

Surprising elections

Presidential elections were held in Mexico on August 21. While there had been few doubts that Ernesto Zedillo —candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)— would win, the expectation was that the race would be much closer. The high percentage of votes in his favor surprised everyone.

What happened? Could it be that millions of Mexicans who live in poverty want things to stay the same? Were they afraid of change, preferring to follow the popular saying that “An evil you know is better than a good thing you don’t” —thereby giving the PRI the chance to complete 71 years in power? Was it a reprieve? Was the popular will respected?

The PRI’s victory should not be interpreted as a seal of approval for the status quo. In surveys carried out shortly before the elections, people who said they would vote for the PRI stated their dissatisfaction with the economic situation and social insecurity.

The first problem that occurred during the vote had to do with the special polling places, which were designed to serve people in transit (the elections were held during school vacations). The 300 ballots assigned to each special polling place ran out very quickly, which provoked the anger of many citizens who were unable to vote.

There were many denunciations alleging that some organized bodies affiliated to the government were transported in groups, so they could vote early on at these polling stations, using up many of the ballots.

Regarding this question, Miguel Angel Granados Chapa, political columnist and citizen advisor to the Federal Elections Institute (IFE), wrote in *Reforma* newspaper (August 22): “It was surprising to many that the ballots ran out at such an early hour; the first reports of [special] polling stations that were in this situation came in shortly after noon. A mechanical calculation suggests that it would have been necessary that one citizen vote each minute, without interruption, in order for the supply to run out in five hours.” This is without counting the fact that many polling booths took more time to be installed and, therefore, opened late to voters —the polls were supposed to operate from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Noting that he was also surprised by the preliminary figures in favor of the PRI, Granados Chapa (this time in his column of August 25) enumerated several causes that combined to contribute to the spectacular effect: “An electorate that shares the PRI’s programs and votes for that party; gratitude for the National Solidarity Program

(Pronasol) and Procampo,¹ translating into votes; the role television plays in Mexico in favor of the PRI’s cause and against the formation of a consciousness that would hope for a better world.”

The conclusions of the 150 foreign observers who participated in the “Forum of Testimony” —out of the more than 400 invited by the Civic Alliance, who were sent to 20 states of the Mexican republic— summed up the irregularities they found in the electoral process:

- Mexicans voted under pressure from government officials and organizations affiliated to the PRI, as well as the sale of benefits from government programs. Millions of citizens were affected by these pressures.
- The PRI had an enormous advantage in campaign coverage, despite mechanisms established to limit this.
- The PRI had an advantage in coverage given by pro-government media, above all television.
- The secrecy of the ballot was systematically violated in 34% of the polling stations observed, and in 17% voters were pressured by one or another political party.
- 65% of the observers reported that many citizens who had their voter identification cards were not allowed to vote because they did not appear on the voters’ list.
- There were many irregularities in the use of the indelible ink that was to be applied to each voter’s thumb: 7% of the observers reported that the ink was not used on all voters, 8% reported that polling-station officials allowed people to vote without applying the ink, and 7% found that the ink could be erased.
- More than 10% of the Civic Alliance observers reported at least one case of people being allowed to vote who did not appear on the list of eligible voters.

Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera, who resigned from the PRI some months before the elections, wrote in *La Jornada* (August 26) that the PAN and the PRD² were fighting not against another party but rather “against the professional electoral structure of the PRI, which was financed with government resources during the six years of this administration; against the government, the president, the governors and the majority of municipal presidents [mayors]; against the resources, pressures and threats of Mexico’s big businessmen; against the mass media which concealed information and discredited the opposition.” He

¹ Government public works and farmer support programs.

² The opposition National Action Party and Party of the Democratic Revolution, respectively.

warned that if a national political reform is not carried out, guaranteeing fair play and clean elections, there will be the risk that millions of Mexicans will conclude that the electoral path is not the road to change.

Reactions from the opposition

The PAN candidate for president, Diego Fernández de Cevallos—who became a favorite after his outstanding performance in his debate with PRI candidate Zedillo and PRD candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (see *Voices of Mexico* No. 28, pp. 84-98)—received a high percentage of votes. He thereby regained his party’s position as the country’s number two electoral force—a position which had previously been taken away from it by the alliance of parties that supported Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1988.

Nevertheless, many were surprised by the press conference Fernández de Cevallos and PAN head Carlos Castillo Peraza gave, in which they recognized the PRI’s victory only eight hours after the polls had closed, when results had come in from 5,258 polling stations.

Three days after the vote, one of the PAN’s most distinguished members, Vicente Fox Quesada,³ went so far as to declare: “I am reluctant to believe that Diego Fernández de Cevallos is accepting this election as clean and I am against him remaining silent, because remaining silent means endorsing this [electoral] process, which can in no way be considered just and transparent.”

³ Candidate for governor of the state of Guanajuato in the 1991 elections. While this vote supposedly resulted in a victory for the PRI candidate, the rejection expressed by the people of Guanajuato towards what they considered to be an electoral fraud led to the resignation of the governor-elect and the designation of PAN member Carlos Medina Plascencia as interim governor.

Also noteworthy is the setback the PAN received in the states where it had governorships—Baja California, Chihuahua and Guanajuato—where the PRI stated it had won the vote. Fox Quesada commented that none of the three PAN governors could accept the validity of this election, “in which the government presented the vote as society’s rejection of PAN governments.”

But the PRD got the worst surprise. While it obtained a good percentage of the votes, the figure was much lower than expected and, as mentioned above, the party went from being the second to being the third electoral force.

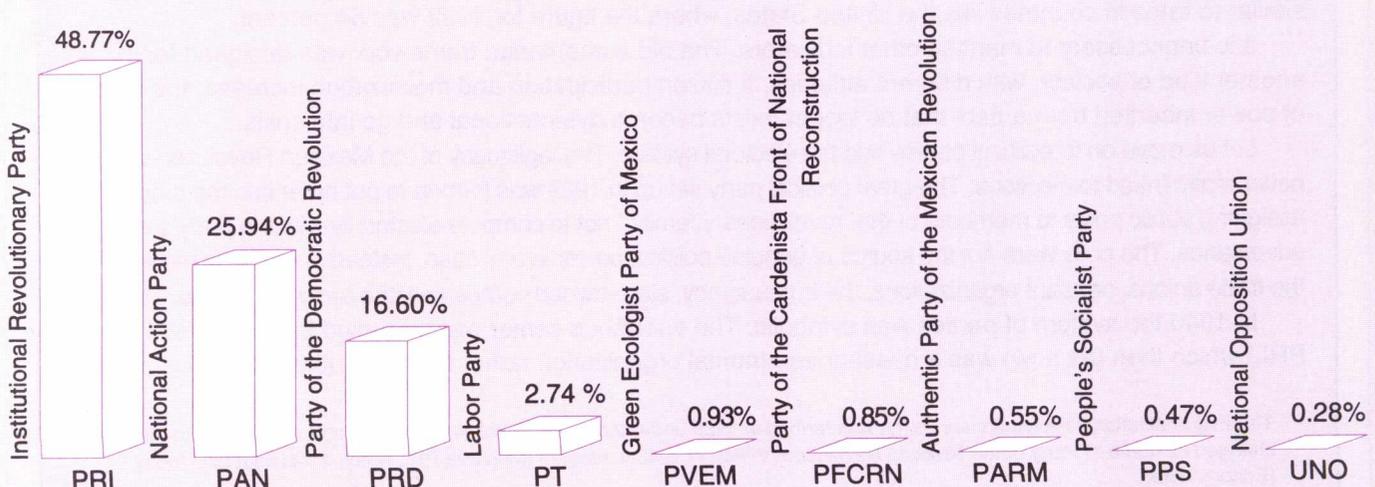
Expressing an opposite position from that of Fernández de Cevallos, on election day—after the first voting trends, favorable to the PRI, had been announced—Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas gave his own press conference, where he stated that he had information from other surveys, which favored him.

Two days later, without proclaiming himself victor in the race, he said that the results were not credible and that he was therefore issuing a call to “clean up or annul the presidential election.” On August 27, at a rally in Mexico City’s Zócalo (central plaza) which was attended by 100,000 supporters—65,000 according to the government’s figures—Cárdenas changed his party’s strategy. He did not call for mobilizations, rallies or *plantones*.⁴ Instead he called for joining forces to achieve a “great national dialogue,” but later he changed his mind.

He stressed: “We do not seek power at any price. We do not want violence. Our paths will continue to be those of civic action and peace. These are times for keeping alert and

⁴ *Plantones* are sit-down (or camp-out) protests in the streets or in front of government offices. The “government-party regime” means the rule of a party with official status as *the* ruling party.

Final results of the presidential elections



Source: Federal Elections Institute (IFE).

A new political consciousness in Mexico

The political system which is presently coming to an end acquired its basic characteristics a little more than half a century ago. These have been: an extreme, clear-cut "presidentialism," blocking any kind of division of powers whether by function or by territory; an omnipresent official government party; opposition parties whose existence has been more formal than real; and the predominance of an undemocratic, clientele-oriented civic culture tending to leave politics with a big "P" to the "professionals."

The conditions in which this system reached maturity have gradually changed. Yet time after time, the political system itself has resisted change. The problems of adapting the political to the social built up, to the point that they became dysfunctions making it impossible to process demands and conflicts as efficiently as in years gone by.

For some time now, the kind of society that fomented "clientelism" and non-participation by the citizenry has been in retreat. In some regions it no longer exists at all.

The Mexico which gave rise to the authoritarianism of the '30s, and over which that authoritarianism asserted itself, was predominantly rural. In 1940 only 3.9 million people, 20% of the population, lived in towns of more than 15,000 inhabitants, and there were less than fifty such towns in all. By 1960 the urban population had almost doubled, reaching 36.5% of the total population, and the number of cities had risen to 123.

Today in the '90s, at least 61% of Mexicans live in urban areas. The agrarian culture which gave birth to Mexico's corporatist, government-party system has almost disappeared.

Many other indicators testify to the changes in Mexican society—changes which affect the relations of the populace with the "Supreme Government." In 1940, for example, more than half the reading-age population could not read or write: 56.5%, to be exact. Today, illiteracy stands at only 12.6 percent. 86.6% of Mexicans of school age or older have received some kind of formal education. This means they are less defenseless vis à vis the government.

This more educated population has greater access to the media and to news about the "third democratic wave." In 1985, 96% of homes had access to radio and 73% to television. Despite undeniable distortions in the news and the low circulation of the daily press, the cultural isolation in which most Mexicans lived in 1940 was broken some time ago.

Against the system's grain, political participation is on the rise. More than half of those registered voted in the 1988 elections. While there are higher figures for some previous elections, those figures are simply not credible, since the elections involved were carried out with no competition facing the PRI and no observation of the voting process. In any case, a voter participation level of 50%, while low, is quite similar to rates in countries like the United States, where the figure for 1992 was 54 percent.

It is unnecessary to mention other indicators. The old authoritarian framework was designed for another kind of society, with different attitudes. If citizen participation and mobilization increase, the forms of power inherited from a past that no longer exists become dysfunctional and go into crisis.

Let us move on to political parties and the electoral system. The legitimacy of the Mexican Revolution was never really linked to elections. The great political party set up in 1929 was formed to put order into the process of assigning public posts to members of the "revolutionary family," not to compete electorally with the party's weak adversaries. The polls were not the source of genuine political power in any case. Instead power was based on the trade unions, peasant organizations, the bureaucracy, state-owned companies, the army and police, etc.

In 1940 the system of parties was symbolic. The enormous center was occupied by the PNR/PRM/PRI,¹ which then (as now) was a quasi-governmental organization rather than an authentic political party.

¹ The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) was formed in 1929 under the name Revolutionary National Party (PNR). In 1938 it changed its name to Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM); in 1946 it adopted the name PRI, which it has kept until today. (Editor's note.)

On the left was a revolutionary party, the Mexican Communist Party, which had little interest in electoral processes but lacked the proletarian and peasant base it would have needed to attempt the seizure of power. On the right was the PAN (National Action Party), which for many years thereafter functioned more as a pressure group than as a party.

Starting in 1988 this situation changed, and the change was extraordinary. Today the electoral opposition is no longer merely symbolic.

A system of parties revolving around the PRI is no longer functional for a Mexico which seeks to be seen, both domestically and abroad, as a country with a modern system, whose economic plans require stability more clearly than ever before.

The disagreeable possibility that politics may once again be conducted by other, violent means was posed in 1994 with the rise of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and other forces which question, or outright reject, electoral politics.

The final element is "presidentialism." By 1940 the axis of political organization had ceased to be the *caudillo*-president—such as Juárez, Díaz, Carranza and Obregón; his place had been taken by the institution of the presidency as such. This in itself represented a big step toward political modernization.

Unfortunately, due to tradition and historical circumstances—backwardness, in international terms—the concentration of power in the presidency came to be seen as something natural. Only through this presidential power would it be possible to make up for lost time and direct the country's energies toward economic modernization. As during the Porfirio Díaz era, a defect was made into a virtue.

For a period of time, this concentration of power—which obliterated any division or balance of power and made democracy impossible—seemed to function quite well. Mexico had the most stable system in Latin America, and from 1940 to 1976 its economic growth was enviable. Yet when the economy began having problems, the presidency—as the institution most responsible for "macro" processes—rapidly began to lose prestige, credibility and legitimacy.

The 1982 economic crisis was a political catastrophe for the presidency, and the dubious results of the 1988 elections did nothing to improve the situation. In an audacious effort to regain and restructure presidential power, Carlos Salinas decided to take over direct control of all the key processes in the country.

As Rogelio Hernández aptly points out (in *Estudios Mexicanos*, Winter 1994), to recover power and control the president had to weaken some of the presidency's auxiliary instruments: the cabinet (in which a total of almost a hundred changes were made during the Salinas years), the governorships (17 changes), the large corporatist organizations (in particular the trade unions and the National Peasant Federation), the government party (the National Solidarity Program, instead of the PRI, was now the great middleman for the interests of the people).

When the armed rebellion in Chiapas and the assassination of the PRI's presidential candidate brought the process of reconstructing authoritarian presidentialism to an abrupt halt, it became clear that the weakening of the presidency's network of auxiliary institutions—strong governors, strong secretaries of state, strong unions, etc.—had left the president in a very vulnerable position indeed.

In conclusion, between 1988 and 1994 the authoritarian presidency reached the limit of its possibilities. It can be reconstructed, but only at enormous cost. What is politically and morally viable is to construct another, democratic type of presidency.

Lorenzo Meyer

Summary of article in *Reforma* newspaper, July 7, 1994

The election in figures

Voters and polling stations

- Citizens with voter ID cards: 45,729,000 (86%)
- Votes cast: 35,550,283 (77.74%)
- Votes annulled: 1,000,782 (2.82%)
- Valid votes: 34,549,501
- Polling stations installed: 96,395
- Special polling stations: 687

Posts that were up for election

- Senators: 96
- Parliamentary deputies: 500
- Members of Assembly of Representatives: 66
- State where the governor was elected on August 21: Chiapas, where PRI candidate Eduardo Robledo Rincón was declared the winner.

active in the defense of legality and the push for democracy, but they are also times for reviewing and reformulating our commitments and objectives for work and struggle.”

He said that in participating in the elections “under the conditions in which we have done so, we already know what happens: with voters or without voters, the government apparatus wins. We will not vote again unless it is in genuine elections.”

For his part, on August 24 IFE General Director Arturo Núñez stated that the inconsistencies that occurred in approximately 11,000 polling stations stood in the way of reporting complete preliminary results. In response, the PRD accused the electoral authorities of delaying the figures in order to “manipulate” them.

The lateness in reporting final election figures, as well as the PRI’s overwhelming victory, detracted from the credibility of what we were endlessly told would be “Mexico’s cleanest and most transparent elections.”

Observers, both domestic and foreign, oversaw the voting process, but who oversaw the IFE when it drew up the voters’

lists, designed the computing system and counted the results? So that there will be no room for suspicions of “cybernetic fraud” in future elections, the entire electoral process must be in the hands of civil society rather than the government.

Proposals have also been aired to adopt a two-round voting system to assure more democracy, genuinely separate the PRI from the government so that electoral races will be more equitable and fair, and have the forces involved in elections wait until definitive results are announced before they begin making declarations as winners and losers.⁵

What is most important is to analyze the errors that have been committed, in order to avoid them in the future. ❧

Marybel Toro Gayol

Managing Editor.

⁵ The other six presidential candidates joined in the rush to recognize the victory of the PRI. It is worth mentioning that only one of them, Cecilia Soto of the Labor Party (PT), received enough votes to retain the public financing given to political parties. The other five parties have lost this financing and, if they fail to receive at least 1.5% of the votes in the next federal elections, will lose their electoral registration.

The role of radio and TV in the elections

On August 15 an extraordinary meeting was held between the Secretariat of the Interior (Gobernación) and the National Chamber of the Radio and Television Industry (CNIRT), after which the Chamber forbade all of the countries’ broadcast media from airing special election-coverage programs.

The CNIRT instructed radio stations to cancel the special programs they had announced, which were to provide continual information on the voting process, and to install “filters” on stories they received from their reporters, in order to “prevent manipulation by groups or parties.”

The only preliminary figures which could be broadcast were those announced by the CNIRT itself, despite the fact that other organizations —such as the Coparmex business association— also carried out exit polls, or quick counts such as the one made by the Civic Alliance.

Topping it all off was the suspension of transmissions from the U.S. Univision, ABC and CBS chains, as well as KTL from Los Angeles. This suspension was carried out by the Cablevisión cable TV system —a subsidiary of the Televisa network, which is owned by Emilio Azcárraga, who has publicly proclaimed himself a “soldier of the PRI”— in order to control the flow of information on the vote. For its part, the other cable TV system (Multivisión) suspended CNN transmissions —for the same reason.