensuring that governance can swiftly adjust to the evolving nature of crises without bureaucratic delays.

Further, the transition toward more adaptive and flexible governance structures is imperative. This shift would enable the country to navigate the intricacies of contemporary challenges more adeptly, fostering an environment where innovative solutions can emerge. Central to this new governance paradigm is the promotion of collaborative efforts across different sectors of society and government, encouraging a collective approach to problem-solving that leverages diverse perspectives and expertise. Instituting a governance framework that values cooperation, inclusivity, and innovation is critical to effectively mitigating the adverse effects of crises. Such a model enhances the efficiency of crisis response and nurtures a culture of proactive and creative problem-solving. By embedding these principles into its crisis management strategy, Mexico can aspire to withstand the immediate impacts of crises and emerge stronger, with improved mechanisms for dealing with future challenges.

3. *Promoting inclusive governance.* Although the government has made some changes to increase the effectiveness and inclusiveness of key social programs, broad disparities in access and quality of public services remain. Such inequalities underscore the urgent necessity for governance that is more inclusive, empathetic, and responsive to the diverse needs of society. The NWS model, with its core focus on citizen-centric governance and the protection of human rights, provides a strategic framework to rectify these shortcomings. The adoption of the NWS in Mexico calls for the formulation of policies that defend the interests and welfare of these vulnerable groups and guarantee fair representation and rights protection across the board. Empathy must underpin this shift toward more inclusive governance, ensuring that all community members' voices and needs, especially those at the margins, are heard and addressed. Moreover, this model advocates for broad-based participation in policymaking, fostering a sense of belonging and valued contribution among all societal sectors. By implementing such an approach, Mexico can lay the foundation for a governance system that restores trust in democratic institutions, mends social divisions, and enhances societal resilience. This inclusive framework is essential for addressing marginalized communities' immediate needs and rights and building a cohesive society capable of withstanding and thriving amidst future challenges.

In essence, we can envision Mexico's evolution toward a Neo-Weberian State through a strategic framework that prioritizes strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing readiness and adaptability, and cultivating a governance culture that is inclusive and responsive to the needs of all. These strategic pillars provide a roadmap for Mexico's progress, emphasizing the critical alignment of its governance practices with the tenets of the NWS. While the challenges are substantial, the NWS framework emerges as an instrumental resource for evaluating current shortcomings

and steering Mexico toward a public sector that is more robust, agile, and committed to upholding democratic principles and human rights.

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