

From Disinterest to Excess The Cultural Bases for Political Participation in Mexico

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Mobilization in San Mateo Atenco against the construction of an international airport in the area.

In Mexico's intellectual and political milieu, the characteristics, types and orientations that should distinguish democratic forms of participation from other kinds of political activity do not seem to have been sufficiently pinpointed. It seems necessary to intro-

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duce into the debate the importance of certain cultural variables without which individual or social group involvement in processing public matters is relatively insignificant or even counterproductive for the stabilization of our young democracy and its governmental effectiveness.

I am interested in underlining this point since it clearly expresses one of the greatest current problems in the

process of building a democracy in Mexico: the coexistence of society's enormous disinterest in public matters and hyperactive social groups that have developed forms of participation inconsistent with the principles and values of a democratic culture. Briefly, in the wake of the majority's rejection of participating in a widely scorned sphere of activity, certain forms of political action on the part of consistent minorities has

intensified, which far from contributing to the consolidation of institutional routines and forms of social relations appropriate to a democracy, contribute to the erosion of both its legal and axiological pillars. And in a situation of political transition like the one Mexico has been experiencing in recent years, it has not been easy to find a balance between the subject, pragmatic and providentialist culture stemming from our revolutionary heritage and a culture of legal, responsible, tolerant participation, capable of creating a solid basis for the two main characteristics of modern democracies: the representativeness of their institutions and the governability of the political system in the framework of the rule of law.

Thus, given the breakdown of many of the traditional mechanisms of political discipline, cohesion and authority, an unprecedented situation has emerged in which factors traditional to our political-cultural history have taken on new meanings, factors such as the discredit of public institutions, disrespect for legality, the weakness of the citizen as a category, making personalized leaderships supreme, the acceptance of patronage as the norm in relations, the tendency to see social movements as great quests for justice and imposing an extreme moral character on conflicts, among others. In an atmosphere of political opening and the relative lack of definition of new forms of relations among socio-political actors and state institutions, the force of this cultural substratum, together with the maintenance of profound inequalities that have increased tension and social clashes, has meant that many of the most visible expressions of participation are forms of extra-institutional protest, not very conducive to tolerance,

dialogue and negotiation and sometimes openly extra-legal. Though this cannot be generalized—since undoubtedly forms of public participation exist with other bases—it does seem appropriate to underline the gravity of their effects for Mexican public life as a whole.

It must be said that this is not only a cultural obstacle situated in the dynamic of society, since its continuance can be explained to a great extent by the manner in which the political elites themselves are dealing with it and reacting to it in the country's new phase. Faced for the last few years increasingly with the choice of maintaining momentary political stability

should be abandoned, but rather, that they should be intensified and extended to strengthen society's capacity and consciousness to evaluate the behavior of the state and collective movements.

From this viewpoint, no truly democratizing project can elude the question of what is expected from that participation, what its meaning must be and what its conditions and breadth are, and therefore, also, what its limits are. If the model of citizenship promoted is too ambitious in its levels and forms of participation, it is very feasible that most of those who might be interested in taking on some kind of political commitment will not do so. As I have

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or accepting the costs of consolidating a new form of negotiation and generation of agreements that does not undermine legality and protects the rights of third parties, they have usually opted for the former. Many have commented that this inability to consolidate a rule of law brings with it a profound socio-political lesson that, among other things, distorts participation, feeds uncertainty and delays the entire process of democratic consolidation. Of course, it must not be forgotten that when conflicts are posed, processed and resolved against the current of civic education aimed at socializing through different institutional efforts, that education tends to be devalued and lose its sense of reality and effectiveness in the formation of civic identities. This obviously does not mean such efforts

pointed out, both sides of the coin, excessive participation and profound indifference, are perfectly identifiable in contemporary Mexico.

After a closer look, the panorama of the citizenry's "political education" is not very encouraging. The results of the recent National Survey on Political Culture and Civic Practices clearly show the magnitude of the challenges.¹ What is in play is no minor matter. We are dealing with the possibility of building a form of government and social coexistence that could overcome the obstacles stemming both from the concentration of authoritarian power and the paralysis and ineffectiveness that arise from the inability to find mechanisms to productively involve the citizenry in public matters, a strategic aim in situations like Mexico's in which

the political organizations inherent to representative democracy—that is, political parties—have notable inabilities. In that sense, despite the irrefutable fact that the political culture is formed through prolonged and contradictory processes of social learning in which a great number of formative factors of different kinds intervene, it is also true that the deliberate effort to introduce certain values, information and expectations has central importance for orienting the collective dynamic in one direction or another.

Undoubtedly, beyond voting to elect the government, the fragility of citizens' participation as such in the public sphere begins precisely with the

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scant number of individuals who recognize themselves as citizens. Today, Mexicans only barely associate the category of "citizen" with public matters, political parties and politics (they make this association in only 4.20 percent, 3.65 percent and 7.25 percent of cases, respectively).² This illustrates the difficulty in clearly perceiving the implications that come with an effective exercise of citizenship. This is not strange if we consider Mexican political tradition, strongly conditioned by corporatist practices and an official discourse that for decades put the reference to "the people" or "people's groups" ahead of the category of the citizen, which was identified with the liberal current, not dear to the heart of the post-revolutionary political mentality, as well as to the class

or populist discourse of a large part of the left. There is, therefore, an enormous educational job to be done in order to infuse new value into the image of this central piece of the democratic dynamic, which presupposes a new positioning within specific institutional frameworks in which the citizen will have to play a much more active and defining role in the design and implementation of public policies.

"Learning to participate," a precondition for this to really happen in which the contents and methods of formal education intervene decisively as a privileged agent for socialization, seems to be the only feasible route for assuming and practicing politics in a different way

in the face of the cultural indigence of the media, the churches, unions and the parties themselves. The fact that, today, more than half the public (54.9 percent) believes that "politics is very complicated and that is why most people do not understand it" clearly indicates that up until now it has not been possible to build meaningful links that make its language, instruments and usefulness understandable from the point of view of daily life. Changing this requires, first of all, an increase in the level of information about public affairs in general (their content, institutional reference points and social effects) and citizens' rights in particular. Without this, the connection between citizenship and politics will be permanently severed or distorted. Another negative thing about this

panorama is that 34.96 percent of the public is not familiar with their constitutional rights, and only 4.52 percent say they are very familiar with them. In addition, there is enormous disinterest in public matters: only 13.21 percent of those surveyed say they are "very interested" in them.

The difficulties in orienting oneself in the field of politics and the even greater difficulty in practicing politics democratically can be clearly seen in the survey question that deals with the words the public associates or relates to democracy. More than half (54.24 percent) of those surveyed have insufficient information to define their meaning and simply answer that they do not know. This explains why only a little over half of those surveyed believe that "Mexico is a democracy" and, of those, only 10.94 percent say that this is because elections are held and 6.47 percent because specific freedoms exist. This does not speak well of the socializing apparatuses that provide information on which the citizens base their judgments and evaluations, particularly television, the medium most used to find out about what is happening in politics (80.11 percent of those interviewed used television for this). Given the sensationalism and entertainment dynamic prevalent in the electronic media, legal reforms should be implemented to ensure that they live up to their social responsibility, linked not only to the quality of the information they disseminate, but also to the values and expectations they propose as models.

Speaking of values, one in particular is fundamental for democracy: tolerance. In this value are concentrated the possibilities for structuring a socio-political order in which pluralism does

not lead to anarchy nor competition to battles. What is more, if understood in its broadest sense, tolerance is an indispensable prerequisite for developing forms of open, flexible negotiations. It is no exaggeration to say that clarity on this point is the center of the political culture's democratic coherence. In today's Mexico, it seems difficult to be optimistic about this, when we see that 54.68 percent of the public "would not agree to someone being on television who they know will say things that go against their beliefs"; an additional 12.42 percent "don't know" if they would agree to this.

It is also a matter for concern that there is a very negative perception in society about solidarity: 77 percent of citizens thought that "most people almost always only worry about themselves." This is indicative of a society that tends toward atomization and selfish behavior and makes for difficulties in collective organization around common causes (50.26 percent of those interviewed thought this would be "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely").

Given these deficiencies, education for public participation should emphasize the way in which society values legality as a crucial variable in the make-up of a democratic culture. In today's Mexico, no one is unaware of the fact that the continual transgression of the rule of law by citizens, social movements, business interests and authorities on all levels completely distorts the social dynamic, bringing it to the brink of the pre-political stage of informal arrangements and the survival of the fittest. Without respect for the law, there is no way that the rule of law can function correctly, nor can coexistence in society develop in a predictable, secure way. We cannot

underestimate the fact that the weakness of the culture of legality has always been one of the most damaging factors for the country's public health. The proclivity for *de facto* agreements, corruption, the abuse of power as well as illegal pressure on the government has had negative effects not only in the political sphere, but also in the economy and society as a whole, gravely affecting institutions' rationality and effectiveness. Without a culture of legality, democratic consolidation is not possible, nor is sustainable development nor civility in collective coexistence.³

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that contribute to giving a particular meaning to those experiences.

As a whole, this panorama explains the prevailing precariousness of public participation: 85.46 percent of Mexican citizens do not belong to any organization, and those who do are divided in equally small numbers among a variety of kinds of organizations: unions (3.60 percent), social groups (1.37 percent), religious (5.36 percent), political (1.06 percent) or civic groups (2.25 percent) and agricultural organizations (1.85 percent). Along the same lines, 88.86 percent have never participated in creating new groups or organizations to solve problems in their communities and 87.60 percent have

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fact. To the question, "Who do you think respects laws least, those in government, the citizens or both?" 42.43 percent answered that no one respects them. Only 13.12 percent think that both those in government and the public respect the law and 30.93 percent are of the opinion that those in government respect it less. If we add the fact that 67.56 percent think that corruption involves both politicians and common citizens, we will have a clear idea of the assimilation of legality in the whole of society.⁴ All of this underlines the importance of using cultural initiatives and measures of institutional control to encourage the convergence of the two basic facets of civic education: the citizenry's practical experiences and the socialization of information and values

never tried to influence decision-making there.

These figures illustrate the weakness of Mexico's social fabric, characterized by a quite low level of self-organizing capabilities except in special cases, such as natural disasters, momentary aid to vulnerable groups or religious matters, in which the primary mechanisms of collective solidarity are put into motion or when there is a perceived attack on specific interests. It is therefore not strange that if we look at the most significant expressions of social participation in recent years, it is difficult to find proposals of social or political programs with a perspective of improving the rationality of one institution or another. The basically opposition-oriented nature of these movements—and in some cases, their strictly conserva-

tive character is not divorced from a subject identity centered on compensation historically received from the state. Neither is it disassociated from the contempt for the law or the widespread idea that if a law is considered unfair it can be disobeyed.

The not-always democratic orientation of political participation is one of the most sensitive problems in the perspective of redefining the political system and the consolidation of Mexican democracy. Without an active social base that is co-responsible and constructive,⁵ institutional activity will hit no corresponding civic-cultural note capable of ensuring the viability of its initiatives or of accompanying and dem-

ocratically limiting the exercise of power. ■■■

NOTES

¹ *Encuesta Nacional sobre Cultura Política y Prácticas Ciudadanas* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, 2002).

² This is in response to a question that allows for two answers from each interviewee and therefore doubles the possible relative percentages.

³ People's alienation from the law is related to their lack of trust in the institutions that are supposed to administer justice. In that sense, the fact that 56.63 percent of those surveyed have an "average", "bad" or "very bad" opinion

of judges and courts, while only 11.75 percent held them in "good" or "very good" esteem, is of great import. The Supreme Court is "highly trusted" by only 10.18 percent of the public, less than the church (55.69 percent) or teachers (42.32 percent) or even the media (21.67 percent).

⁴ In Transparency International's last annual report, Mexico continues to rate very low in terms of control over corruption, and is surpassed even by less developed countries like Peru, El Salvador or Senegal.

⁵ It should be noted that the potential interest in participating, although not overwhelming, is greater than real participation. This is shown by the figure of 46.36 percent of citizens who would be willing "to help solve a problem in their community" while 65.77 percent would agree to cooperate to work "to support the communities and improve public services" if asked by the government. The matter involves, then, finding the forms and mechanisms that can activate that participation.