



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

WEATHERING THE STORM: FELIPE CALDERÓN'S OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENCY, MEXICO, 2006—2012

SYNOPSIS

In 2006, incoming Mexican president Felipe Calderón had to work quickly to deliver on ambitious campaign promises that included improving infrastructure and confronting organized crime. Limited by his country's constitution to one six-year term, Calderón, a hands-on manager, sought to ensure coordination and follow-through among members of his Cabinet by creating a strong Office of the Presidency. At first, he appointed Juan Camilo Mouriño, a close aide and political adviser, to head a centralized office that combined political and policy responsibilities in his chief-of-staff role. Later, Calderón moved Mouriño to the Cabinet, shifting political responsibilities out of the office, flattening the structure, and assuming more-direct management responsibility than he had exercised as president earlier. Mouriño's untimely death later the same year coincided with twin crises that tested the office and the presidency. Although Calderón's tenure demonstrated successful planning and coordination, his experience also illustrated the limitations of an organizational structure that relied too heavily on the chief executive's participation.

Robert Joyce drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Mexico City in January 2015. Case published in June, 2015.

INTRODUCTION

Gerardo Ruiz Mateos, head of the Office of the Presidency and secretary of economy under Mexican president Felipe Calderón, compared the presidency to the captain of a ship in treacherous seas. "You have to manage the chaos and keep the ship on the right course," Ruiz said. "You need to move the ship sometimes because there's a storm. You can change course, but you cannot change the destination."

Calderón, 44, won Mexico's 2006 presidential election by a razor-thin margin. Running as the candidate of the incumbent National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional,

or PAN), he had received 36.7% of the vote, barely beating Democratic Revolution Party candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who garnered 36.1%. A third major candidate, Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, captured 22.7%.

Calderón took office amid uproar in the streets. Unwilling to concede, López Obrador protested the results for weeks and staged his own mock inauguration. His allies in Congress temporarily blocked Calderón's way into the legislature building for the oath of office.¹

For the new president and his team, the chaos of those early days foreshadowed the years

ahead, when unanticipated challenges would arise in rapid succession. During the campaign, Calderón had made bold promises to Mexican voters. For example, he aimed to expand Seguro Popular, a health-care program aimed at low-income citizens, which had been established by his predecessor, Vicente Fox, who was from the same political party. He set a goal of universal coverage by the end of his administration. He also favored heavy investment in transportation infrastructure to improve mobility and open markets—a step that could reduce the vulnerability of inaccessible towns to capture by drug cartels. Finally, Calderón focused on addressing the country’s worsening security situation. He had pledged to increase the capacity of security forces and improve their employment conditions in order to better confront increasingly bold criminal organizations.

Calderón and his team needed a way to deliver on those lofty goals and respond to unanticipated challenges. From the start, the question was how to balance the immediate with the strategic. Implementing an ambitious agenda and managing the chaos required an effective Office of the Presidency. After the July election, Calderón tapped two top aides—Juan Camilo Mouriño, his former undersecretary of energy, and Ruiz, a major campaign fund-raiser with private-sector management experience—to design and organize an office that would enable him to deliver on his priorities.

THE CHALLENGE

Colleagues described Calderón as a hands-on manager. A lawyer with a master’s degree in economics, Calderón had won election to Mexico City’s municipal assembly at the age of 26 and served as PAN’s national party president in the late 1990s before earning a second master’s degree from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He then served as head of the national development bank and as secretary of energy during Fox’s administration.² The media

said he held strong views, had a reputation for being stubborn, and was wary of people outside his small inner circle.³ He told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2006 that he was “firm and demanding,” possibly to a fault.⁴

According to some of his aides, Calderón believed administration-wide coordination had weakened under the Fox administration, and he wanted to ensure his Cabinet concentrated on achieving his vision during his six-year term.

Mouriño and Ruiz aimed to create an Office of the Presidency that could operate effectively amid day-to-day strains on its focus and capacity. They had some flexibility, because Mexican law gave presidents broad leeway to shape the office as they saw fit and because newly established civil services rules did not extend to the office’s political posts.

Priority setting and planning were crucial functions, and Mouriño and Ruiz had to decide whether the functions would be handled within the Office of the Presidency or by a government secretariat (also called a ministry). Mexican law required new presidents to submit a governing plan to Congress within six months of taking office.

The Office of the Presidency also had to advise Calderón on emerging issues and problems, as well as provide specific kinds of information the president needed to make key decisions. José Luis Méndez, a Mexican presidency scholar and former Fox speechwriter, said he considered this function the most important. “The success of the Office of the Presidency has to do with controlling the government,” he said. “But that is not the most important criterion. The most important criterion is the capacity of the Office of the Presidency to help the president make good decisions, to think and act strategically.”

Communications and Cabinet coordination were two other crucial functions. The Office of the Presidency had to communicate the administration’s strategy and progress to

Congress, where Calderón had to work with two opposition parties; to Mexico's citizens broadly; and finally to the world. To be effective, the new president had to persuade Congress and the public that government policies would be not only carefully considered but also well implemented. A strong communications effort would bolster the administration's relations with Congress, keep political opponents at bay, and foster public support. "Communication is everything," said Sofía Frech, who headed planning early in the Calderón administration.

In coordinating Calderón's Cabinet, the Office of the Presidency would be responsible for managing Cabinet secretaries who had their own goals and for helping them deliver on the president's priorities. "The president will always have problems trying to control and trying to get the Cabinet secretaries to do what he wants," said Méndez. "Even if in Mexico the president appoints a secretary close to him, the secretary to some extent or another will play his own game."

The design of the office also had to accommodate Calderón's aptitudes and style. Past presidents had molded the office to reflect their personal approaches to government. Carlos Salinas (1988–94) had a powerful chief of staff and an expanded Office of the Presidency. Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) had eliminated the chief of staff position, reduced the profile of the Office of the Presidency, and relied on several top aides for support.

Vicente Fox, the first president in more than 70 years who was not a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, had structured his presidential office along thematic lines, concentrating on high-visibility priorities such as government innovation and relations with indigenous communities. Each specialized office had its own head, who reported directly to the president. Fox delegated many decisions to Cabinet secretaries and demanded little coordination among agencies and secretariats.

"There was a feeling that in President Fox's Cabinet, everyone did whatever they wanted," said Ernesto Cordero, who headed policy development for Calderón's campaign. "It was like a Montessori Cabinet, as the press called it. Calderón didn't want that." (Montessori is an educational approach based on giving young students independence in their decision making.) Calderón's Office of the Presidency had to strike a balance between central control and delegation.

Calderón's staff "wanted a design to make things happen," said Cordero, who served as secretary of social development and, later, finance. "The office had to be designed to be strong enough so that the Cabinet [secretaries] paid attention to the president's guidelines but at the same time assumed responsibility for their own jobs."

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Alejandro Poiré, a political adviser and, later, secretary of governance, outlined the decisions the Calderón administration worked through while designing the Office of the Presidency. "At the beginning of the administration, it was crucial that we clarify our goals," he said. "What do you want to do? How do you want to go about it? What is the role of the Office of the Presidency?"

Calderón assigned Frech to draft the administration's governing plan and set priorities ahead of the December inauguration. Mouríño and Ruiz worked with other advisers to organize the Office of the Presidency and decide on its responsibilities.

Setting goals

Although law required him to submit a National Development Plan for his term, Calderón wanted to set longer-term goals for his country. Aides said the president looked to establish national objectives that would help shape priorities not only for his administration but also for succeeding governments. "He wanted to see

the Mexico of the future,” Frech said.

Rolando Rodríguez, who was with the planning office, said there was a tendency in Mexico to reinvent goals with every administration. Calderón’s objective was “to try to imagine how Mexico would be—not just in six years, the constitutional period of the president, but in 20 years,” Rodríguez said.

The goals and aspirations established in the long-term plan, called Mexico Vision 2030, set the course for the programs and targets of Calderón’s term, ending in 2012. The two documents constituted the main focus of planning during the early months of the administration.

“Vision 2030 served as a broader, longer-term set of goals and also as a more ambitious project that would help us align the priorities of the president and the administration,” said Poiré.

“He called for a collaborative and deliberative process to define a common vision for 2030,” said Janet de Luna, who worked with Frech on the project. “We produced a qualitative vision: a description of what we wanted in terms of the economy, social policy, and more.”

“We were working on the Mexico we wanted to have, no matter which party was in power,” said Rodríguez.

To draft the document, Frech worked with policy scholars; solicited public input online, by phone, and via regional forums; and developed national goals in the same subject areas Calderón had prioritized during his presidential campaign.

The thinking that went into Vision 2030 informed the creation of the National Development Plan, the five-year outline due to Congress by the end of May, 2007 covering 2007–12. The two plans covered parallel subject areas, and each was consistent with Calderón’s election platform, according to Cordero. The goals and indicators developed for Vision 2030 were scaled down to where they could be expected to be in 2012, the end of Calderón’s term, according to de Luna and Rodríguez. The development plan and

the subsequent policy sector programs, contained road maps drafted by the 19 secretariats and included targets to achieve the broader national goals. “The planning office staff asked ministries to estimate what the goal had to be for 2012 considering the vision that was being defined for 2030,” de Luna said. “In each sectorial program, you could trace how they would contribute to the National Development Plan.”

Calderón released Vision 2030 in May 2007; the National Development Plan came out immediately after.

Designing the Office of the Presidency

In organizing Calderón’s Office of the Presidency during the transition period, Ruiz and Mouriño faced three related decisions. The first had to do with whether to create a chief of staff position or its equivalent. Former president Salinas’s chief of staff had played a powerful role, but Presidents Zedillo and Fox had preferred to work with small inner circles of top aides.

A second decision involved whether the Office of the Presidency should take over budget responsibilities from the powerful Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit. Shifting budget authority to Calderón’s office would tighten the president’s control over funding and create strong leverage over line secretariats to deliver on the president’s priorities, but it also left no doubt in people’s minds where responsibility for failure would lie if a policy went awry.

The third decision centered on legislative affairs. When Calderón took office, the Secretariat of Governance, similar to the ministry of interior in other countries, handled relations between Congress and the administration as well as interactions with state and local governments. Direct involvement by the president’s office could help Calderón signal his priorities more clearly and give negotiations a higher profile.

Ruiz and Mouriño researched best practices on all three issues and spoke with former



presidential staffers around the world. They traveled to the United States and conferred with former chiefs of staff and former top aides. They also met with former European presidential staffers. In Mexico, they learned from the experiences of former chiefs of staff and presidency officials. Transition staff also played a role by collecting published material on the British government's experience and soliciting the opinions of scholars of the US presidency.

This process left Ruiz and Mouriño with two main takeaways: First, the structure of the Office of the Presidency should reflect the personality and working preferences of the president. And second, positions in the office should reflect the expertise and competence of the incoming president's team.

Mouriño and Ruiz had little trouble deciding that the administration needed a position equivalent to a chief of staff. Ruiz said his talks with former presidential staffers revealed that someone in an administration typically emerged as a de facto chief of staff even if no such position

existed, as aides jockeyed for influence with the president. Méndez pointed out that certain aides in the Fox administration eventually took over the role of chief of staff.

Further, the chief of staff role was the logical position for Mouriño, whom Cordero described as "definitely [Calderón's] closest aide and a very dear friend." Besides having a long relationship with the president, Mouriño was respected politically across the administration and well versed in policy matters. In the Office of the Presidency, he would be the focal point of policy and politics.

Speaking with former presidency staff in other countries also persuaded Ruiz and Mouriño to leave the budget and legislative relations functions in their respective secretariats. The two decided it would be better to delegate legislative and budget battles, freeing them to concentrate the strength of the Office of the Presidency on dealing with coordination, pursuing follow-up, and providing timely and comprehensive advice. In addition, attempting to expand the presidency

and its direct responsibilities could raise political questions and fuel additional opposition.

“At the time it was tough to change many things. All eyes were on us,” Ruiz said. “You cannot just go in and increase the budget of the presidential office.” He also recalled a former presidential staffer’s telling him, “You want people to have different fuses to burn before they get to Los Pinos [the presidential compound].”

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Calderón had explicit priorities when he took office in December 2006. While his Vision 2030 and National Development Plan were released months into his administration, Calderón worked on his objectives from day one. He relied on his Office of the Presidency to advise him on day-to-day decisions, coordinate and follow up with Cabinet secretaries, and communicate his agenda.

Setting the course

Frech and the rest of Calderón’s team had to sift through proposed policies and programs to settle on priorities that would plot the course for the new administration as well as lay the foundation for the National Development Plan and Vision 2030.

To ensure that administration officials were all on the same page, Frech organized multiple planning sessions before and then throughout Calderón’s term. At these sessions, senior presidency officials and Cabinet secretaries would discuss the administration’s priorities. Calderón also spoke and answered questions.

Frech discussed planning and delivery strategies and posed challenging questions about risks and opportunities. “It was a very rigorous exercise,” she said.

“One of the toughest jobs at the beginning was making sure we didn’t have too many priorities,” Poiré said. “That’s tough, but it’s essential. There are only so many things a presidency can do in terms of its time, its staff, its

focus; and that’s why it was very important at the beginning to make sure the ministries were aligned.”

Not surprisingly, some line secretariats were reluctant to adopt ambitious national objectives that would be made public in Vision 2030 and the National Development Plan. While the two documents were released later, and sections of Vision 2030 contained insights into the goals and indicators Calderón’s team had discussed during the transition period and early in the term.

Vision 2030 aimed to establish specific goals for Mexico in some 28 areas. Under economic targets, for example, the document said: “In 2006, GDP per capita was \$8,020. By 2030, we want it to be \$29,000.” Some, however, dealt with factors outside the secretariats’ control: “In 2005, the Networked Readiness Index of the World Economic Forum ranked Mexico as 56th among 125 nations in terms of technological development and public access to it. By 2030, we want to be among the 20% of countries assessed as best by this index.” Because the statement required measurement relative to other countries, secretariats had little control over achieving the objective.

Although the target-setting discussions encountered some predictable difficulties, the process helped elevate the importance of shared goals in the Calderón administration. “We wanted to make sure the president’s priorities were everybody’s priorities,” de Luna said. “It was a good exercise. It wasn’t fully successful, but it helped clarify what we cared about.” Planning sessions continued every year or so and were opportunities to return to the administration’s original agenda, reflect on progress, and recalibrate activities and responses.

Ruiz and Frech narrowed down the number of projects for which the Office of the Presidency was responsible, based on political significance, impact on citizens, and feasibility. “It wasn’t a mystery,” said Frech. In the end, Calderón

selected the projects he most cared about and wanted regular updates on. The natures of the projects ranged from universal health-care coverage to specific infrastructure projects.

Creating the organization

On December 4, 2006, just a few days after taking office, Calderón issued an executive order that set the initial structure of the Office of the Presidency. The order said the office “should carry out interagency relationships with other bodies . . . with the purpose of directly informing the President of the Republic and making the management of the Federal Public Administration more agile and efficient.”

The order created six units within the Office of the Presidency to deal with the tasks of the office. The units handled several tasks: coordination with Cabinet secretariats, advising the president, communications, scheduling, image and opinion tracking, and administrative support.

As head of the office, Mouriño managed all units and quickly earned a reputation as a proxy for Calderón and a pivotal player in the administration. “He was a sort of prime minister from the Office of the Presidency,” Méndez said. Cabinet members understood that Mouriño spoke for the president, and he took on most of what was considered the Secretariat of Governance’s role in negotiating political deals for the administration. Méndez compared Mouriño’s role in Calderón’s administration to former president Salinas’s chief of staff, who was the most powerful in memory.

“Calderón made it clear to everyone that [Mouriño] was the first guy to speak to him in the morning and the last guy to speak to him at night,” Cordero said.

“All the people who came with Calderón into office recognized [Mouriño’s] leadership,” said Tomislav Lendo, a speechwriter for both Calderón and former president Fox. “I think for President Calderón, [Mouriño] was someone he

relied on very much in political terms.” During the early months of the administration, Mouriño worked hard to build support for Calderón in the face of continuing protests regarding the legitimacy of the election.

The unit in charge of Cabinet coordination was particularly important, and Calderón appointed Ruiz to head the operation. With Ruiz’s input, the new president revamped Fox’s Cabinet coordination department to reflect the new president’s more-detail-focused governing style. The executive order divided the roughly 60-person unit into four offices that would follow up on Cabinet working groups and a strategic planning office. A technical secretary led the coordination effort for each of the working groups, which included Cabinet secretaries related to four subject areas: social issues, the economy, infrastructure and tourism, and security.

Frech headed the planning office, a function that had fallen by the wayside in recent years, according to Cristopher Ballinas Valdés, a scholar of public management. In 1976, incoming president José López Portillo created the office of budget and planning in the Office of the Presidency. A few years later, the office became its own secretariat, remaining so until the finance secretariat took over budget and planning responsibilities in 1992. In the Salinas administration (1988-1994) the planning secretariat was the most powerful in the Cabinet, however, since 1992 the finance secretariat had struggled to centralize the process, and each ministry had produced its own plan, according to Ballinas.

By blending the planning function into the Office of the Presidency, Ballinas said Calderón centralized priority setting and decision-making in one place and made it clear that his planners acted in his name.

Frech and her team produced a plan for Calderón’s first 100 days in office, focusing on an equal number of actions, high-profile visits, and

announcements.

Among the other five units of the Office of the Presidency, the advisory group was important for providing expert counsel. The group included experts who often were chosen to supply advice in such areas as the economy. Those advisers helped craft Calderón's responses to developing or ongoing events.

The communications function was spread between two groups. An image and public opinion unit combined functions that had been separate; it tracked public sentiment on policy and sought to build support for the president and his projects. The separate social communications unit worked on speeches and media strategy.

Calderón had no official spokesperson. During Fox's administration, Calderón had viewed the position as mainly cleaning up after the president's poorly received comments, and he did not want anyone doing that for him, according to Lendo, who served as head speechwriter in the social communications unit. Under Calderón, the press liaison issued statements and coordinated with the media but did not hold briefings, Lendo said.

Several administration officials said the communications function was disorganized and weak. Outreach and public relations were especially poor, according to Frech, because the administration had no system for dealing with individuals or groups with special interests in certain policies or decisions.

The Office of the Presidency remaining two units dealt with relatively routine functions. The private secretary, a long-existing position, handled Calderón's schedule, correspondence, and travel; and an administrative unit took care of internal office finance.

Administration officials suggested that Calderón made some organizational decisions with personnel considerations in mind, such as the creation of separate units for image and public opinion and social communications. Aides said

the president sought to avoid placing in government positions above or below one another any two people who had been equals in his campaign organization.

Although Calderón favored loyal aides for high-level posts in the Office of the Presidency, senior managers hired their deputies based on academic credentials and experience. Many of the second-tier staff had advanced degrees in management, policy, or specific subject areas.

By early 2007, the Office of the Presidency had about 500 mid- or high-level staff with policy responsibilities, according to an article by Méndez. Estimates from Ruiz and Frech agreed with Méndez's estimate.⁵

Cabinet meetings and follow-up

Rather than meeting regularly with the full Cabinet, which represented a broad spectrum of disparate responsibilities, Calderón convened working groups of certain Cabinet members to focus on specific policy issues. For roughly the first two years of his administration, the president met weekly with each of the four working groups set up through the Cabinet coordination unit. Initially, that unit was run by Ruiz and overseen by Mouriño, who, along with each working group's technical secretary, set the agendas for those meetings, which only secretaries were permitted to attend.

Issue-based meetings of specific Cabinet members enabled Calderón to keep his finger on the pulse of major programs, projects, and problems. "We put two things in front of the president: things he wanted to see and things that needed a decision," Ruiz said.

Technical secretaries played significant roles prior to and during working-group meetings by ensuring that only important topics reached the president. Before each meeting, with help from the cabinet coordinator (Ruiz) and, if necessary, the chief of staff (Mouriño), the technical secretaries tried to resolve problems involving

policy implementation. Ruiz said, “The Office of the Presidency was the last opportunity to solve a problem before it reached the president.”

Technical secretaries “weren’t auditing bureaucrats, in any way,” said Poiré, who served in that post and as spokesperson for the security Cabinet before Calderón appointed him secretary of governance. “It was the technical secretary’s job to ask, ‘Hey, have you done this, and do we know what the actual impact of this work is?’”

Technical secretaries were usually in their 30s or early 40s, with advanced degrees in either management or a field relevant to their working groups. Although most had experience in public policy, they were selected to be nonpolitical, with an eye toward small egos and teamwork.

“If you’re a good technical secretary and if the Office of the Presidency is working well, you get to bring the president only solutions that have been developed already by the staff and the Cabinet members,” Poiré said. “But every once in a while, that’s impossible, so that’s what Cabinet meetings are about.”

At the group meetings, Cabinet secretaries discussed the status of individual projects. Because Calderón took a strong interest in specific aspects of implementation, the pressure to present progress to the president was a powerful incentive for ministers to meet their targets. “When the president was involved, everything worked,” Frech said. Peer pressure from their colleagues also was an important motivator for Cabinet secretaries, Cordero said.

“Calderón was much more involved in all the details about the projects, the challenges, and the goals,” said Lendo. Fox, he said, had “a more general outlook,” and Cabinet meetings in his administration dealt mainly with broad issues, leaving specific problems to lower-level ministerial staffers.

The Cabinet coordinator and technical secretary worked with the Cabinet secretaries to implement presidential decisions. The Cabinet

coordination unit tracked progress on a computer spreadsheet program that listed each project, the project’s deadline, and the person in the administration responsible for it. The staff designed a color-coding system to ease the task of pinpointing problem areas: projects that were on schedule were highlighted in green, those needing some attention were in yellow, and those needing urgent action were in red.

Most of the unanticipated problems involved delays in meeting targets because of logistical, legal, or political issues. Because of its position within the presidency, the Cabinet coordination team could clear obstacles through multiple channels: by coordinating with multiple secretariats, by fostering communication between relevant agencies, and by reallocating resources as needed.

Attention from the Office of the Presidency raised the visibility of projects and generated pressure on senior secretariat officials to take action. If lack of teamwork among secretariats was at the root of a problem, the Cabinet coordination office could set up working groups with office space to find a solution. Similarly, presidency staff might increase funding or shift staffing.

“Most of the time, when things are not happening as expected, it’s not because someone is stalling or dragging their feet,” Poiré said. “It is because either the original diagnosis was inaccurate, or unexpected circumstances have occurred, or there’s not enough coordination or proper understanding of what is going on. For those three things, presidential staff can be crucial.”

The Cabinet coordination office favored collaboration over confrontation. Formal authority over Cabinet secretaries rested with the president, not his staff. Because the Cabinet coordination office could not simply give orders to the Cabinet, communication and cooperation were key.

“We were aware when projects were lagging behind,” said de Luna, who was in the Cabinet

coordination office during the last year of the administration. “When the Office of the Presidency became aware that projects were lagging behind, it would step in and try to set up tables to facilitate coordination or give a sense of a higher level of priority to the project.”

“My strategy was, if someone needs help, I’ll help,” said Frech, who took over as Cabinet coordinator in 2008. “The key is giving them the credit and letting them be the champion.”

Following up with Cabinet secretaries and pointing out inadequate progress on the president’s priorities inevitably strained relationships between Cabinet secretaries and the coordination office from time to time. “There could be an incredible amount of tension [between the technical secretaries and the Cabinet secretaries],” Poiré said. “All sorts of tensions. It’s a very difficult job.”

Cordero said, “The structure will create tensions between the Office of the Presidency and the rest of the Cabinet. The question isn’t, Will tension arise? It’s, how will you handle it?”

The presence of the technical secretary, the Cabinet coordinator, and the chief of staff in Cabinet group meetings was crucial for communicating Calderón’s confidence in his staff. “It’s an important but delicate balance,” Poiré said. “The technical secretary represents him, and the way the president makes sure that’s heard is that he or she was always sitting in those Cabinet meetings.”

Still, Poiré stressed that technical secretaries lacked the power to exercise the president’s authority over Cabinet members. “The model was made clear at the beginning,” he said. “It was clear that these individuals had technical authority and political authority to poke and haggle the members of the ministry and sometimes even the secretary, but ultimately, it was up to personal relationships and the ability of each of these individuals to set clear, productive boundaries.”

Ruiz said there was “not much” a technical

secretary or Cabinet coordinator could do to prod reluctant secretaries to take specific actions. When a technical secretary encountered resistance from a Cabinet secretary, the technical secretary would push the issue up to the Cabinet coordinator. If the Cabinet coordinator could not persuade the secretary or otherwise solve the problem, the dispute would go to the chief of staff and eventually the president. The possibility of Calderón’s direct involvement kept Cabinet secretaries generally in line.

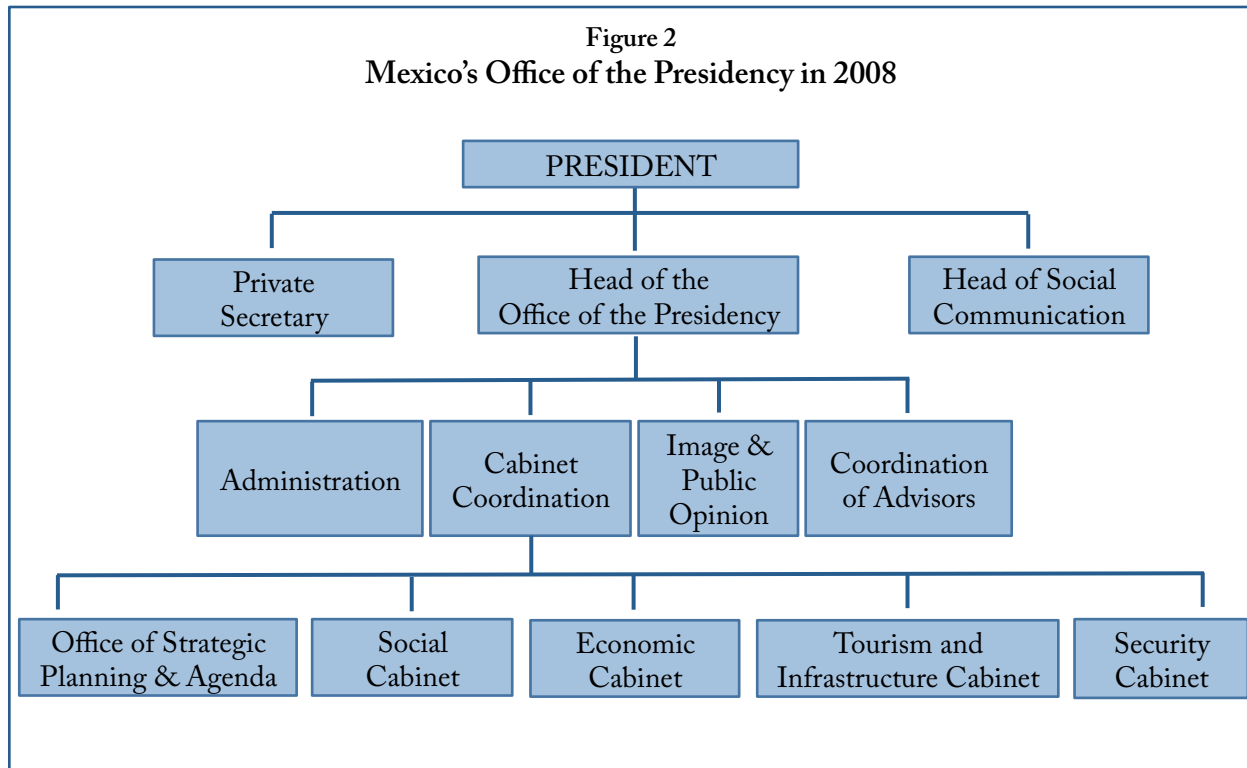
“These are human relations, this is high-level politics, and ultimately, responsibility lies with the secretary, so these relationships have to be nuanced,” Poiré said. “In the end, the buck stopped with the president and the Cabinet, as it should.”

Revamping the office’s structure

In January 2008, a little more than a year after setting the initial structure of the Office of the Presidency, Calderón appointed Mouriño, his senior political deputy, to be secretary of governance. He restructured the office and named Ruiz as head of a more horizontal organization.

The reorganization reflected Calderón’s reluctance to empower any other aide with the same responsibility he had given Mouriño. “The president didn’t give anyone else the same authority [Mouriño] had,” de Luna said. In the new structure, Calderón personally oversaw two of the six functions that had been under the head of the office: the private secretary, who handled his schedule, and the head of social communications.

Aides pointed to multiple reasons behind Mouriño’s appointment to the Secretariat of Governance. Most important, the secretariat had a political portfolio that suited Mouriño’s experience and reputation. As head of the Office of the Presidency, Mouriño had performed many of the traditional functions of the secretary of governance as Calderón’s political representative in legislative talks and other negotiations.



In addition, Mouriño, who was 36 at the time of his appointment, was a rising star in PAN. Poiré suggested Calderón might have been trying to give Mouriño more visibility and to better position him to run for president in 2012.

But although Mouriño’s appointment may have satisfied political considerations, his departure left a hole in the Office of the Presidency, where he used to unsnarl political tangles that came up in the course of policy making and implementation. Ruiz said his new role as head of the office excluded political responsibilities. He was involved mostly with Cabinet coordination, which he still supervised in addition to the coordinator of advisers, the public opinion and image unit, and administration. “Being the chief of staff does not mean you’re the chief of the entire presidential office,” he said. “You’re more a coordinator of people who report directly to the president.”

Others close to the situation said the reorganization contributed to new problems for the office. De Luna said that the reorganization

contributed to communication problems within the Office of the Presidency, which occasionally were evident to the ministries.

“Policy happens in a political environment,” Lendo said, “and to achieve your policy goals, you need to handle politics. You need a team in your office to do that.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Fate and circumstance disrupted Calderón’s plans and exposed weaknesses in the organization of the Office of the Presidency. In November 2008, just 10 months after becoming secretary of governance, Mouriño died when the government plane he was in crashed. The loss of his longtime friend and closest political confidant shook the president and added to a growing list of challenges confronting his administration.

Two problems in particular arose during that vulnerable time. First, violence and public fear were escalating amid a nationwide war between government security forces and organized crime. During 2008, the number of murders in Mexico

soared to 14,006, 58% more than the year before, according to Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography. (By 2011, the annual death toll would nearly double to 27,213.) Second, global financial markets, especially those of Mexico's northern neighbor, the United States, went into a tailspin.

The twin crises dominated Calderón's attention and reduced his personal involvement in other issues and activities that dealt with important objectives of his administration. The president met more frequently with his economic and security Cabinet groups and less with their social and economic counterparts.

Officials gave differing estimates on the frequency of Cabinet group meetings during 2008–10, the peak of the economic and security crises. The security Cabinet continued to meet weekly, and the president attended smaller briefings on specific aspects and operations. The economic Cabinet continued to meet nearly every week, according to former officials. However, aides recalled that the president met less frequently with other Cabinet groups, with estimates ranging from once every two or three weeks to only when a major problem warranted a meeting.

The diversion of the president's attention meant that Office of the Presidency staff had to push administration priorities without the constant reminder that Calderón's political will was behind them.

Mexico's deteriorating security situation consumed most of Calderón's time and energy, according to aides. Ruiz said that as head of the Office of the Presidency, he would coordinate with the security Cabinet, but that Calderón handled much of the work himself. Sigrid Arzt, technical secretary to the security cabinet, said the president was deeply involved in operational details. Frech, who took over as Cabinet coordinator in December 2008, said, "the security issue was very serious and the president was

personally involved."

The severity of the security crisis caught the administration off guard by some accounts. "We knew we had a bomb and it was ticking, but we never imagined the size of the bomb," Cordero said. "And the ticking was faster than we expected."

The collapse of world financial markets further shocked Mexicans. The country's gross domestic product contracted 1.3% in the last quarter of 2008 and continued to plummet, shrinking 4.5% in 2009, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. "Who could imagine in 2006 the size of the crisis in the world in 2008 and 2009?" Ruiz said. "Those two years of the crisis—it wasn't a storm, it was a hurricane. We needed to stop the ship." In August 2008, about two months before Mouriño's death, Calderón appointed Ruiz as secretary of economy. Patricia Flores, who had been in charge of the administrative unit in the Office of the Presidency, became head of the office.

When Mexico's economy began to recover and after PAN suffered losses in the 2009 legislative elections, Ruiz, Frech, and others looked for ways to get things done with less of the president's direct participation.

In 2010, as the economic crisis eased but the security situation remained serious, Ruiz left the Secretariat of Economy and returned to his position as head of the Office of the Presidency. He and Frech took stock of what the administration had achieved and what could still be accomplished during the two years before the end of Calderón's term. "When I returned in 2010, we needed to review the goals and say, OK, what can we get?" Ruiz said.

Frech brought in external consultants in 2010 to help evaluate priorities and sharpen the administration's focus on projects that would have the greatest impact. These advisers helped identify infrastructure and health care as priority areas. While Calderón spent most of his time on

security and, to a lesser extent, the economy, his staff did what they could to maintain progress on those and other priority programs.

Communications continued to be a weak point for the administration as the crises fueled public demand for more information from the president. Calderón and his team decided to keep the administration's message focused on security—which polled as Mexicans' top concern—rather than spread the talking points among his other priorities. But with the death toll rising, it was difficult to respond to critics of the president's security policies.

By 2010, it was clear to Calderón that he needed a new communications strategy. In August, he appointed Poiré as spokesperson and technical secretary of the security Cabinet. Poiré said the move reflected “an urgent need” for increased communication on the security issue.

“Many of the things that were done were overshadowed by public security issues,” Lendo said. “The press was interested only in public security. As the saying goes, if it bleeds, it leads.”

ASSESSING RESULTS

Former officials and observers generally agreed that Calderón's Office of the Presidency represented an improvement in monitoring, evaluation, coordination, and follow-up over the offices of his predecessors, especially Fox.

“I think Calderón's administration is a very good example of how to coordinate the priorities of the president through the Cabinet without disrupting Cabinet relations,” Ruiz said.

Cordero, who served as secretary of social development and, later, finance, spoke favorably of how the office interacted with the Cabinet. “The Office of the Presidency never let us, the members of the Cabinet, forget about the president's priorities.”

Frech said there were not enough institutionalized incentives for Cabinet secretaries to deliver on the president's priorities. Because the

system relied on face-to-face meetings, priorities shifted when crises dominated the president's schedule. Frech suggested that greater use of budget adjustments and political pressure could have improved the administration's focus.

However, other officials said Calderón's Office of the Presidency had strong incentives for Cabinet secretaries to cooperate, including direct punishment from Calderón. Ruiz estimated that Calderón removed six or seven secretaries due to poor performance in meeting targets.

Cordero said that although Cabinet secretaries were “not worried or afraid of losing their jobs,” removal was “a credible threat.”

Presidential scholar Méndez suggested that at times Calderón gripped his Cabinet too tightly. “Calderón, everyone agrees, had an extremely strong personality, to put it softly,” he said. “The secretaries were very afraid of Calderón, of being scolded in public or privately.”

Although Ruiz acknowledged the office's high level of central coordination may have slowed some administration actions, he defended the approach: “We maybe created bottlenecks, but we had order in the decision-making process.” He suggested that the office's structure suited Calderón's hands-on management style. “You adapt the office of the president in terms of the president,” he said. “We structured it by Calderón's personality. We tried to structure something to work for him. And it did work for him.”

However, the extent to which the Office of the Presidency contributed to the administration's progress on national goals was unclear. By many measures, the Calderón administration fell short of its ambitious goals. Economic growth weakened, reflecting in part the world financial crisis. Gross domestic product grew an average of 1.8% during Calderón's six years in office, down from 2.3% under Fox. In addition, the percentage of Mexicans living below the national poverty line increased to 52% in 2012 from 43% in 2006,

according to government figures. Calderón officials pointed to a combination of high expectations and unpredictable crises for the weak outcomes.

The administration made gains, however, in some priority areas including health care. By 2012, Seguro Popular, the country's flagship healthcare program, provided coverage for nearly 53 million citizens, up from under 16 million in 2006, according to the National Institute for Statistics and Geography.⁶ In August 2012, several public health scholars published an article in *The Lancet*, a health journal, proclaiming that Mexico had reached universal healthcare coverage.⁷ Still, access to quality care remained a challenge. In 2012, 21% of citizens surveyed said they did not have access to health protection, down from 58% in 2000.⁸

Mexico's transportation infrastructure also grew. In his final report to Congress, Calderón said his administration had built or modernized more than 19,000 kilometers of roads and highways, which he said was more than the previous two administrations combined.

But security troubles overshadowed Calderón's successes. Administration officials boasted of capturing and killing dozens of organized-crime bosses and arresting hundreds more and of breaking up cartels and reducing their areas of control.

The murder rate told a different story. Mexico had 120,000 homicides during Calderón's six years in office, double the number during Fox's term, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography. In 2011, murders peaked at 27,213—more than three times the 2007 total—before starting to decline in 2012, Calderón's last year in office.

"It's very tough to [evaluate success]," Ruiz said. "If you see it in terms of what we planned in the beginning, we fell short on some things; if you measure in terms of what happened during the process, we had a lot of victories."

REFLECTIONS

"Before you're in government, you can have a lot of ideas and make a lot of plans about how to run things," said Tomislav Lendo, a speechwriter under Mexican presidents Felipe Calderón and Vicente Fox. "But as you go through government, several things start happening: One of them is that you get more information, and the way you saw things at first changes because you understand the problem better. Another is that certain things come up that you didn't plan. And all those things start changing the way you run the government. Plus, throughout the period, your alliances with political forces change, as does your ability to manage your goals within the political context."

At least partially as a consequence of unforeseen events, over the course of his term PAN and Calderón in particular lost the political capital necessary to get things done. Further, the death of Calderón's closest adviser just two years into his administration, as well as twin security and financial crises, hit the administration particularly hard because of Calderón's hands-on management style. His personal involvement was a powerful incentive for coordination and follow-through. However, when his attention turned to putting out Mexico's multiple administrative and political fires, the Office of the Presidency struggled to provide an alternative motivation for the Cabinet to meet their initial goals.

Better delegation or time management could have ensured that less pressing and longer-term priorities received sufficient attention. "You have to cover the whole field; you cannot just follow the ball," said Gerardo Ruiz Mateos, chief of staff, Cabinet coordinator, and secretary of economy under Calderón.

With the president involved in so many different areas, Sofía Frech, head of planning and also a Cabinet coordinator in the administration, said getting on Calderón's agenda could be difficult.

“The most valuable asset you have is the president’s time,” she said. To ensure that day-to-day concerns did not soften the government’s focus on broader goals, she said a presidential office should be structured to deal with short-term and long-term issues separately.

Still, officials lauded the president for his allegiance to his priorities. “President Calderón had very strong discipline; he was very consistent,” said Ernesto Cordero, who led policy planning for Calderón’s campaign before serving as secretary of social development and then finance. “You could listen to one of his first speeches when he was campaigning, and you could listen to his last address to Congress; he maintained exactly the same line and used exactly the same language and had exactly the same goals.” Cordero unsuccessfully ran for president in 2012.

Calderón staffers said the president’s consistency made it easier for them to focus on goals. Alejandro Poiré, former political adviser, security spokesperson, and secretary of governance, advised mobilizing an administration around objectives. “It’s not just that the priorities are very clearly laid out—and I think it’s essential

for them to be visually laid out—it’s that you have to organize staff around enforcing those priorities,” he said.

“The specific goal doesn’t matter as much,” Poiré said. “It’s useful, because it will tell you and your staff whether you’re moving in the right direction and at the right speed or not. But it’s more than the number; it’s what it is that you want to hit. And that’s the hardest part.”

Former officials said it was very difficult for Calderón or any president to achieve definitive success on major national problems in one six-year term.

“The big things you start, you don’t finish as president. You have to be very lucky that the former president gives you something for you to give to the people,” Ruiz said. “There’s no magic. In six years, you cannot change a country; it’s impossible.”

Echoing Ruiz, Frech said, “Don’t try to change the country with one administration. You need to understand the country, the real forces of society, and the real expectations; and in that context, know where to push to start change. You have to understand the process of change.”

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