

Italy and Mexico: a political analogy

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When a political system, such as the one in Mexico, decides to accelerate and intensify the democratic process it is advisable to take a good look at the theory of democracy. This is easier if a comparative method is applied. Such a contrast could include analysis of the formal constitutional framework, political realities, and the relationship between the two.

If we review the Mexican and Italian systems to identify similarities and differences, the end result is both a *political analogy*, and a *forgotten analogy*. There are similarities in both countries, however, that have not been examined.

Mexico and Italy could not be more different in terms of the formal institutional structure. Mexico adopted a presidential system of government after achieving independence. Italy instituted a parliamentary system in 1862.

Italy employed a centralist arrangement, conditioned by regional elements in 1947. Mexico opted for a federalist structure with important centralist elements that have not been modified in many years. There is a drive to decentralize in both countries, as well as a deep concern with the development lag in their southern regions.

Mexico opted for the current republic system of government when Iturbide's self declared "empire"

* Present Governor of the State of Guerrero.

collapsed in 1823. Italy modified its structure with the referendum of 1946 after the Allied victory in World War II.

Both countries have similar legislative structures of two chambers, a Senate and a House of Representatives. The Italian chambers have an equal voice in electing a President, creating a government and transferring power from one administration to the next.

The Italian system approaches direct democracy. Its citizens have the right to propose laws and call for referendums. Although they do not exercise these rights frequently, the democratic process is firmly established. These mechanisms have not been implemented in Mexico aside from a faint-hearted, temporary and unproductive effort in the Federal District.

Observing the Italian Parliament in action and comparing it to Mexico can be fascinating. The Italian President can dissolve the Parliament and call for elections to consolidate his power, if he deems the mood of the people to be favorable for his plans. This power, like the sword of Damocles, is a way of testing the ground to maneuver alliances in support of government decisions. Calling for early elections can make heads roll in ruling parties that are not prepared.

Italy has been ruled by a parliamentary government since the period of the Albertan Statutes, with a relatively brief fascist interlude. Mexico has maintained a presidential system with minor deviations. In Italy, the President is elected by an Electoral College that includes both chambers and three representatives from a Regional Council. Italy is ruled by proportional representation. Mexico chooses its leaders with a combination of direct and proportional representation. The President and the Senate are elected by a direct vote and their elections ratified by the House of Representatives, while the latter are elected by proportional representation.

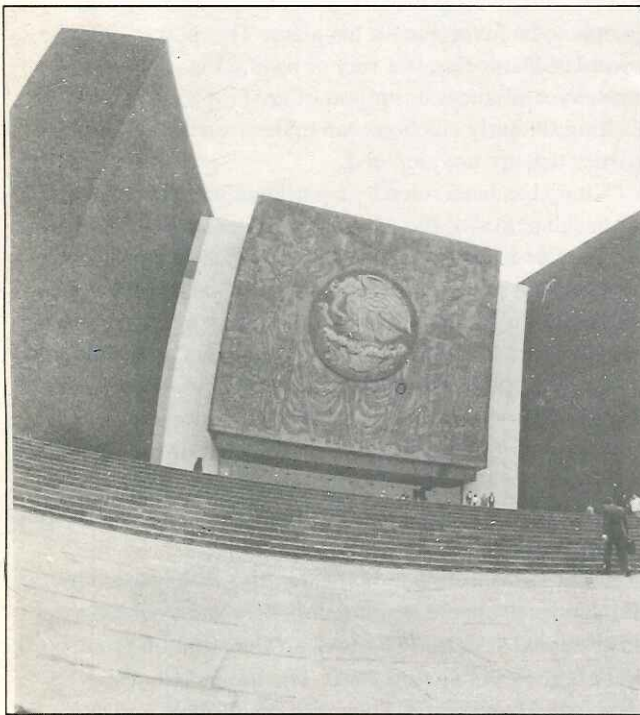
The Constitution in both countries is the basic law. It includes the mandate for democracy and establishes an institutional system. The Mexican Constitution grew out of the Revolution of 1910. The Italian one was developed by the political parties who fought and triumphed over fascism.

The Italian Constitution is an explicit legal transition from dictatorship to democracy. In Mexico the Querétaro¹ Charter became the instrument to accelerate the process of democratization, and, according to some, was a critical phase of the transition to democracy. Both constitutions specify amendment procedures. However, while the Italians have not altered theirs, Mexico has made many modifications.

¹ The Constitution of Mexico was drafted in the city of Querétaro, approximately one hundred and fifty miles northwest of Mexico City.

There are numerous parallels between the political experiences and constitutions in the two countries. The most significant is the role of the party in power. Mexico has been governed by the same political party without interruption since the Constitution was ratified in 1917: the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). In Italy, the Christian Democrats have also controlled the government, although under different circumstances. The PRI has always managed to maintain an absolute majority on its own, while the Christian Democrats have formed a series of coalitions to hold on to their controlling position.

Italian coalitions are formed after elections have taken place in the process of negotiating a new government. In Mexico, until the 1988 presidential election, it was common for parties of the opposition to nominate the candidate for President chosen by the PRI, though this did not affect the make up of the House of Representatives or the shape of the government itself.



The Legislative Palace of Mexico.

This means that under the Italian parliamentary system the ruling party must form a legislative coalition or the government falls. In Mexico the presidential and the mixed electoral system allow for one party to hold the Presidency and another, or several others, to control the Congress, without coalitions or threats of a governmental failure.

Recently, the ruling party (PRI) in Mexico has seen a decline in the number of votes it receives, to the point that it almost lost the absolute majority in the 1988 presidential election. Since then, the phenomenon of volatile votes has

appeared in Mexico. Italy, on the other hand, has not experienced radical changes in their voting pattern.

Analyzing the constitutions in each country is not enough. We need to investigate the dynamics of the political parties. Both countries have multi-party systems, and this also calls for further probing. Many believe that Italy has a multi-party democracy where the ruling party inhibits democratic institutions. Others think that Mexico has only one politically viable party with other smaller factions that have a hard time gaining access to power.

Small minority parties play an important role in both countries' imperfect multi-party system. The Christian Democrats would not be in power if it weren't for coalitions. Mexico's PRI would not have been able to carry out the critical legislative reforms such as bank privatization and electoral reform without the support of minority parties. The leading opposition is the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), that received seventeen per cent of the votes in the local elections of 1988.

In terms of the political focus in the two countries, the Christian Democrats vacillate between the center and the left, and the PRI tries to consolidate a central position, the so-called progressive center, to secure the support of the center-right, not to mention the straight center, traditionally represented by the PAN.

The PRI is not the only party courting the center. Many political groups have shed their traditional platforms to wave the flag of the Mexican Revolution. The far left communist parties (PSUM, PMS) faded and joined the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD). This party has its roots in the *Frente Democrático Nacional* which had broken all voting records for an opposition party in 1988, led primarily by dissidents from the PRI.

The Italian and Spanish International Communist Parties, although not the French, are following the Mexican pattern and shedding their Marxism. They are now "democratic-left" parties moving toward a moderate center-left position, and thereby becoming more viable alternatives in today's political climate.

The multi-party systems in Europe and Latin America are changing, primarily through modifications of strategy. Italy has always had a radical element committed to pressuring Western democracies to live up to their idealist foundations: "the loyal opposition". Although they may not be viable, or even desirable, alternatives, this opposition claims that parties struggling for power must accept the minimal social conditions promised by the Constitution, even though they may not coincide with the system developing and applying them. They also demand that both the "loyal opposition" and alternate parties make a clear commitment to following the rules of the election game:

equality, electoral impartiality and effective voting, thereby assuring that the losers have actually lost, and that the victors have actually won.

Politics is a popular topic of conversation in all political systems. Italian parties arouse interest due to the large number of small groups supported by the "Barons". The fragmentation of power in the Italian system is illustrated quite graphically by the board appointments to government positions and the participation of and cooperation with the opposition.

In Mexico the plurality of the ruling party (PRI) has suffered from excessive presidential control. Although there are no "Barons" in Mexico, there are renowned leaders and governors who strive for local political interests. Their influence, however, is limited to local administrations and does not extend to the national scene. Further, the regional activity is limited by the constitutional prohibition of reelection.

Some Italian political parties², though not the Christian Democrats, are affiliated with social organizations such as labor unions, as is the PRI in Mexico. This is also true for England's Labor Party, and in Spain with Felipe Gonzalez's ruling PSOE. The PRI therefore enjoys considerable internal cohesion, while the Italian Christian Democrats are afflicted by internal splintering.

The internal life of political parties is affected by the electoral system. A common observation of the Italian system is that proportional representation produces a higher echelon selecting the parliamentary candidates, and therefore nominees are often detached from the electorate.

The Mexican electoral system of one round of votes for a straight majority means one nomination per electoral district. One result of the highly contested election in 1988 has been that local interests are more carefully considered in order to select viable candidates. The proportional representation system looks at the national panorama when nominating candidates from the higher echelons of the party, and opposition candidates in Mexico are normally chosen by the national organizations, a fact which might explain their limited electoral success. However, the *Partido Acción Nacional*, applies a system of locally nominated candidates, and has demonstrated its ability to win elections.

Italy also deals with the longstanding obstacles to democracy in areas such as Sicily and Calabria, where analysts have noted increasing organized Mafia and Camorra penetrations into local political structures. Mexico does not have a parallel situation.

In Mexico, the PRI's approach has encouraged extensive rotation of power positions among people within the ruling class. This not only reflects the federalist nature of the

political structure, but also assuages fears of the ruling party blocking vertical mobility in the corridors of power. The Italian system vis-à-vis the accessibility of power is diametrically opposite. Central control of nominations and the "Baron" phenomenon have spawned a plethora of senior citizens in power.


Italy has created a "party-ocracy", where it is the political parties who control the country. Negotiations between parties take place outside the institutional framework of Parliament and the Council of Ministers. Critics warn that the role of a central Parliament is deteriorating. By contrast, in Mexico the role played by Congress has recently been escalating. Negotiation toward consensus within the institutional framework is increasingly common and positive.

Exploring the democratic process also brings up substantive issues. Both the Italian and Mexican systems developed when an authoritarian phase came to a close, fascism in Italy and the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship in Mexico. There are, however, real differences. Italy has had to face its immediate past (1922-1943) while Mexico reacts to the more remote last half of the nineteenth century. Italy chose democracy with electoral participation from the outset, with the "party system of democracy" limitations built in, while Mexico built a lugubrious multiparty system that has only recently changed during specific elections and in specific spheres.

The Italian process has been heavily influenced by external factors such as the United States, the European Community, the Cold War and, recently, the democratization of Eastern Europe. Mexico, on the other hand, has developed its democratic process internally.

The issue of Catholicism has not been relevant to the electoral process in Mexico since the resolution of the *Cristiada* conflict (1929) over the Church's objections to the Constitution of 1917. In Italy, on the other hand, the Christian Democratic party integrates church politics into its platform and therefore has enjoyed both the support of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the resulting electoral payoff.

The Italians face public demand for institutional reforms aimed at strengthening their Executive Branch. The process of democratic reform in Mexico looks to strengthen Congress. Italian reformers are reassessing the role of the majority system in creating their Parliament, while the Mexican process has already increased proportional representation.

A final and critical difference between these two political systems is that the Italians have built a democracy within a highly developed economy, while Mexico's more modest process has taken place within a gradual and still unsatisfactory development 

² Communists, the Social Democrats and International Socialists.