

The Mechanics Of Democratic Change¹

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In this article I will present a series of reflections about the mechanics of democratic change in Mexico, emphasizing the fundamental topics of elections and political parties.

When I speak of political change in our country, I do not mean momentary change, no matter how important. I am not alluding to this or that legislative or constitutional reform, or to one demand or another. I am trying to underline the idea of a process which, though lengthy, is no less significant.

The underlying theme is that we are face to face with a society which has diversified and become more complex and is seeking new channels of expression.

My starting point is the recognition of the fact that Mexico is a plural society which has reached a relatively high—though very unequal—degree of modernization. That is to say, it has a relatively high degree of productive and urban development, organizational complexity, diversified culture, and it is profoundly influenced by and interrelated with the rest of the world.

This highly diversified society produces different ways of being, sensibilities and analyses, as well as distinct, even opposing, proposals. We now face a situation in which multiple sensibilities and/or ways of thinking of different social sectors can no longer be unified under a single discourse, a single set of ideals, a single organization. A situation in which sensibilities and ways of thinking materialize in different organizations and institutions which must interact with each other. If I emphasize the plurality of Mexican society so heavily, it is because it seems to me to be the

defining trait of the end of the century. What is more, I consider it the real motor of political change.

Throughout Mexico, sensibilities and ways of thinking have mixed and reorganized, incorporating themselves into mechanisms with their own dynamics, according to specific interests which come into play among many others. The diversification of society also produces different groupings: from organizations that defend or project their own interests, groups that aim to protect one area of social activity or another, to parties which offer different understandings of the situation and ways of doing politics.

If Mexico's transition to democracy achieves one thing, it is precisely this: adjusting the formulas for policy making, representation and government to a plural nation. Putting it in perspective, the history of the democratic transition is the history of that adjustment: building, inscribing and appropriating a process for resolving political disputes and generally carrying out

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The new IFE General Council. Since the recent electoral reform, only ostensibly non-partisan individuals have the right to be voting members.

political activity together for an end-of-century society.

The advances in political freedom, the emergence of groups to put forward demands and propound their points of view, the succession of electoral reforms, the growing strength of political parties and the increasingly intense electoral competition are all symptoms of this process, of the effort to model norms and institutions to the new reality of society.

To illustrate the magnitude of the change, we have only to remember how until just a few years ago, the key moment of changeovers in the public administration at different levels was not election day, but the day candidates were nominated: after that, the electoral campaign itself was virtually a ritual. A great deal of Mexican political history of less than a decade ago emphasized and underlined the nomination

of candidates of the majority party much more than the electoral process itself. For many decades, the tensest and most passionate moment in any election was the *destape*;² everything that followed was just going through the motions with no real competition.

In recent years, however, competition has not only increased, but has also broken with many unwritten rules previously considered unchangeable. Little by little, the process of differentiation of the vote, a result of the differentiation taking place in society itself, created and strengthened alternative parties which here and there made electoral races closer and closer.

We can now see many more indicators of this process: we have governors

from parties other than the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI); mayors from a wide variety of organizations; city halls ruled by different political currents than the one in the state house; plural, dynamic local congresses; and, above all, parties that sustain and strengthen these processes of change and political adjustment.

In this way, the dynamic of systematic, regular elections aids in reinforcing the presence of the political parties which, with their own efforts, also increase the competitiveness in these processes.

However, just as the parties have developed not only *de facto* but *de jure*, elections have not only become more and more relevant and competitive, but their organization and the conditions in which they are carried out have been the subject of reforms that foster, delimit or model electoral campaigning itself.

Suffice it to point to the way in which the elections of 1988 and those of 1994 were organized or the questions dealt with in electoral legislation only five or six years ago compared with today, the fact that elections tend to become more and more institutionalized and the increasingly open way in which the different political options compete.

It is true that the conditions in which campaigns are carried out continue to be unequal, and that is one of the most important aspects of the recently discussed electoral reform. However, it is also true that, despite this and other delays, fewer and fewer elections lack real competition and the races get closer and closer with

² The moment when the PRI nomination was made public or "uncovered". [Translator's Note].

each ballot. For example, when the voters went to the polls in the State of Mexico, Hidalgo and Coahuila in 1996, it was once again very clear: elections have become normal things; the voters decide; there are fewer post-electoral disputes; the contenders accept both defeat and victory naturally; and the map of governmental representation and leadership changes.

I understand that this kind of mechanism —progressive, slow and gradual— may make some people impatient and others nervous. But the changes are constant, permanent; they happen every day and, as far as I can see, they are unstoppable.

In and of itself, this represents an enormous change in our political customs and traditions: accepting the existence of others, dialogue, getting along and competing with others, knowing how to win and learning how to lose. But there is also something more: the modification in the party system has an impact on and brings changes to our system of government. Increasingly competitive elections, the resulting changes in government posts and the vote oscillating among the different options with the possibility of no party receiving an absolute majority also all shake up governing mechanisms, forcing them to change.

Until today, under the republican, democratic, federal, representative system set up by the Constitution, a single political bloc held a permanent majority in all spheres of state power. This situation is beginning to erode, forcing negotiations, accords, alliances and, in general, a higher degree of communication and exchange than in the past.



José Woldenberg Karakowsky, president of the General Council.

Political parties are not only consolidating as electoral options, but are increasingly taking a place in the engine room of the political system, in the very heart of the state.

As is clear, we have already come a long way. It is not my place to venture opinions about the future of the democratic transition in Mexico. I can, however, look back, recognize the different stopping points on the road we have traveled and ponder its functioning with two aims: first, to recall the difficulties and the sluggish stages inherent to the process and, second, to confirm that, despite the zigzags, the steps back-

ward and the apparent postponements, the democratization process will not stop for the simple reason that this is a plural society which demands both a political format and method appropriate for its expression.

I believe that this is the most important political task facing us at the end of the century: to normalize, construct and consolidate elections as the method of Mexicans' living together and working out our political disputes. Octavio Paz has said that this is a "civilizing" task, since Mexico would thereby leave behind a tragic centuries-old tradition: trying out democracy only

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the moment when the PRI made
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Jaime Cárdenas and José Barragán, two of the nine new electoral councilors, selected by Congress for their political neutrality.

to then fall into the chasm of ungovernability.

That is not the case today. And to a great degree this is because of the kind of road we took, because of the mechanism used: gradual but sure, systematically negotiated although not without conflicts. Allow me, then, to close by summarizing that road as I see it.

1. Changing voting patterns is a manifestation of the society's real plurality nationwide. At the same time, it expresses the different sensibilities, analyses and proposals in our society, reinforced as an irreversible expansive wave of change.

2. This differentiation demands and strengthens the system of political parties that slowly but surely is being built in the country.

3. The deepening roots of the different political options change the traditional nature of elections, transforming them from non-competitive rituals into highly contested races.

4. And this mechanism of successive elections turns the political parties into central entities of political dispute.

5. This process is changing the political map and political relations. Gradually, but seemingly irreversibly, we see fewer and fewer candidates whose victory is preordained and others destined inevitably for defeat. It is the citizens who have the last word.

6. But, as the political map changes, it also becomes more complex. In city governments, representatives of different parties coexist; governors from one party have to learn to live with municipal governments ruled by another, even in their state capital; the balance of forces in local congresses changes, and in some cases the state executive has to live with a legislature with a majority that raises another party standard; and the federal government itself is subjected to new relations with state and municipal gov-

ernments, at the same time that the federal Congress is becoming plural.

7. This dynamic modifies the relationships among the different seats of power both vertically and horizontally. Among the president, governors and mayors, necessarily both tense and collaborative relationships are being built; and at the same time the traditional formulas for relating among local congresses and governors and the president and the Congress are changing.

8. All of this should be seen as fortunate, as an expression of a democratization process of the political relationships in Mexico.

9. However, given the uncertainty generated by the movement toward democracy itself, plus the enormous difficulties stemming from other spheres of society (particularly the economic crisis), some people begin to yearn for the past or may even place their bets on the situation's perpetual decomposition, getting bogged down or conflict.

10. Faced with these conservative or antidemocratic pressures, politicians from all parties have an enormous responsibility to guide the democratic process through institutional and pacific channels. In order to do that, all-encompassing pacts and political moves are needed. That was the underlying significance of the electoral reform negotiations: the need to include all the political actors, particularly those represented in the two chambers of Congress.

11. If the process of democratization continues, the mechanics of elections will show us, as it is already doing,

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that there are really no absolute winners and losers, much less perpetual victors or vanquished. That is to say, democracy means alternating in office, which, in turn, generates political activity.

12. These changes are occurring within an institutional framework


—which is at the same time being modified— that fosters and allows for them, and this is not a small thing.


13. Elections, then, are beginning to become what theory tells us they should be: the source of legitimacy for governments and the possibility for

the public to opt among different proposals.

14. The fact that post-electoral conflicts are on the decline not only shows that institutional and legal arrangements are better than in the past; it also demonstrates that at this point, fraud would be very costly.

15. In summary, we can say that the vote continues to show its power and possibilities; the vote as a formula for living together and competing in a civilized fashion.

This is the task in which we are immersed: making elections an open book, transparent, clear and unquestionable. In my view, this is a goal we can neither renounce nor postpone. 

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