

# Electoral processes in North America

The international conference on “Electoral Processes in Mexico, the United States and Canada 1994—Evaluation and Perspectives” was held in Mexico City on January 25-27. Organized by the National University of Mexico’s Center for Research on North America (CISAN), the conference was coordinated by Silvia Núñez and Bárbara Driscoll, CISAN’s Academic Secretary and Coordinator for U.S. Studies respectively. The event, inaugurated by Mónica Vereá, the Center’s Director, included a representative for each country in each of the six round tables.

## Presentations

In the first round table, Juan Molinar stressed that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) holds the world record for remaining in power—it has ruled Mexico since 1929—and noted that, while U.S. voters have not faced changes in electoral laws during this century, their Mexican counterparts have seen a series of electoral reforms come and go over the past 35 years.

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He reported that the average life-span of a recent Mexican electoral law is one and a half years. Key examples were the 1986 electoral code, which was reformed before being put to the test, and the 1994 elections, during which the need for a new electoral reform was being discussed even before the presidential election had concluded.

Molinar stated that the PRI is a party in decline, faced with an increasingly demanding opposition and the impossibility of continuing to sustain the fiscal costs derived from the way it is constituted as a political party.

He explained that the PRI brings together a broad range of forces, whose often contradictory interests cannot continue to coexist. As an example of this, he cited

the fact that the government authorized peasants to raise the price of corn, while forbidding corn tortilla manufacturers to raise their prices, compensating them instead through subsidies. The system this sort of contradiction produces has brought a serious economic crisis, which started in the 1970s.

Mark Jones confirmed Molinar’s point about the stability U.S. voters have enjoyed. He mentioned that the American electoral process has not changed since 1789, noting that Bolivia is the only country in the Americas which shares the system of indirect election of presidents if they are not elected on the first round.

He specified two forms in which U.S. citizens exercise their democratic rights: through referenda—which allow them to create laws—and primary elections, which ensure that candidate selection is carried out by a majority of votes and not through party leaders’ favoritism. Primaries became highly popular in 1968.

Jones remarked that the president of his country frequently fails to obtain the support of Congress. Even senators and congressmen belonging to his own party tend to be more concerned with the interests of their districts—which determine whether they will be reelected—than with those affecting the nation as a whole.

The same is true in Canada. According to R. Kenneth Carty, many members of Parliament—also in pursuit of reelection—are more intent on remaining on good terms with their electors than on governing.

He spoke about the changes undergone by the Canadian electorate since 1950, in a period when demographic growth made it impossible for each candidate to personally get to know his or her constituency. This situation was accentuated in 1960 due to population shifts—three fourths of the populace concentrated in urban areas. Moreover, the number of electoral districts increased from 200 in 1872 to almost 300 in 1988.

Carty said that since 1960, elections have been won or lost in Ottawa; thus, in recent years that city has determined the government’s make-up.

During the second round table, Germán Pérez Fernández noted that differences between the Mexican, U.S. and Canadian electoral systems are so great as to make them incomparable. There are constant changes in

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Mexico; as an example just in terms of political parties, he mentioned that one of the principal opposition forces—currently called the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)—has changed its name four times since 1982, with the successive restructuring of alliances and political definitions this has entailed.

Pérez Fernández stressed that the transition to democracy will be possible only when political parties understand that attempts at mutual annihilation necessarily backfire and are equivalent to annihilating the political system itself.

He noted that the Mexican public feels indignation and disbelief towards the country's electoral processes and that social movements and civic associations have therefore supplanted many of the functions usually fulfilled by political parties. He mentioned the specific examples of Zapatista *subcomandante* Marcos, the San Angel Group and the Civic Alliance; underlining that the organization of the Federal Electoral Institute and the creation of citizen ombudsmen resulted from grass-roots mobilizations, he proposed that problems with future state elections be resolved by adjusting local legislation to federal statutes.

Samuel H. Fisher discussed the U.S. congressional elections of 1994. Citing a series of voting statistics according to sex, race, income, educational level, etc., he pointed to the economy as the key factor motivating electoral preference: those who experienced losses in their family finances, or remained at essentially the same level since the 1992 elections, gave their vote to the Republicans.

When survey subjects were asked why they had voted Democrat in 1992 and Republican two years later, they answered that they had voted for change. Fisher remarked that this demonstrates that the American electorate is unclear on the kind of changes it wants to see. He also called attention to the fact that, for the first time in many years, Republicans control both the Senate and the House of Representatives as well as governing 30 of the 50 states.

Another interesting aspect of the elections was the South's break with its electoral tradition, which had been summed up in the saying that “I'd rather vote for a yellow dog than a Republican.” In 1994 many Southerners decided the Democrats were less vote-worthy than a yellow dog.

Gary Levy also submerged the audience in statistical data. He provided an overview of the Canadian

Parliament's composition since the 18th century, focusing on the case of Quebec, since he views this province as an illustration of trends in other parts of Canada.

Unlike Carty, Levy maintained that Quebec together with Ontario hold the key to putting a party in power, emphasizing the fact that Quebec's electorate votes for the party with the best chance of winning, particularly if it is led by a politician from the province itself.

In the third event, Julio Faesler explained what he considers the main reason the citizenry is concerned with the legality of elections: that many arbitrary acts can be committed in legal form. He added that in order to achieve a greater degree of electoral credibility, starting in 1991 Mexicans learned the techniques of electoral observation and “quick counts.”

“Citizens realized that they could tally the results themselves in order to find out whether the official results are reliable. This made them conscious that they could have an effect on raising the quality of electoral processes.”

Faesler said he considers the 1994 presidential elections—because of the problems detected in the electoral process—as the point of departure for creating an adequate electoral law in Mexico.

Eric Uslaner painted a picture of U.S. society as more liberal in theory than in practice. As an example, he cited Americans' support for Clinton's pledge not to discriminate against gays in the armed forces, as contrasted to the fact that in their own social environment they are not so tolerant towards this sector of the population.

He maintained that the Democrats' major defeat in the 1994 elections was due to the electorate's perception of the Republicans as more conservative and more likely to safeguard their society's moral values.

Jacques Girard gave a detailed explanation of the Canadian electoral system.

The fourth round table featured Raúl Trejo Delarbre's exposition of the changes undergone by the mass media in 1994: they were no longer regarded with indifference—virtually all political parties demanded that the media become more open and proposed reforms to accomplish this. Private television networks offered free time to the front-running presidential candidates and, for the first time, the three main parties' candidates carried out a debate. At the same time he questioned the debate's influence: “Still under discussion is the degree to which it shaped the vote, or whether the debate

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simply reinforced existing preferences, as well as the question of how much influence the media really have.”

Trejo Delarbre added that, in Mexico, political equity is related to equity in the mass media. Nevertheless, he said, it is necessary to define what equity or fairness is, in terms of handling political information. For example, is it fair for a very minor candidate to receive the same radio or television time as one of the front-runners?

Herbert Parmet noted that in the United States, as media grew, so did the importance of money: and as electoral success became increasingly dependent on money, it became necessary to impose ceilings on campaign expenditures. He pointed out that, while having more funds available does not guarantee that a candidate will win, someone who lacks financial backing has no chance of even being nominated as a candidate.

Nevertheless, as Julio Faesler had remarked, politicians find ways to commit arbitrary acts even within the legal framework. “In the United States there is a proliferation of political action committees which hurdle

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legal barriers and bring together huge sums of money. In such a climate, questions of law and regulation seem almost moot,” Parmet concluded.

Walter Soderlund expressed the view that money isn’t everything in electoral races. As an example of this he cited the stunning defeat of Canada’s Conservative Party in 1994. The party saw its parliamentary seats slashed from 162 to 2, despite having spent much more than other parties on campaign advertising.

He added that political propaganda cannot effectively sell the image of a politician who has been discredited or lacks charisma, or of a party which has lost its standing. In the case of the elections he analyzed, the only winning card the Conservatives held in the race was the charisma of their candidate, Kim Campbell. Yet just as money isn’t everything, charisma isn’t either.

In the fifth event Manuel Chávez provided an interesting statistical summary on the relation between elections and the regional distribution of budgets, which is quite unequal in terms of the number of inhabitants and the resources generated by the country’s different regions.

He reported, for example, that with 13 percent of the population, Mexico City absorbs 20 percent of public

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investment, while the State of Mexico is given only 2 percent of the budget despite being home to 11 percent of the population. Some states generate much more than what they receive for spending, while in other states the opposite holds true.

Chávez warned that centralism and the inadequate distribution of resources has led to a wearing out of federalism and the weakening of the autonomy of states and municipalities, all of which is to the detriment of democracy in Mexico.

In contrast to the excessive presidentialism from which our country suffers, Kenneth Collier discussed the problems that congressmen give U.S. presidents. He pointed out that both the president and U.S. society as a whole frequently seek to further projects for the benefit of the country but are prevented from doing so by Congress.

He maintained that this is why all American presidents end up being considered failures, noting that some—Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Carter—even resorted to lobbying so as to fight the system and influence members of Congress, in order “to quilt little scraps of power and put them together.”

Collier mentioned that former President Reagan was able to draw closer to the American people through television and have them lobby in his favor. “This strategy worked for him until the representatives and senators also learned how to use this medium. While Reagan always had

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unchallenged access to the television cameras, this is no longer the case for Clinton.”

This year a referendum is scheduled to be held in Quebec (see “Quebec at the end of the 20th century,” p. 60), in order to decide whether to declare independence from Canada. On this issue, Louis Massicotte predicted that independence would be voted down because there is a difference between supporting sovereignty and intending to vote for it in a referendum. Still, he considered it unlikely that this would be the last referendum on the issue, since the Bloc or the Parti Québécois can afford to lose many referenda on sovereignty, but their federalist opponents can hardly afford to lose one.

In the sixth round table Santiago Creel, a citizen ombudsman during the 1994 presidential elections, denounced the fact that the ombudsmen’s report on the electoral process of August 21 had been distorted and misquoted by the House of Representatives.

He added that since that time elections have been held in five Mexican states, four of which led to post-electoral conflicts, and that votes will soon be held in 14 others. “If they follow the same pattern, by mid-year half the country will be in serious trouble.”

He emphasized the need to carry out an authentic electoral reform centering on: safeguarding Mexicans’ political rights in the Constitution; guaranteeing fair

### PAN victory in Jalisco

On February 12, National Action Party (PAN) candidate Alberto Cárdenas Jiménez, 36, won the race for governor of his state, with 57 percent of the vote. The PAN also won the mayoralties of five of the largest cities and, for the first time, will have a majority in the state Congress.

#### Electoral calendar

Date	State	Type of election
May 28	Guanajuato	Governor
May 28	Yucatán	Governor
		City councils
		Congress
July 2	Michoacán	Congress
July 12	Chihuahua	City councils
		Congress
August 6	Baja California	Governor
		City councils
		Congress
	Durango	Congress
		City councils
	Oaxaca	Congress
	Veracruz	Congress
	Zacatecas	City councils
		Congress
	Aguascalientes	City councils
		Congress
August 20	Chiapas	City councils
		Congress
November 12	Puebla	City councils
		Congress
	Sinaloa	City councils
		Congress
	Tamaulipas	City councils
		Congress
	Oaxaca	City councils
December 3	Michoacán	City councils

## Topics and participants

*Historical Perspective on Electoral Processes:* Juan Molinar (Mexico), Mark Jones (U.S.), R. Kenneth Carty (Canada) and Bárbara Driscoll (moderator).

*Elections within the Local and National Frameworks:* Germán Pérez Fernández del Castillo (Mexico), Samuel H. Fisher (U.S.), Gary Levy (Canada) and Richard Navarro (moderator).

*The Participation of Civil Society:* Julio Faesler (Mexico), Eric Uslaner (U.S.), Jacques Girard (Canada) and Silvia Núñez (moderator).

*The Role of Communications Media in Electoral Processes:* Raúl Trejo Delarbre (Mexico), Herbert Parmet (U.S.), Walter Soderlund (Canada) and Julián Castro Rea (moderator).

*Federalism and the Balance of Power:* Manuel Chávez (Mexico), Kenneth Collier (U.S.), Louis Massicotte (Canada) and Paz Consuelo Márquez Padilla (moderator).

*Elections and Democracy:* Santiago Creel (Mexico), John Mueller (U.S.), Daniel Latouche (Canada) and José Agustín Ortiz Pinchetti (moderator).

This international event culminates on April 3 with the wind-up forum on "Elections and Democracy," featuring Soledad Loaeza (Mexico), Seymour M. Lipset (U.S.) and Jean Pierre Kingsley (Canada); all the papers presented will be reprinted in a volume published by CISAN.

electoral processes; creating an independent, autonomous electoral authority; promoting democratic culture; reducing the number of polling stations in order to improve supervision; designing a more adequate system of districts, based on population criteria; and providing regulations to guarantee the right to information.

It is worth asking what measures are projected for doing away with the *cacique* (traditional local boss) system, which in past elections has frightened people into voting in certain ways and prevented secret ballots in many rural communities.

Daniel Latouche remarked that, just as Canadians are obsessed with referenda in Quebec, Americans are fixated on elections in our country. He added that, during negotiations for NAFTA, the question arose as to whether Mexico was democratic enough to join together with the United States and Canada.

Nevertheless, he stressed that NAFTA itself was negotiated in an anti-democratic way, and that the probable inclusion of Chile in the pact will be decided without taking Mexican, U.S. and Canadian public opinion into account, unlike what happens in Europe: "In

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the 1970s the French electorate was even consulted on the admission of the United Kingdom to the European Community. As more and more countries are admitted to NAFTA, our respective parliaments will probably have less to say about the treaty.”

As was to be expected, dissonant voices were heard. John Mueller said that people believe in a democracy which has been idealized but does not really exist. He accepted that democracy means liberty, but not equality or fraternity, and that among its principal obstacles are democrats themselves.

Regarding the perspective for an improvement in Mexico's electoral processes, he caused some turmoil in the audience with his statement that elections don't necessarily make a difference, and predicted two final outcomes: that the same people get elected or that the leader is changed but winds up behaving in the same way as his predecessors. Is that to be our fate—that, as Giuseppe Tomasso de Lampedusa wrote in *Il Gattopardo*, everything changes in order to remain the same? ❧

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