

Unfettered Democracy

Democracy is not simply the right to vote, it is also the right to choose between different political alternatives

It is often stated that a working democracy implies the right to vote and the guarantee that the vote will be respected. Yet such formulas often forget that these are only some of the components of a democratic process. The essence of democracy is the ability, or the desire, to enfranchise the majority of the people so that they can freely participate in designing a political project that truly benefits them, without outside interference. In a contrasting analysis to that of Manuel Villa, Silvia Gómez Tagle, also a researcher from the Center for Sociological Studies of the Colegio de Mexico, explores these lines of thought. Her views:

In this year's local elections, the citizens of the state of Chihuahua elected a governor, 14 state legislators and 67 mayors and city governments. The contradictions of those elections must be analyzed from a variety of perspectives.

In the first place, it is important to remember that the recent political process unfolded within the framework of a very old problem, the contradiction between local interests and the federal government, and even between local political party chapters and their respective national offices.* In addition, it is important to analyze the process in relation to contradictions between groups belonging to the lay-masonic tradition, deeply rooted in the government and comprising its dominant sectors, and Catholic sectors, long excluded from political power.

The elections also reflected a contradiction between grass-roots concerns, which the left has yet to be able to represent successfully, and a "democratic" project (without adding any adjectives to explain what kind of democracy), proposed by the rightist PAN. And they reflected

the problems of diverse leftist party interests, expressed in several political currents. Trapped within the principal PRI-PAN rivalry, the left has not been able to avoid engaging in alliances -voluntarily or involuntarily- with one or the other party. And finally, the elections reflected the strains of a very particular contradiction, between a defense of the vote and a defense of national sovereignty, created to a certain extent by the sectors of the PAN that have sought support north of the Rio Grande.

For a while now, two tendencies have been developing on the Chihuahua political front. The first is the PAN's growing strength reflected in a revitalized electoral strategy, the naming of younger party activists to leadership positions, a flexible policy regarding alliances with other groups (even with the left!), etc. The other tendency is the PRI's decreasing strength due to internal conflicts and the diminishing importance of certain economic sectors that once gave the party its electoral strength. The latter have lost importance with the development of new productive sectors, such as the *maquiladora*, with the growth of new major cities, such as Juárez, and with the strengthening of the middle classes, accustomed by the economic boom years to certain luxuries and now deeply affected by the economic crisis, etc. It would also be important to examine the factors causing other opposition parties' decreased electoral showing. For example, the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) participated in federal elections for the first time in 1979, winning 18,265 votes. In 1985, however, the PSUM, direct descendant of the PCM and including

*The main parties involved were: the PRI, Institutionalized Revolutionary Party, in power; the PAN, National Action Party, right opposition; and the PSUM, Mexican Unified Socialist Party, left opposition.

other left forces as well, only won 6,409 votes in the entire state.

All of these factors came together to produce this year's controversial Chihuahua elections, in which the PAN actually had a chance to win the gubernatorial contest. But in 1986, after several years of partial defeats (taken as excessive in our political system), the PRI's desire to win, together with the decision by electoral officials to support the party, overrode all else. Unlike 1983 when the PRI was late in organizing its campaign, this year the party was the first to choose its gubernatorial candidate and

was a great disappointment for many. In addition, the tendencies in state voting patterns established in elections over the past several years were changed. The PRI won 97% of the mayoral races with 58% of the vote (the PAN won only one city hall and the Socialist Workers Party a second), all of the state legislature slots with 57% of the vote and the governor's office with 59% of the vote.

Nonetheless, a more careful analysis of election results shows some weak points in the PRI's victory. In the first place, it is rather odd that with 35% of the total vote (similar to the percen-

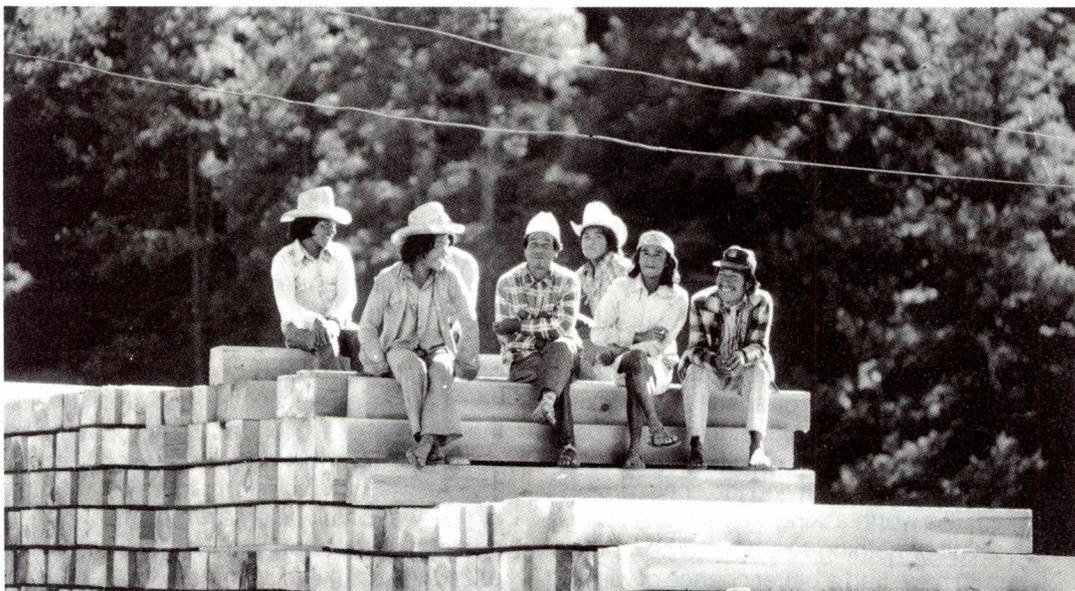


Photo by Sergio Dorantes

The lumber industry is important in Chihuahua.

spared no resources in its all out campaign.

In addition, two novel measures were implemented in an effort to revitalize the party. First, with the exception of Ciudad Juárez, mayoral candidates were elected by PRI base-level members. This was an important move as there has been frequent debate within the PRI about how candidates are chosen. It was the first time this process has been used since 1965, when Carlos Madrazo, noted politician and then president of the PRI, tried something similar. Second, a change in electoral tactics was implemented. 36,000 people, mostly employees in the state bureaucracy, were recruited to get out the vote. Each one of them was required to get at least 10 people to promise to vote for the PRI.

Other measures were taken in an attempt to make use of the state apparatus to control the electoral process. For example, local electoral legislation was modified to reduce the representation of the opposition on specific boards involved in the process, the president of the State Electoral Commission was granted prerogatives allowing him to name "aides," thus making it easier to manipulate things, etc.

Having thus carefully prepared the scene, the PRI won an overwhelming victory. The outcome

tage it won in the 1985 federal elections), the PAN was named the victor in only one mayoral race. In addition, in Chihuahua, Parral, Cuauhtémoc and Santa Bárbara townships, the PAN got almost as many votes as the PRI (between 2% and 17% difference); in Juárez the difference was a bit larger, but it was, nonetheless, a very hotly contested race. In many other townships, however, the PAN won many fewer votes than the PRI, thus producing the following statewide figures for mayoral races: PAN, 233,338 votes and PRI, 391,395 votes.

When the results were made public, there were many protest activities, with broad participation—people from the business sector, community groups, peasant organizations and the Catholic Church, among others. On July 10, the PAN, together with some of these other forces, denounced that there had been widespread fraud and called for a nullification. The PAN took its challenge to the Electoral College.

Comprised of the outgoing legislature, with 4 PAN representatives and no other opposition members, the Electoral College finally met on August 1st to review and pass judgement on the local Chihuahua elections. Three of the PAN deputies resigned (one dissident continued to participate) in protest when the College refused

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to accept some 1300 testimonies presented by the PAN to substantiate its nullification petition. Shortly thereafter, the College quickly announced its findings. It nullified the counts from 36 of 1800 voting booths, leaving final election results completely unchanged.

At the same time, the PSUM, the mayor of Cuauhtémoc (an ex-member of the Socialist Workers Party, PST) and several other grass-roots organizations, some with ties to the Catholic Church, decided to convene the "Democratic Electoral Movement." Since none of them were represented in the Electoral College, they decided to create mechanisms parallel to the official ones to evaluate electoral results. The outcome was a Peoples Tribunal made up of well-known public figures with impeccable moral and professional credentials. Unfortunately, the Tribunal's findings were also disheartening. The available information was not sufficient to allow them to undertake a general evaluation of state-wide elections. Thus, they ratified some written evidence of irregularities and acknowledged that it was impossible for them to arrive at a definitive decision regarding the validity of official results.

The PAN was the only party that could have challenged the results of specific mayoral or state legislature races. Nonetheless, the party was not interested in partial victories and put all of its energies into having the entire process nullified. It is worth asking why the PAN chose such an all-or-nothing strategy, since it probably would have had a better chance of winning on a case by case basis. Possibly PAN leadership felt that it would be more damaging to the PRI to isolate it completely than to insist on a few lesser victories. Nonetheless, for an electoral party like the PAN, it's not clear that the path it chose actually opened any positive prospects since its position implies giving up its only victory in the recent elections: the municipal government of Nuevo Casas Grandes.

By the end of August protest activities against the electoral fraud were fewer and fewer. It seemed that the struggle for democracy in Chihuahua was quickly losing steam. Only two proposals still remain for the future, and it's hard to predict what their impact might be. One was the decision by the PAN to block the inaugurations of Governor-elect Jorge Baeza and municipal officials elected on the PRI slate, scheduled for October. The other proposal has to do with the transformation of the "Democratic Electoral Movement" into a national coalition that works to protect the vote independent of party concerns. Groups as diverse as leftist parties and the anti-Communist organization, Integral Human Development, will participate together in the new coalition. The idea is to try and broaden the opportunities for democratic activity in Mexico.

Finally, although we've dealt with "democracy" without using qualifying modifiers throughout this article, in the case of Chihuahua, it is

important to explore the implications of the different adjectives that can be used to make the term more specific. Without them it will be very difficult to reach an understanding of the deeper problems associated with the electoral process: the internal weaknesses of the official party; the development of opposition forces that are not particularly pluralistic and the virtual absence of the left; the process of urbanization and the strengthening of a middle class greatly influenced by U.S. life styles to the point that they consider it valid to seek political support from our neighbor to the north; the intervention of the Catholic Church in political matters; and above all, the struggle between the PRI and the PAN, which is really a struggle between the country's dominant classes that leaves most grass-roots concerns and interests virtually unrepresented.

The exercise of electoral democracy, with all of its potential to determine changes in political leadership, is without a doubt a popular demand in Chihuahua as evidenced by the wave of protests and demonstrations during the past few months. It also appears that this demand is being taken up in other states as well, for example during the local elections in Oaxaca and Durango; and it will probably be an issue in the forthcoming Sinaloa elections, as well. Nonetheless, the exercise of a fuller democracy that not only deals with the right to vote and respect for electoral results, but also with the possibility of choosing between truly alternative political projects and of guaranteeing that the benefits generated in the society as a whole will be shared by all sectors, demands that grass-roots interests be adequately represented. This is true for Chihuahua and for the entire nation.★

Silvia Gómez Tagle



Photo by Sergio Dorantes

Chihuahua is the largest state in the nation, an arid, starkly beautiful land.