

# The 2006 Elections The Phantom of Abstentionism

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Today, Mexico's political-electoral life is marked by a severe paradox. For the last two years or so, the main public actors have been obsessed with the 2006 electoral race, while the public does not seem to be expressing the same interest, as can be seen in its gradual abandonment of the ballot box, shown in a record almost 60-percent abstentionism in the 2003 federal elections.

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Later local elections were not very encouraging either. To cite just a few examples, in the state of Quintana Roo in February 2005, abstentionism weighed in at 48 percent, while in the State of Mexico, it reached almost 60 percent. These figures are even more worrying if we consider that in both cases, the governor's seat was up for election.

It is a matter for concern that for the second half of President Fox's term, the parties, chambers of Congress, public servants at all levels, the judicial branch, the media, and business and union leaders have structured their

agendas and dedicated a significant part of their time to next year's federal elections without trying to readjust their basic relationship with the citizenry. Thus, the main tasks and responsibilities, crucial from the point of view of the population's interests, concerns and expectations, have been neglected.

This divorce between the elites' and the citizens' agendas represents a major problem for the political system as a whole since its causes and implications structurally affect the possibilities of consolidating democracy in Mexico.

Exploring the complex causes that lead a considerable portion of the citizenry to abstain in certain situations and explaining the implications and the effects of the impact this behavior has on the entire democratic system will allow us to understand more general problems related to the functioning of public institutions, the political parties, the system of representation and civic culture. In other words, the size of abstentionism is an indicator of social, political and cultural processes that, in specific combinations, make up its causal premise.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that the citizenry's abandonment of the ballot box has reduced the quality of political representation in Mexico, with an important impact on the structural legitimacy of government. At the same time, the system of state accountability to society has been complicated by the elites' autonomy *vis-à-vis* the citizenry. Finally, since voting is the main way citizens can communicate to politicians whether they think their interests are being fostered or not, a voter not exercising his/her right to cast a ballot can be an indication that a sector of society (which may be a majority, as in the case of Mexico in 2003) thinks the political elites are not living up to its expectations.<sup>2</sup>

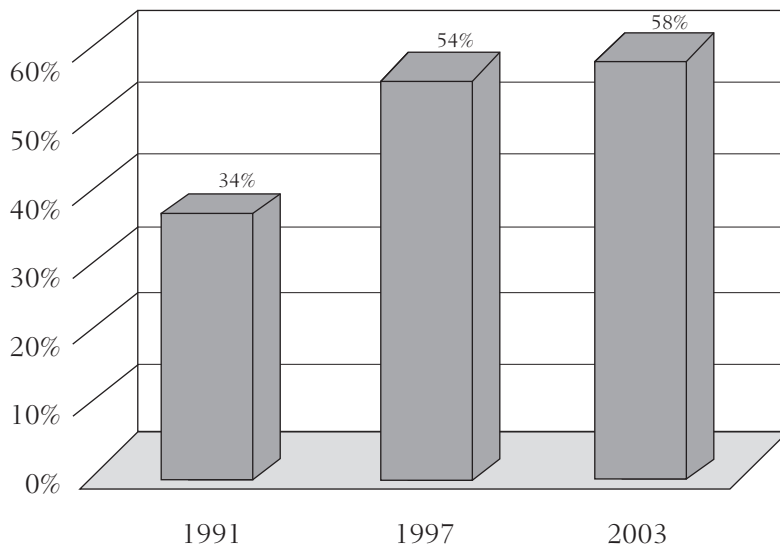
Thus, an analysis of public participation in the 2006 elections cannot ignore that abstentionism is part of a broader process of disillusionment in public institutions and a feeling that individual action is ineffective, a process that some authors think is also linked to a political crisis in contemporary societies manifested in the lack of confidence in democratic institutions.<sup>3</sup>

In Mexico's case, what is at stake in the next federal elections is the evaluation the voter will make of his/her vote. We can already say that there will be at least two kinds of value judgments. The first is related to the so-called "prospective vote" and the second to the so-called "retrospective vote." In the first case, voters will evaluate the candidates' promises and the possibility that they will be kept, and in the second case, they will make their decision also taking into account the concrete results of prior political performance.

Thus, in 2006 the abstention rate will be influenced by two trends that up until now seem contradictory. The

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GRAPH 1  
ABSTENTIONISM IN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS



Source: Created by the author with data from the Federal Electoral Institute.

first is the current hopefuls' ability to generate enthusiasm and motivate people, especially the capability of the man who has consistently headed the polls, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The second trend is linked to people's disenchantment with politics and politicians, directly tied to the fact that the expectations created in 2000 have not been met by Vicente Fox's government.

Given this situation, even if electoral participation were to be revived by López Obrador's candidacy, it would not automatically mean that there has been a change in Mexican political culture nor that the public has understood the importance that voting has for democracy or its repercussions in the quality of society's dynamic. Rather, this phenomenon would be explained, first of all, by the fact that there are routinely higher turn-outs for presidential elections than for legislative ones, and secondly, by the continuance of political-cultural traditions of caudillismo and the weight of charismatic leaders in the Mexican social imaginary. It cannot be denied that certain social policies implemented by López Obrador while he was head of Mexico City's government produced recycled hopes for a significant change in the short term.

Certainly, and regardless of whether the bases and real scope of those policies can be questioned, the credibility of the project and candidacy of the former head of Mexico City's government seems well grounded, above all in the most vulnerable sectors of society. Finally, the fact that his popularity did not vanish despite the scandals and litigation that marked the end of his administration indicates the strength of a model of relations between charismatic leader and social base in which

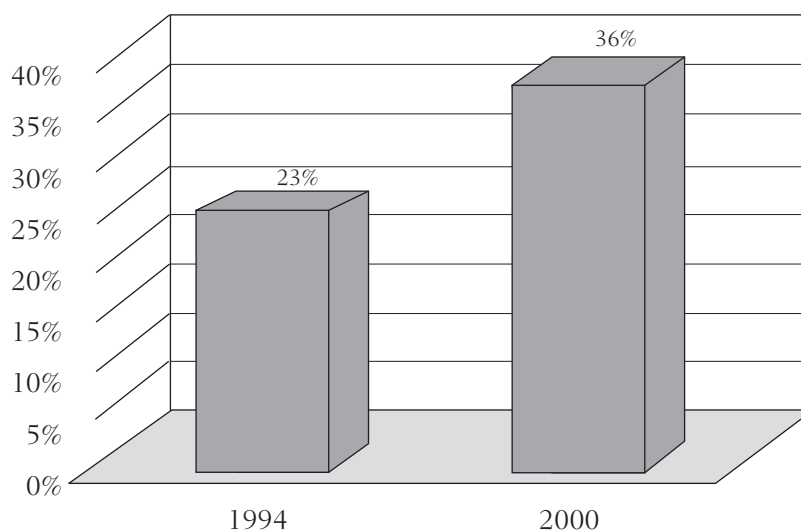
blind belief and idealization turn the leader into a practically untouchable figure.

Generally speaking, overcoming some of the structural obstacles that today prevent citizens from improving and broadening their identification with the political processes and actors in a more modern, democratic way does not look easy in the short term. In that sense, it should be pointed out that the citizen's relationship with political parties is very difficult because what political theory calls significant party identifications have not been consoli-

dated. To the extent that citizens see parties and their proposals as alien, the possibilities of clearly understanding political phenomena dwindle, and therefore, so do the possibilities for effective participation. Without loyalty to parties, without expectations about the effectiveness of their actions and without motivation to support their strategies, electoral competition tends to lose its meaning and inspire more rejection than enthusiasm. The latter seems to emerge, as I said before, only when strong figures appear on the public scene. In addition, up until now, the

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GRAPH 2  
ABSTENTIONISM IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



Source: Created by the author with data from the Federal Electoral Institute.

legal registration of new parties has not seemed to inject greater vitality into the existing party system.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere in today's Mexico, continues to be one in which debate is synonymous with reciprocal attacks and strategies are based more on exploiting your adversary's mistakes in the media than on disseminating proposals and policy initiatives. In that framework, citizens obviously cannot find strong reasons to get actively involved in electoral campaigns or to go to the polls. This problem has important historic roots, as shown by the fact that abstentionism has been

As we have suggested, the explanation of this phenomenon has to include a large number of variables that could be separated into two large groups: those we will call structural and those that are specific to the conjuncture. Among the first are people's perceptions about and attitudes toward democracy and the importance of voting; about the main government institutions; and about political parties and social organizations. Also of considerable impact is the quality of political information citizens have.

Among the variables specific to the conjuncture are: having an up-to-date

- public institutions' and political actors' lack of credibility;
- weak identification with political parties;
- the excessive length and negative image of electoral campaigns;
- the erosion of the main parties' ideological identity;
- the scant relevance and negative image of Congress and the parties; and
- the importance of charismatic leaders.

It seems obvious that the historic gap between Mexico's political class and its constituency, which should be its central reference point, will continue to be the trend, abating only because of the recurring hope stemming from personal leaderships, not strong organizations.

Taking into account the weight of the factors that discourage electoral participation, it seems necessary and possible to contrast some of the political-cultural tasks that would accompany a reversal of the abstentionist trend. In the first place, it is urgent to begin to reconstruct the bridges between the world of politics and day-to-day life, uncovering both the positive and negative effects of political actors' decisions and of the functioning of the public institutions.

This, of course, would have to include a self-criticism by the political elites of the image they project in society. The civic counter-values represented by corruption, secret negotiations, scandal-mongering denunciations and the lack of effective dialogue and respect for the rule of law would have to be progressively disarticulated and substituted by the values of a pluralist, tolerant democratic culture, respectful of

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growing for more than a decade, both in presidential and mid-term elections. This is clearly borne out by the graphs.

At first glance, this poses a paradox. During the 1990s, Mexico went through a democratization process marked by a series of institutional changes and growing electoral competition. Holding free, competitive elections, with several choices and guarantees that citizens' votes would be respected seemed initially to be a factor that would foster more participation. However, as we have seen, participation has dropped off, which is even more noteworthy if we take into account that electoral officials and parties have both invested large sums of money to motivate participation. This is why locating the precise source of abstentionism has become a matter of political and academic interest.

voter registration card; support and benefits received for voting; the importance given to a specific election; the quality of the campaigns and the candidates; and the assessment of the outgoing government. The specific combination of these variables, which include the evaluation of the past and perspectives for the future already alluded to, makes it possible to understand citizens' view of their present, and, therefore, their behavior at the polls.

Coming up to 2006, then, it is necessary to take into account:

- the role of political disappointment and voters' lowered expectations after alternation in office for the presidency;
- people's perception that individual action is not very effective;

the law and sustained in a reasoned exchange of ideas. Otherwise, it would be very difficult for citizens to see the sphere of politics as one that really represents them and in which they are, in the last analysis, those who hold power.

On this basis and with a normative perspective, it seems feasible to propose the construction of a virtuous circle that would encourage the greatest possible participation. In it, there would be a place for a positive evaluation of the democratic system, a higher sense of responsibility toward the community and of loyalty toward the representative regime, as well as a significant level of confidence in institutions and of effectiveness of citizens' action. It would also include strong identification with a party, sufficient information, attractive electoral campaigns and ef-

fective institutional action both in getting out the vote and in updating voter rolls.

Obviously this is an ideal picture; however, it has enormous practical usefulness for building a long-term agenda. In this context, the 2006 elections are an opportunity for the political and social actors with the greatest public responsibility to begin to float initiatives oriented this way.

The responsibility for abstentionism falls on the shoulders of all the institutions and actors in Mexican public life, and in each and every one, from political parties to communications media, from unions to social organizations, and from educational institutions to electoral officials, some sectors have already begun to reestablish the democratic legitimacy of politics and to mo-


tivate public participation. Today, their action is key for reversing the democratic fragility of a social and institutional base that is currently insufficient to meet the challenges of consolidating democracy in the country. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed discussion of this idea can be found in Esperanza Palma and Roberto Gutiérrez, *El abstencionismo en las elecciones federales del 2003*, mimeographed copy (Mexico City: IFE/UAM, November 2004).


<sup>2</sup> Benjamín Temki, "Explorando la dinámica del abstencionismo electoral" (paper read at the Seminar for the Analysis of National Surveys about Political Culture and Civic Practices, Mexico City, September 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Ulrico Beck, "Teoría de la sociedad en riesgo," *Las consecuencias perversas de la modernidad* (Madrid/Barcelona: Anthropos, 1996), and Anthony Giddens, *Un mundo desbocado. Los efectos de la globalización en nuestras vidas* (Madrid: Taurus, 2000).




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