

DEMOCRATIZING MEXICO

Public Opinion and Electoral Choices¹

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How do ordinary Mexicans think about politics and specifically about elections? Are Mexicans democrats? In the late 1950s, there was evidence that Mexican public

supported aspects of authoritarianism. Despite some residual indications of authoritarian beliefs, by the late 1980s Mexicans were more likely to be interested in politics, to be attentive to political campaigns and to discuss politics freely than they had been in the 1950s.

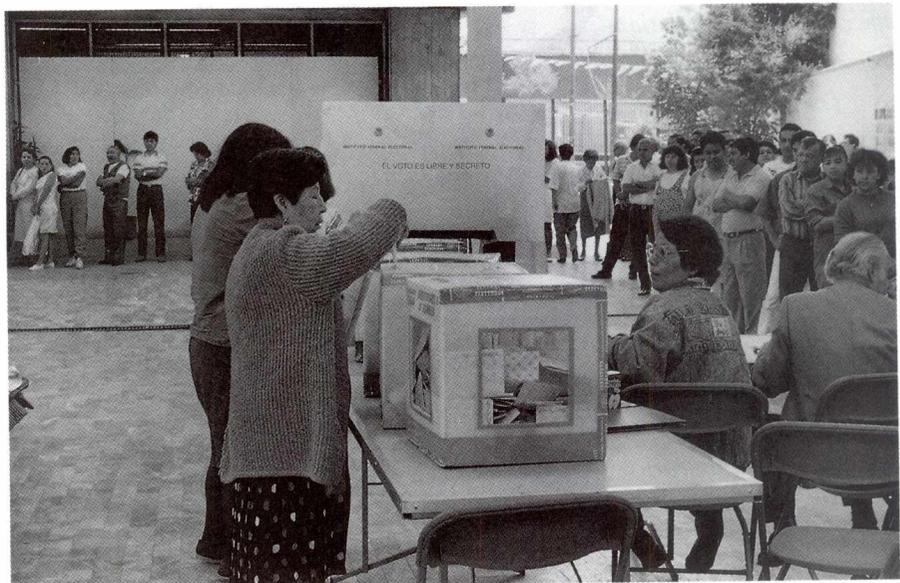
The Mexican electorate was just as politicized as the electorates of many democracies in Europe and the United States, as is clear from comparative survey data for about a dozen countries. The persistence of authoritarian practices in Mexico, therefore, was best explained in

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¹ This article is a summary, by the authors, of *Democratizing Mexico: Public Opinion and Electoral Choices* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). The book is based on data from national public opinion surveys conducted in Mexico between the 1950s and the 1990s, especially for the 1988, 1991, and 1994 nationwide elections.

terms of existing state institutions, policies and leadership choices —not in terms of the preferences of Mexican citizens. Mexicans were ready for political change.



Public participation in federal elections has grown in recent years.

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Moreover, in the late 1980s, differences in the adherence to democratic values did not distinguish between the social bases of support for the different political parties. Mexican public opinion did not divide between a party of democrats and a party of tyrant lovers. There were democrats and authoritarians across the Mexican political party spectrum. To put it more bluntly, yes, there were democrats in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and there were opposition supporters who had authoritarian values. That is why

attachment to democratic values did not explain voter preferences.

By the late 1980s, Mexicans were also polarized in their assessment of economic policies adopted by their government in response to the decade-long economic crisis. They also showed consistent attitudes across issues, e.g., in general, a supporter of freer trade was more likely to support foreign investment, while an opponent of the former was also more likely to oppose the latter. And yet, the level of issue consistency (a measure of ideology) was low.

Attitudes toward some issues, such as the privatization of state enterprises, for example, were not well related to other issues that are ordinarily considered part of the same economic package (e.g., freer trade, foreign investment). The level of economic issue consistency in Mexico on the eve of the crucial 1988 presidential election remained below the comparable level for the United States in the 1950s—a time in U.S. history marked by low ideological commitments in the public. The ideological thunderstorm of Mexico's 1988 election should not be attributed to public beliefs but to the deliberate campaign choices made by Mexican politicians.

On election day in 1988 or 1991, voter views on policy issues, consequently, had little impact on electoral choices. Supporters of freer trade, for example, could be found backing different political parties. Issue cleavages did not markedly overlap with candidate

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preferences. Mexicans were deeply divided in their attitudes toward economic issues and in their preferences for parties and candidates, but these two divisions were for the most part unrelated to each other.

In much of Western Europe and North America, voters make decisions on election day based on their



PRI voters were likely to remain loyal to their party in election after election.

assessment of how the country's and their own economic circumstances had fared in the recent past and could reasonably be expected to fare in the foreseeable future. These general retrospective and prospective "rational" economic judgments were somewhat more helpful in explaining voter choices in the 1988 and 1991 national elections but still proved much less effective than other variables. The evidence concerning the electoral impact of these assessments is stronger for the 1994 national election; these variables may well become more important in future Mexican elections.

Demographic differences were not very important or consistent explanations for voter preferences in 1988, 1991 or 1994. While it is true that the model PRI

voter is an older, little-educated woman from southern Mexico, none of these demographic criteria was statistically significant across elections. Take a long-standing assumption about Mexican parties: that the National Action Party (PAN) is a confessional party of devoted Roman Catholics. In fact, there is no significant difference in the likelihood that practicing Roman Catholics will prefer the PAN over the PRI. On the other hand, the voters for Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the Party for the Democratic Revolution



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According to opinion surveys many voters await the outcome of the PRD's reorganization.

were rather more likely to be religiously secular than the voters for other parties.

What, then, is the basis for the vote? Partisan, institutional and candidate assessments have been the foundations for voter preferences. PRI voters were likely to be loyal to their party in election after election, just as supporters of opposition parties were likely to be loyal to the opposition across elections. This is somewhat surprising because the PRI has at times been discussed as a "party without members." In the 1994 presidential election, for example, close to three-quarters of the voters supported the same party as they had in 1988.

Partisan expectations also mattered. Voters who believed that the PRI would get stronger and voters who believed that the economy would suffer or social peace be threatened if a party other than the PRI would win the election were much more likely to vote PRI in the upcoming elections. Also across these elections, the greater the approval for the incumbent president, the greater the likelihood of voting PRI. A core division existed between the PRI and the oppo-

sition parties. That was the principal basis for political controversy as Mexico lurched toward democratic politics.

Mexican elections have also been shaped by the relative capacity of parties to mobilize their own supporters and to forge strong and stable coalitions. In 1988, Cárdenas and his coalition failed to mobilize the previously unmobilized or to shift the underlying partisan allegiance of demographic or economic groups or sectors. The PAN, too, failed to expand its political base. In the 1991 nationwide congressional election, the main organizational story was the fragmentation of the Cardenista coalition. Opinion alignments had changed rather little since 1988; however, a large pool of Mexican voters still awaited the organizational reconstruction of cardenismo. It was in 1991, however, that the PAN began to expand its national base, a trend that continued in the 1994 presidential elections and especially since that time.

After decades of virtual single-party rule, Mexican citizens approached national elections by focusing on the fate of the party that had long governed

them. First and foremost they asked themselves, “Am I for or against the ‘party of the state’ and its leader?” Many voters asked themselves no other questions; they backed the PRI. Many Mexican voters were ready to vote for the opposition, however. These voters open to the possibility of being governed by a party other than the PRI asked themselves a second question: “Which opposition party?” The answer to this second question was strongly shaped by ideology, policy preferences and social cleavage attachments. There were important differences among the opposition parties. There was, therefore, a kind of “second election” between the opposition parties that competed for voters that had made the key decision to reject the PRI.

Among those Mexicans committed to defeating the PRI there were also many sophisticated strategic voters. A large minority of opposition voters wanted to defeat the government party so much that they suppressed their ideological preferences in order to back the party most likely to beat the PRI, even when such a party espoused policy views with which they disagreed. For example, in 1988 many voters with right-wing predispositions voted for Cárdenas while in 1991 many voters with left-wing predispositions voted for PAN candidates.

Scholars of Mexican elections must wonder about the distortions that fraud may introduce into the elections results. The data in our book is not suited to document the incidence of fraud but it does shed light on the effect of fraud in Mexican public opinion in anticipation of the 1991 elections. The greater the perception that electoral fraud would be widespread, the lower the likelihood of voting turnout. Fraud-

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fearing non-voters were disproportionately likely to support the opposition. Opposition campaigns against fraud, no matter how justified, backfired because many of their backers believed the allegations that there would be fraud and were more likely to stay away from the voting booth on election day.

The “geography” of fraud was also important. The PRI was most likely to commit fraud against the opposition—as evident from the 1991 exit poll—where it was strongest, typically in urban areas. Because opposition and other election observers were concentrated in such areas, this pattern of fraud also backfired on the PRI because it was more likely to be “seen”, increasing thereby the perception that fraud was even more widespread.

Ordinary Mexicans are ready for more open contested politics. They look for elections that truly serve to choose those who govern them. Our book documents their patterns of thought and behavior in the early years of this democratic opening. **W**



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Since 1991, the PAN has increased its number of voters nationally.