

Voting at a Distance¹

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The issue of Mexicans being permitted to vote abroad has not been discussed as it deserves. It entered into our legislation almost surreptitiously: elliptically, the obstacles to voting abroad were removed, but no clear mechanisms were put in place for the new right to actually be exercised. A great deal is at stake in the way we deal with the debate: the relationship of the Mexican government to its migrants, the credibility of electoral processes, the notion of citizenship, the transformation of sovereignty and of democracy itself. I would like to take up two issues of this multifaceted question: the logistical complexity of the endeavor and its democratic significance.

I will begin with the former. We already know that organizing elections in Mexico is a monumental task. Organizing elections the world over would seem a superhuman undertaking. For all practical purposes, clearly, elections outside Mexico would center in the United States. In any case, the immensity of the job is unprecedented despite the number of countries whose electoral legislation allow for it. The logistical unknowns are many: How could reliable voter registration rolls be developed outside Mexico? Would polling booths be set up or would people vote by mail or electronically? Would electoral campaigns be carried out abroad? How would violations of electoral laws and regulations committed abroad be dealt with? From a strictly logistical perspective, the operation is of colossal proportions. In that sense, prior international experiences are not comparable.

The real danger in this thorny polyhedron is that, considering the universe of potential voters and that the mechanisms that make for credibility are not easily exportable, the process could be a step backward for the definitive establishment of electoral confidence. The credibility elections enjoy today is something we must

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protect above all else. The gains of 1997 are not definitive. Trust takes a long time to accumulate, but can fall apart in a split second. Even in the mosaic that is Mexico, different qualities of democracy exist. In Oaxaca, we saw the Party of the Democratic Revolution's national leader proclaiming the victory of the candidate who

all the preliminary results and the overwhelming majority of exit polls predicted as the loser.² Mistrust still has havens where it can be cemented; it would not seem reasonable to increase their number. For that reason, if all the links in the electoral process are not carefully nurtured, we could open up an extremely delicate flank of electoral vulnerability.

I think that in this area, one principle must be maintained: voting abroad cannot relax the rigorousness of domestic balloting. Any weakening in requirements could be politically explosive in that it could spark discredit. We do not want to replay that particular scenario. In any case, the logistical problems are just that: challenges for our organizational imagination. The fundamental debate is the underlying essence: the meaning of voting at a distance. We must consider voting at a distance in light of a democratic theory for the conditions of our time.

Let us go back to basics. A democracy is a political system in which those subject to the law participate, even if only indirectly, in its creation; it is a system in which those obligated by the power structure have the right to found it. In consequence, it is undemocratic for power to emanate from those who are not subject to that power. This, in my view, is the center of our debate. Is it democratic for those who have emigrated to participate in forming the government? I am beginning to think so. And I must point out here the change in my opinion. Until very recently, I was convinced of the essentially undemocratic nature of voting from afar. Voting abroad would be undemocratic if, as I supposed looking at it through the prism of my prejudice, voting from a distance was

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Six Federal Electoral Institute Proposals for Voting Abroad

1. Voting at a normal polling booth, checking a voter registration list and voter ID with photograph.
U.S.\$268,569,283.50
2. Voting at a normal polling booth checking a voter registration list and personal ID.
U.S.\$273,712,483.50
3. Voting at a special polling booth without checking a voter registration list but checking a voter ID with photograph.
U.S.\$76,060,458.00
4. Voting at a special polling booth, without checking a voter registration list but checking personal ID.
U.S.\$271,984,914.00
5. Voting without being physically present, checking a voter registration list and a voter ID with photograph.
 - a) By mail: U.S.\$283,229,959.90
 - b) By telephone: U.S.\$351,229,959.90
6. Voting without being physically present, checking a voter registration list and personal ID.
 - a) By mail: U.S.\$288,373,159.90
 - b) By telephone: U.S.\$356,373,159.90

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necessarily a distant vote. My previous opinion was based on the idea that whoever is not immersed in the community, whoever is not affected by the meaning of his or her vote, whoever does not feel through his/her eyes, hands and pocketbook the experience of that world, should not have the right to determine the course of a community which has become alien. The voter exercises his/her civil rights to the extent that he/she can directly feel the effects of the decision. That is the key to civic responsibility. When I vote, I am betting my future. Looking at things more closely, I can now see that crossing the border does not imply severing ties: community survives distance.

The data reveals the situation that must be legislated. A survey carried out by Mexico City's daily *Reforma* and the *Los Angeles Times* shows that 34 percent of Mexicans have worked at one time or another in the United States and that 43 percent have relatives there. The money sent home by Mexicans from the U.S. is the third largest item in the Mexican economy, closely tying emigrants to the future of the country. The most important thing about this picture is that most Mexicans living in the United States will return to their communities in less than two years. The attachment to their country felt by millions of Mexicans who have to emigrate is undeniable. We cannot think, therefore, that Mexicans casting their votes abroad is, as was previously thought, a remote ballot.

I want to emphasize the basis for my argument against my former opinion. Citizenship does not exist in the abstract: citizenship is tied to community. A complex network of emotional, family, trade, legal and fiscal relationships sustain that political right. That is why, as long as important groups of Mexicans maintain and

even reinforce those ties, their right to participate in the fate of their homeland should be affirmed. This would also bring with it the positive effect of the active participation of permanent U.S. residents in forging the political determination of their communities to counteract the xenophobia and anti-Mexicanism brewing there. The crucial phenomenon is the emergence of a new Mexican nomadic existence. A country which has suffered through a long and painful economic crisis for an entire generation has become a country of migrants, a nation that expels its most valuable people. In effect, tremendous migration is one of the fundamental features of Mexico's population dynamics at the close of the century. If we want to build a political system worthy of its society, we must begin to recognize its face. That is the other sign of our internationalization: the Mexican political system does not begin and end inside its borders. It seems to me not only archaic but also naive to think that Mexicans' voting abroad violates our virginal sovereignty.

The debate, in my view, must center on consolidating rigorously in elections outside our national boundaries. This must not be hurried. I repeat: the worst possible thing would be to tear the delicate tissue of electoral certainty. It would be dreadfully irresponsible to move in that direction without having paved the road to trust. ■■■

NOTES

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² The author refers to Andrés Manuel López Obrador, PRD national leader, who after the state of Oaxaca's August 1998 gubernatorial elections declared his party's candidate the winner despite all the data pointing the other way. [Editor's Note.]