

The Mexican Democratic Tide

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Transition to democracy theory has not gained full acceptance in Mexico. Intellectuals and politicians are divided about it. This skepticism is explicable.

Mexico's democratization process does not fit any of the transition models from other countries. A pact (Spain) or reform (former Czechoslovakia), imposition (Grenada) or revolution (Nicaragua) are all ill-suited to describe Mexico's political transition.

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None of these provide sufficient insight into the peculiarities of Mexican politics. Additional ingredients must be added. I found such ingredients in Alexis de Tocqueville's democratic theory as explained in his famous *Democracy in America*, book 1. He strongly believed that equal conditions constituted the driving force behind an underground democratic revolution sweeping and shaping the world. "Among us," said Tocqueville, "a grand democratic revolution is taking place. Everyone sees it, but not everyone judges it in the same way. Some consider it as a new thing, and thinking it acci-



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dental, hope they can still stop it; while others judge it irresistible because it seems to them the most continuous fact, the most ancient and permanent one that history has known.”¹

Beyond Tocqueville’s deterministic historicism, the dynamic element of his theory, i.e., the specific way the democratic revolution moved along, is theoretically valuable. To describe democracy’s peculiar dynamism he used a metaphor, which I shall call “the democratic tide.” It is my basic tenet that Mexico’s transition to democracy can be understood using Tocqueville’s democratic tide theory.

Democratization of the Mexican political system during the last third of this century has become an ambiguous process. Steps forward are followed by steps back. Far from a linear advance toward a democratic target, it has moved sinuously through adverse social conditions.

The best way to describe Mexico’s democratization process would be in Alexis de Tocqueville’s metaphorical terms: “Democracy is like a rising tide; it only ebbs to flood back with greater force, and soon one sees that for all its fluctuation it is always gaining ground.” Since the 1968 student movement crisis, when the process started, that is exactly what has happened in Mexico: a series of political fluctuations toward democracy and away from it into authoritarianism. Nevertheless some democratic ground has been gained.

There have been two main floods of Mexico’s democratic tide: the 1977 and 1996 electoral reforms and the elections that followed them. In the intervening 20 years, the tide has mainly been at an ebb, although some small leaps forward have occurred.

The 1977 electoral reform opened up the political system and allowed opposition parties to play a role, albeit a small one, in the Chamber of Deputies. Out of 400 seats, 100 were “reserved” for them through the system of both majority and proportional representation that the reform established. On the other hand, the government controlled the organization of the elections: impartiality was unknown and election results were to some extent predetermined. This arrangement was known as “directed democracy,” a euphemistic term which hid the simple fact that elections were not completely fair and free.

The 1986 electoral reform and the years that followed it were a step backward. The Mexican democratic tide ebbed. Government feared that opening the political system more in

the midst of the oil/economic-shock crisis could result in “a domino effect:” all chips would start to fall to the opposition. The regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) tightened electoral control in the National Electoral Commission, the government body in charge of elections. It was no surprise, then, that under such unequal conditions the victory of the opposition National Action Party (PAN) in the northern state of Chihuahua went unrecognized, and that the governorship was awarded to the PRI, the government party. Resistance movements against unfair elections and electoral fraud became common practice in the aftermath of local elections.

During Salinas’ first years in office the democratic tide started to move forward in local elections. The northern state of Baja California was swept by the PAN vote and for the first time in Mexico’s history an opposition governorship was officially recognized in 1989. It looked as if society’s demands for free and fair elections were finally accepted and the tide would move forward. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

The tide ebbed again when local elections took place in the central part of Mexico, known as El Bajío. In San Luis Potosí, a very charismatic figure, Dr. Salvador Nava, challenged and defeated the PRI’s hand-picked candidate, Fausto Zapata. The Electoral Commission declared Zapata the winner. Dr. Nava headed a walk to Mexico City known as “The March of Dignity” and created a wave of public opinion in his favor. Zapata was forced to resign and the local Congress named a substitute governor, appointed by Salinas but acceptable to the Navistas.

This began a political practice called *concertaciones*, that is, negotiated, pre-arranged political hand-overs from the PRI to the opposition parties, mostly the PAN. The same thing was done in other state elections like those of Guanajuato and Michoacán.

All of these political fluctuations deepened society’s demand for a profound electoral reform. Salinas accepted a third one in his administration early in 1994, mainly because he was pressed to do so by the Zapatista revolt in the southern state of Chiapas.

With this reform, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), since 1991 the country’s highest electoral authority, became majority-led by non-partisan citizens elected by Congress. Domestic and foreign electoral observers were also officially accepted.

During 1994, Mexico's "anus horribilis,"² two unprecedented events in the country's political history took place and gave the democratic tide further ground: the May 12 televised debate among the three main presidential candidates, Zedillo (PRI), Cárdenas (Party of the Democratic Revolution [PRD]) and Fernández de Cevallos (PAN), with a viewing audience of 40 million, was a completely new political experience; and the August 21 election, which resulted in record high voter participation (almost 80 percent of registered voters). Contrary to the case of the Salinas election, Zedillo's victory was unquestionable. On the basis of this outcome, he offered a new and "definitive" electoral reform.

The 1996 Zedillo reform had two main achievements: a) total government withdrawal from the electoral apparatus, which meant the Minister of the Interior no longer headed the electoral body and the IFE would now be run by nine citizens, all appointed by a two-thirds vote of the Chamber of Deputies, thus requiring the consensus of all political parties and, b) Mexico City's mayor would be elected by direct vote, a long-standing demand of many social organizations and opposition political parties.

The July 6 election was certainly the Mexican democratic tide's biggest flood forward since the 1977 electoral reform. Although it was an intermediate, or mid-presidential-term election, people's concern and expectations ran very high.

THE JULY 6 RESULTS

At 8 p.m., Sunday, July 6, the media announced exit poll results. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD) won the first capital mayor's race by a wide margin (48 percent) over the PRI's Alfredo del Mazo (25 percent) and the big loser, the PAN's Carlos Castillo Peraza, who came in third (16 percent). Cárdenas' party also made an almost clean sweep of Mexico City's local Congress with 38 out of 40 district-majority seats and 29 out of 30 seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies elected in the capital. In both cases the PRI came up completely empty-handed.

In the Chamber of Deputies, the PRI lost its absolute majority for the first time in history, taking 239 out of 500 seats. The PRD came in second with 124; the PAN, 122, the Labor Party (PT), nine; and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM), six.

Of the 32 senatorial seats out of 128 up for election, the PRI won only 13 and lost 19; nine went to the PRD, seven to the PAN, two to the PT and one to the Greens. In local elections, the PRI won four out of six governorships and lost two, Nuevo León and Querétaro, to the PAN.

At 10 p.m., electoral authorities officially confirmed the exit poll results. President Zedillo appeared on television, accepting the outcome and sending congratulations to Cárdenas, his 1994 presidential election opponent. Around 60 percent of all registered electors had gone to the polls.

THE NEW SCENARIO

Where does democracy stand in Mexico after so many ebbs and flows of the tide, and, most importantly, after the July 6 elections and their aftermath? How much ground has it gained as a result of the tide's ebbs and flows? Is it possible to say that Mexico is now a democratic country included in the "third democratic wave" of the twentieth century which started in the 1970s?

Election results provided Mexico with a new political experience: shared government, where the presidency or governorships are in the hands of one party and the congressional majority in the hands of the opposition.

The experience of shared government is quite common in other countries. Not so in Mexico. In the United States, for the 160 years between 1832 and 1992, 40 percent of the time the country had shared governments.

In Latin America, for 59 percent of the time between 1958 and 1994, 101 elections gave nine countries shared governments (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador).

In Mexico, this kind of experience just began in 1989. Eight states, one-fourth of the total, had shared governments: Baja California, Guanajuato, Southern Baja California, Chihuahua, Aguascalientes, the State of Mexico, Coahuila and Morelos.³ Nevertheless, the novelty was at the federal level, where Mexico had only two such experiences in its history. One was in the last century, when President Benito Juárez had to share power in the one-chamber Congress. The other was in 1911, under President Francisco I. Madero.

Political reform has changed the Mexican electoral system for good. The electoral authorities' impartiality and effectiveness has given credibility to the election process. Electoral democracy is therefore being consolidated in Mexico after almost 30 years of building and rebuilding the electoral system.

A multi-party system (PAN, PRI, PRD and some smaller ones) has definitively taken the place of a quasi-one-party system.

Political pluralism in both chambers of Congress is another element of the new scenario. This is true at both federal and local levels. Beginning with the 1979 political reform which limited opposition representation in the Chamber of Deputies to a small part of it (100 out of 400 seats), it has evolved to such a degree that now the opposition parties have an absolute majority.

Looking ahead, a good deal of political engineering will be needed for Mexico's political system in the near future. Political imagination is required to accommodate old structures to new realities and frame the appropriate institutions to suit them. In nineteenth century Mexico, the liberal and advanced political institutions framed in the 1857 Constitution were ill-suited for the society's backwardness. At the end of the twentieth century, society's advances makes the 1917 Con-

stitution's political institutions unsuitable. It must be adjusted to a society which has undergone profound change throughout the century.

Almost nothing of what the Mexican political system is today, i.e. electoral democracy, a multi-party system, a mixed majority and proportional representation mechanism in both chambers of Congress, election of the capital city mayor, and most of all, the possibility of peacefully alternating in office at local and federal levels existed just 30 years ago, in 1968, when the democratization process began in Mexico.

The country's democratic tide has moved a long way since then. But, as Tocqueville predicted, after so many fluctuations, it has gained ground. **MM**

NOTES

¹Alexis de Toqueville, *Journey to England and Ireland*, quoted in John Dunn, *Democracy, The Unfinished Journey: 508 B.C. to A.D. 1993*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 8-9.

²The author is referring to a set of events that took place that year, shocking Mexican society. The three most important were the January Zapatista revolt in Chiapas and the assassinations of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in March and PRI General Secretary José Francisco Ruiz Massieu in September. [Editor's Note.]

³Jalisco became the ninth with its November 1997 congressional and municipal elections. The governor is a member of the PAN and the local Congress will have 20 PAN deputies and 20 opposition deputies. [Editor's Note.]