The Mexican Elections of 2006 and the Political System

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Introduction

The presidential elections of 2006 profoundly tested Mexico's young democratic institutions. There were two top contenders for the presidency—Felipe Calderon of the National Action Party (PAN) and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). They were separated by less than 250,000 votes, representing only 0.06 percent of the total vote. Lopez Obrador refused to accept the official results, accusing the wining party of fraud and extensive violations of the electoral code. Supporters of Lopez Obrador launched protests to demand a vote-by-vote recount or an annulment of the election. After two months of uncertainty, the Federal Electoral Tribunal named Felipe Calderon of the National Action Party (PAN) the president-elect. The narrow margin of victory in the elections, coupled with the postelection conflict, led some observers to worry about the breakdown of democracy, but Mexico's governmental institutions were able to manage the conflict, prevent widespread violence, and demonstrate the resilience of Mexico's democracy. The 2006 elections further strengthened the multiparty nature of the political system with the federal legislature divided among three major parties and a handful of smaller parties.

Historical Background

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Mexico was governed by a one-party system in which the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) controlled almost all elected offices across the country. Mexico's transition to democracy was characterized by the development of a multiparty system. While opposition parties had always existed, it was only in the 1980s that they began to win influential elections. At first opposition parties won municipal elections, and then building on their experience as mayors and city councilors, they went on to win state elections. Finally in 2000 the opposition candidate from the National Action Party (PAN), Vicente Fox, won the presidential election. After a prolonged transition from one- party rule, the 2000 elections definitively established Mexico as a multiparty democracy.

Over the past few years there has been a strong resurgence of the Left in Latin America. Parties of the Left had been in decline across most of the region since the dirty wars of the 1970s, in which most activists on the Left were either killed or exiled. As it has become clear that the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s have not improved the standard of living for the vast majority of people in the region, leaders on the Left have gained increasing support from the voters. There is a tremendous diversity among the new leftist leaders in Latin America. Hugo Chavez, a populist former military officer who intentionally antagonizes the United States and allies his country with Cuba, contrasts sharply with more pragmatic leftists such as Michelle Bachelet of Chile and Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil who have maintained good relations with the United States and continued to pursue neoliberal economic policies. The anticipated victory of Lopez Obrador in Mexico would have further strengthened this regional trend, but with Lopez Obrador's defeat, Mexico continues as an exception in the region (along with Colombia, which also has a rightist government). Since the elections in Mexico in the summer of 2006, the Left has continued to win important victories, including the election of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

Electoral and Party Systems

One-party systems are usually authoritarian, though there are some examples of one-party systems that are considered democratic. Mexico was considered democratic by many scholars

in the 1950s and 1960s. The government was not more democratic in the 1950s and 1960s than it was later on, but the scholarly standards for democracy were lower, and in comparison to other countries in the region, Mexico appeared relatively democratic. Most one-party systems are communist, and they remain one-party systems because other parties are outlawed or severely circumscribed. Mexico was rather unusual in that it was one-party authoritarian but not communist. Mexico's one-party system was enforced through a complex system of patronage (using government resources to pay supporters), co-optation (using government resources to buy off opposition), and electoral fraud and repression if necessary.

In a democracy, one-party systems are uncommon, because it is rare that large majorities of the population agree about politics. Two-party systems usually emerge in countries with plurality single member district (SMD) electoral systems. SMD is the type of electoral system used in the United States. In this system of selecting legislators, the country is divided up into the same number of geographic districts as there are seats in the legislature. Each district elects one representative, and whoever gets the most votes wins the seat.

Countries that have plurality SMD electoral systems often only have two major political parties, because it is difficult for new parties to get a foot in the door. In the United States, for example, there is a small Green Party, which tends to be to the Left of the Democratic Party. It is difficult for the Green Party to grow or even survive because if the people on the Left of the Democratic Party split off to vote for the Green Party, then it is more likely that the Republican Party will win. Those on the Left would probably prefer to see the Democratic Party win rather than the Republican Party, so voting for a third party is seen as "wasting your vote." If, however, minorities are geographically concentrated, plurality SMD may not always produce a two-party system. Canada, for example, has a plurality SMD electoral system, but there are multiple parties. This is because the French minority is concentrated in the province of Quebec and can therefore support a party to represent their interests. If the French were spread out evenly across the country it would be more difficult for them to have a party, because they would not have enough votes to win in any districts. Because they are concentrated in one province, they have a good chance of winning in Quebec and gaining representation in the parliament.

Multiparty systems usually emerge in countries with proportional representation electoral systems (PR). In a PR system the country is not divided into separate districts, and voters do not vote for individual candidates for the legislature. Instead, voters vote for a "party list." In a traditional PR system, the parties present lists that rank order their party's candidates for the legislature. Voters vote for a party list rather than individual candidates, and parties win seats proportional to the percentage of the vote they receive. If there are 100 seats in the legislature, and Party A wins 30 percent of the vote, it will get 30 seats. The party will give the 30 seats to the top 30 candidates on its party list. This system tends to lead to more parties, because those who do not feel well represented by the major parties can form new parties and are likely to gain a voice in government. Usually parties have to win a certain percentage of the vote before they are eligible for a seat. In Mexico this threshold is 2 percent. Let's rethink the above example of the USA's Green Party in the context of a PR electoral system. If 5 percent of the voters on the Left vote for the Green Party, instead of throwing the election to the Republicans, the Greens would get 5 percent of the seats in the legislature. Their supporters would not have "wasted their votes." In fact, they would actually have a voice in government. Thus, there are greater incentives and opportunities to form new parties in a PR system than in an SMD system.

The Mexican Electoral System

The electoral system in Mexico has undergone profound changes over the past 30 years. The PRI walked a fine line between controlling the electoral system to ensure their electoral victories and making elections fair enough so that opposition parties would focus on winning elections rather than working to topple the entire political system through protest or violence. As the opposition grew stronger, the PRI made more and more concessions by improving the fairness of the electoral system. Proportional representation was introduced in 1964 to give opposition parties a chance for representation in the national legislature. The number of seats distributed proportionally increased to 100 in 1977 and then to 200 in 1986. A federal electoral tribunal was established in 1986 to rule on electoral disputes. Previously, the legislature (which was controlled by the PRI) ruled on all electoral disputes. This court was granted more autonomy and power in subsequent reforms in 1990 and 1996. An independent institution, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), was set up in 1990 to oversee and monitor elections, taking these functions out of the hands of the executive. Subsequent reforms strengthened the independence of IFE. By the year 2000, most of the electoral laws and institutions had been thoroughly reformed, and elections were competently and fairly administered.

Mexico has a mixed PR-SMD system. In the lower house (Chamber of Deputies), there are 500 seats: 300 seats are allocated by single member districts and 200 seats are allocated by proportional representation. The country is divided into 300 geographic districts and one representative is elected from each district. Each party also prepares a list for the PR seats. Those 200 seats are allocated based on the percentage of the vote each party received in the single member district elections. In the Senate, each state (and the federal district) has three senators. Each party presents a list of two candidates. The party that wins the most votes gets both senators from their list. The party that comes in second gets one senator. Another 32 seats are allocated through proportional representation.

Mexico's mixed electoral system provides incentives for more than two parties to form, because parties need only win 2 percent of the national vote to gain representation in the congress. As a result, since 1997 no party has had a majority in the national legislature. The divided government makes it difficult for the any legislation to get through congress. Fox's administration (2000–2006) was characterized by deadlock and near paralysis. Because of the problems of divided government in presidential systems, many political scientists have suggested that a parliamentary system would be preferable. A parliamentary system is more stable because only the parliament is directly elected by the people and therefore only the parliament has democratic legitimacy. The prime minister answers to the parliament. In a presidential system both the president and the legislature have democratic legitimacy, so there is no clear democratic solution if the president and the legislature are in conflict. Moreover, the fixed terms of a president make presidentialism rigid and therefore less able to manage political crises constitutionally. In Latin America (though not in Mexico) political crises are all too often solved with military coups. If there were parliamentary systems, these crises might possibly be solved by votes of no confidence. (Linz 1990; Mainwaring 1993)

There are three major parties in Mexico: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico for most of the twentieth century and has an inclusive centrist ideology; the National Action Party (PAN), which is center-right and represents the Catholic Church and business interests; and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), a center-left party with ties to peasant organizations and some unions. A few smaller parties, including the Green Party and the Worker's Party, also have representation in the national legislature.

In addition to the electoral system, the history of one-party rule by a centrist party also helps to explain why Mexico has three major parties. Opposition parties formed both to the right and to the Left of the PRI during the process of democratization. If the PRI had been either clearly right wing or clearly Left wing, the opposition may have been united, resulting in only two parties. There is also a regional component to Mexico's party system. The PRD is strongest in Mexico City and the South, while the PAN is strongest in the North. This regional breakdown reflects the fact that the South of the country is much poorer than the North and also has a much larger indigenous population. The PRI has a strong presence across the whole country. The geographical diversity of the parties creates a situation where many states only have a two-party system (the PAN versus the PRI in the North and the PRD versus the PRI in the South) while national politics is characterized by three major parties.

Mexico's Three Major Parties

The PRI governed Mexico for over 70 years. The party was founded in 1928 in an effort to bring stability to the country after the revolution. The party has been inclusive, accepting almost anyone who wants to join the party, regardless of ideology. For most of the twentieth century, politics was determined by competition among factions within the PRI. Today, the most important factions are the authoritarian old guard, known as the "dinosaurs," and a more modern reformist faction.

The PAN was founded in 1939 as a reaction against the leftist policies of President Lazaro Cárdenas. While the ideology of the PAN's leadership has varied over time, the party has been closely tied to business interests and the Catholic Church. For most of its history, the PAN played the role of the "loyal opposition," agreeing to participate in elections so that the system appeared more democratic and accepting that there was little chance of ever gaining power. Even though the PAN promoted economic policies beneficial to business, large business interests supported the PRI, because they relied on good relations with the government for subsidies, contracts, and other benefits. In 1982, however, President Lopez Portillo responded to an economic crisis by nationalizing the banks (to nationalize a company means the government takes it from its private owners and runs it as a government-owned company). As a result of the bank nationalization, many business leaders Left the PRI and began to support the PAN. The money and expertise they brought to the PAN provided the basis for the PAN's success.

The PRD was formed after the presidential elections of 1988. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the popular president Lazaro Cárdenas, along with other leftists from the PRI formed a faction called the "Democratic Current" to challenge the more conservative factions that were dominating the party. When Carlos Salinas, a more conservative figure in the party, was chosen as the PRI's presidential candidate, members of the Democratic Current left the party and supported Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas for president. Salinas was declared the winner in an election that was marked by extensive electoral fraud. After the elections the coalition that supported Cárdenas formed the PRD.

During the administration of Carlos Salinas, the PRI-controlled government made alliances with the PAN in order to pass the neoliberal reforms favored by Salinas. At the same time the government repressed the PRD and many leaders and supporters of the PRD were killed. As a result the PAN was able to gradually strengthen its electoral position, while the PRD was greatly weakened. By the late 1990s, the repression subsided, and the electoral fortunes of the PRD began to improve. In 1997 Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas won the first ever election

for mayor of Mexico City, the second most important elected office next to the presidency. Previously the mayor had been appointed by the president. The PRD also won 125 of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and PRD candidates went on to win a number of gubernatorial elections. The PRD, however, did poorly in the 2000 elections, winning only 51 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (down from 125). Their percentage of the vote for congressional elections dropped from 26 percent to 19 percent. Some leftist voters may have been more motivated by anti-regime sentiments than political ideology and therefore voted for Fox since he was the most likely candidate to unseat the PRI. Despite its losses in the congressional and presidential elections, the PRD's Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador did win the mayoral elections in Mexico City in 2000. In 2003, the PAN had heavy losses in the congress, and the PRD almost doubled its congressional delegation. See Table 1 for the number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and percentage of the vote won by each of the three major parties.

The Elections of 2006

As early as 2004, the PRD's Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador was the front-runner for the 2006 presidential elections, before other parties had even chosen their candidates. A shopkeeper's son from the state of Tabasco, he had been a member of the PRI and was the state director of the National Indigenous Institute in Tabasco during the 1970s. In the 1980s he joined the Democratic Current of the PRI and then left the PRI to support Cárdenas' presidential campaign in 1988 and run against the PRI for the governorship of Tabasco. He led protests after the election and started a voters' rights movement in Tabasco. He ran again for governor of Tabasco in 1994 against Roberto Madrazo. There was fraud and considerable illegal spending by Madrazo. After massive protests in the state, President Zedillo tried to convince Madrazo to step down but was unable to do so. Lopez Obrador went on to organize the "Brigadas del Sol," a grassroots movement to build the base of the PRD by sending activists out door to door. He was elected mayor of Mexico City in 2000.

As mayor, Lopez Obrador became well known and enacted popular policies. He was known for his personal austerity, holding press conferences at 6:30 a.m. and driving himself around in an old Nissan. He promoted populist policies, such as taking back land in Chapultepec Park that had been illegally appropriated by wealthy residents with property adjacent to the park (Chapultepec Park is a 1,600-acre park that serves as the recreational and cultural center of Mexico City). He also provided a pension of about $58 a month to every resident over 75. He attempted to win the support of the middle class as well with projects to renovate the historic district of the city and build a double-decker highway to relieve Mexico City's notorious traffic problems.

With Lopez Obrador far ahead in all the polls, the Fox administration brought charges against him related to a minor land dispute over an access road to build a hospital. In April of 2005, PRI and PAN representatives in the national congress voted to strip him of his immunity from criminal prosecution and essentially impeach him. Prosecutors charged him with the misdemeanor crime of failing to obey a court injunction. Under Mexican law anyone facing criminal prosecution is barred from running in an election, so the charges meant that the leading contender for the 2006 presidential elections likely would not be permitted to run. Many people viewed the legal case as a purely political maneuver to keep Lopez Obrador out of the race. After huge protests in support of Lopez Obrador, Fox backed down, fired the attorney general, and dropped the charges. Lopez Obrador returned to the presidential campaign with even more support than before.

Ultimately Lopez Obrador lost the election to Felipe Calderon of the PAN. Felipe Calderon won a surprise victory in the PAN's primary over President Fox's preferred candidate, Santiago Creel. Calderon is a lifelong member of the PAN and represents the more traditional conservative Catholic faction of the party. His father was one of the founders of the PAN. He served as the president of the PAN, the leader of the PAN in congress, and was secretary of energy under President Fox. Roberto Madrazo won the PRI's primary to become the PRI's contender, but only after a bitter dispute within the party. Madrazo represents the old-style authoritarian PRI, and reformist elements within the PRI did not support his candidacy.

While Lopez Obrador was in the lead throughout most of the race, during the final few months of the campaign he began to lose support. He did not show up to the first presidential debate, and a lot of negative advertising against him seemed to turn middle- class voters away from him. The official election results gave Calderon 35.9 percent, Lopez Obrador 35.3 percent and Madrazo 22.2 percent of the vote. With a difference of less than 250,000 votes, this was the closest election in Mexican history. Before the final vote count was announced, both Calderon and Lopez Obrador declared themselves the winner. When the official results put Calderon ahead, Lopez Obrador and his supporters staged large protests and later blocked streets in downtown Mexico City demanding a vote-by- vote recount. In addition to allegations of fraud and error at the polling places, Lopez Obrador argued that the negative media campaign against him was illegally financed and that President Fox illegally intervened in the election. The Federal Electoral Tribunal called for 9 percent of the votes to be recounted. While some irregularities were found, the court declined to order a full recount. The Federal Electoral Tribunal expressed some concerns with the financing of the media campaign against Lopez Obrador and Fox's interventions but ultimately decided the infractions were not severe enough to merit annulling the election. Thus they declared Calderon the winner on September 5, 2005, more than two months after the election. On September 16 (Mexican Independence Day) Lopez Obrador declared himself the legitimate president of Mexico and vowed to create a parallel government. Calderon will face many obstacles in trying to unite the country and move forward with his policy proposals.

Consequences of the 2006 Elections

The main consequences of the presidential elections of 2006 for the party system are increased polarization among the parties, the weakening of the old guard of the PRI, and continued divided government at the national level. In contrast to Vicente Fox and most other elected leaders of the PAN, Calderon represents the base of the PAN. Fox was a businessman who joined the PAN in the 1980s after the bank nationalization. Calderon is a lifelong member of the PAN. His father was an important leader of the party, and the president-elect seems more committed to conservative ideology and the tradition of the PAN than Fox and others who only recently joined the party. The PAN suffers from a split between traditional, ideological members who have been long time activists in the party and the more recent converts who are more pragmatic. Fox belongs to the latter category. Fox's preferred candidate for the PAN's presidential bid, Santiago Creel, was also a relative newcomer to the party. Under Calderon's leadership, the party may return to its historic roots as a conservative Catholic party. The Left was also radicalized by the election. While Lopez Obrador lost support in the months after the election, some of his core supporters remain convinced that the election was stolen and fear the PAN is trying to rebuild a one-party state. With the PAN moving away from its pragmatic leaders and back toward its base, and the Left disillusioned with the current electoral institutions, it is hard to imagine the PAN and the PRD working together in a divided Congress. Further deadlock

is likely to continue. The growing polarization may open up an opportunity for the PRI to retake the ideological center and play both the PAN and PRD against each other as they each search for legislative allies, thus strengthening the PRI.

The resounding loss of Roberto Madrazo in the 2006 election symbolizes a decisive defeat for the old guard of the PRI. Madrazo represented the authoritarian elements of the PRI that are sometimes referred to as the "dinosaurs." His defeat should lead to a resurgence of the more modern, reformist faction of the PRI, or else the PRI is likely to be marginalized altogether in the future. The aftermath of the 2006 elections has spelled trouble for a number of Madrazo's allies. Most notably, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the governor of the state of Oaxaca, is a close ally of Madrazo. Madrazo's imposition of Ruiz as the PRI's candidate for governor caused a schism in the PRI with a number of prominent PRI leaders publicly supporting the opposition candidate. Ruiz's administration has been marked by crisis since Ruiz used the police to end a teachers' strike in the city of Oaxaca. As a result of his strong-arm tactics, the city was occupied for months by protestors demanding his resignation. The protests intensified in the months after the presidential election, and in late October, President Fox sent in federal troops to try to reestablish some order in the city. Madrazo's waning power was also displayed when his favored candidate was not selected as the PRI's gubernatorial candidate in the state of Tabasco, and in the PRI's defeat in the gubernatorial elections in Chiapas.

The PRI also had massive losses in the national legislature. Its representation in the lower house dropped from 201 seats to only 106. The party's percentage of the vote fell from 37 percent to 21 percent. Both the PAN and PRD picked up seats. The PAN increased its representation from 151 to 206 seats, and the PRD jumped from 95 to 127. The PRI went from having the largest share of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies to being outnumbered by both the PAN and the PRD. The PRI does have more seats in the Senate than the PRD (33 for the PRI versus 26 for the PRD), but the PAN has a large plurality with 52 out of a total 128. No party has a majority in either house of congress; thus, the divided government that characterized Fox's tenure will persist.

The PRD's electoral fortunes have fluctuated dramatically, depending upon the personal appeal of the party's candidate. It does not have a strong infrastructure and membership base. Thus, with Lopez Obrador's falling popularity, the party may lose some ground in the next elections. This already happened in the gubernatorial elections in Tabasco on October 15, 2006, when Lopez Obrador's close ally lost to the PRI. The PAN is clearly the dominant party right now, controlling the presidency for the second time in a row and also having a plurality in both houses of congress. It has historically been weak in the South, but it is expanding its infrastructure. If Calderon takes a sharp turn to the right, however, it may put off moderate voters and compromise the party's future. While the PRI was greatly weakened by the 2006 election, the party has a strong grassroots organization. It still controls the more local governments than the other parties, and if the reformists can take back the party, it may be able to stage a comeback. In sum, the 2006 elections severely stressed Mexico's electoral institutions. No electoral system can perfectly count every single vote; machines malfunction and humans make errors. When the results are very close, it may be impossible to know which candidate actually won more votes. Still, Mexico's electoral institutions have been through constant reforms and have been rigorously examined for fairness and competency. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TRIFE) that organize, monitor, and arbitrate Mexico's elections are among the most modern and reliable in the world. Democracy is always a work in progress, and

it is hoped the 2006 elections will inspire even more reform to further improve the fairness and accuracy of Mexico's elections.

Table 1: Mexican Party Vote Shares and Representation in Congress

		Seats in Chamber of Deputies			Percentage of the Vote		
Year	Congress	PRI	PAN	PRD	PRI	PAN	PRD
1988	LIV	260	101	{136}*	50%	17%	{27%}*
1991	LV	321	90	40	61%	18%	8%
1994	LVI	300	119	71	50%	26%	16%
1997	LVII	238	122	125	39%	27%	26%
2000	LVIII	209	208	51	37%	38%	19%
2003	LIX	222	151	95	37%	31%	18%
2006	LX	106	206	127	21%	42%	25%

*The PRD did not exist in 1988, thus the number in parentheses represents the group of leftist parties that supported the Cardenas coalition.

Source: Roderic Ai Camp, Politics in Mexico: The Democratic Consolidation, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 206-209. The 2006 data is adapted from http://www3.diputados.gob.mx/camara/001_diputados/005_grupos_parlamentarios.