

Notes on the Transformation Of the Mexican Electoral System

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For the last 20 years, Mexico has been immersed in a process of perfecting its electoral legislation. In that same period the public has increasingly demanded clean elections and become more and more aware of the importance of the right to vote. This political transition has been characterized by a profound transformation of political norms. In and of itself, it shows that the transition would not be possible without the constant renovation of the normative framework of elections. We can even say that, at least until the 1997 federal balloting, the constant renovation of this framework became a precondition for holding elections.

In fact, the last decade produced profound adjustments in the rules of the game. While these changes did not affect the essence of the political regimen, they did generate important modifications in electoral institutions and procedures.

As a derivation of this unfinished process of successive reforms, between 1989 and 1996 the political forces managed to significantly modify the Mexican electoral system through consensuses about parliamentary accords. This change can be seen in the August 1990 passage of new legislation, the Federal Code for Electoral Institutions and Procedures and the additions

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and modifications introduced in later reforms.

Among the most important innovations from 1990 on was the creation of permanent electoral authorities, totally autonomous with regard to the three branches of government, whose decisions would not be subordinate to them. These authorities are also independent vis-à-vis party organizations, despite including in their decision-making

bodies political party representatives who have the right to speak but not to vote.

The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) is one of the main products of the reform. Among its most outstanding characteristics is its leading bodies being completely made up of individual citizens, all its acts being subject to guiding principles elevated to the constitutional level¹ and its concentrating all the functions involved in organizing the elections. Without a doubt, the IFE is the institutional result of a long evolutionary process of electoral authorities which has been entrusted with the sensitive task of making Mexican elections trustworthy and believable and of achieving the acceptance and full confidence of the political actors and society. But, in trying to attain this basic objective, what have its most important achievements been?

A first achievement has been the creation of trustworthy voters' rolls that have been used in the last three federal elections, built up from

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The Federal Electoral Institute's General Council.

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nothing between 1990 and 1991. Another accomplishment has been the creation of a voter's registration card complete with photograph, which from 1992 on became the main instrument for exercising the vote as well as Mexico's main form of personal identification.

The voter registration rolls are permanently kept up to date, a task to which the political parties contribute through the IFE's national, state and district watchdog bodies, where they can supervise and verify its compilation and trustworthiness. It is also verified by samples taken by a specialized technical committee.

The tests and audits of the voter registration lists aim to show that they are up to date, given the country's demographic mobility and growth, and to generate confidence in their use.

The data published by electoral authorities indicates that Mexico's voter registration lists have one of the highest levels of coverage in the world. During the 1997 elections, a little over 98 percent of the citizens who fulfilled the prerequisites established by law were listed on the voters' rolls. That same number came to 93 percent of the entire population of voting age, an example of the sheer volume of the technical work done to achieve a solid, trustworthy instrument.

The electoral instruments have also been proven trustworthy by their use in different state elections, wherein, just as in federal elections, they have gone unchallenged by political forces.

Another IFE achievement has been the legal procedure for designating the electoral councilors who make up the 32 local and 300 district electoral councils, one council for each state and district respectively.

The naming of these officials is one of the central aspects of the organization of Mexican elections. Just as in the IFE's general council, state and district council members are the only ones with the right and responsibility to vote council decisions.

That is why the mechanism stipulated in the law includes finding persons who, based on their experience, knowledge, prestige and lack of ties to party organizations, represent the best options for each state and electoral district.

Therefore, in the last elections, electoral council members were designated by the highest possible consensus of the bodies that choose them. For the 1997 federal elections, a broad-based exercise to review proposals and discuss the designation was carried out. This, in turn, meant greater confidence of the political parties in electoral bodies on a national, local and district level.



The Federal Electoral Institute concentrates all the functions involved in organizing elections.

The new mechanisms for designating polling place officers are another facet which has created more certainty and trust in the organization of Mexican elections.

From the 1991 federal elections on, polling place officers have been selected by lot. The 1996 reform instituting a double drawing to pick 10 percent of the citizens on the voter registration lists to be trained and evaluated and later designated as poll officials, strengthened this procedure.

This mechanism is designed to guarantee impartiality in picking poll officials and ensuring their effective functioning. It has contributed to eliminating the old discussion about who made up the bodies that directly counted the ballots. It also represents the opportunity for the public to participate in the vast, complex organization of the elections.

Another fundamental element in building trust in Mexican elections has been the almost immediate dissemination of preliminary results.

These official results, obtained from adding up the figures on the different official certificates from each polling place, show general electoral trends. Preliminary results are crucial for inhibiting extra-official speculation among political players and the media and for making the electoral authorities

the source for trustworthy results based on official polling place documents.

Any irregularity or delay in the announcement of preliminary vote tallies would irredeemably damage electoral bodies' credibility. Therefore, the operational effectiveness in obtaining them is fundamental for making the elections transparent.

One final reflection on the question at hand: what this article describes, as well as other measures established by law or electoral authorities to create greater certainty about elections, the existence of a special electoral court and a system for challenging violations of the law, testify to the perfecting of Mexico's electoral system.

The constant updating of electoral norms will continue to be essential for Mexico's political transition and its impetus and extent will depend on agreements among political actors. In any case, however, the adjustment of the normative framework demands electoral authorities offer society the preparation and development of unquestionable elections to allow advances in the consolidation of the public's trust in them. **MM**

NOTE

¹ The IFE's guiding principles are legality, certainty, confidence, impartiality and professionalism. [Editor's Note.]

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Trends in the Year 2000 Presidential Race

Polls show that support for possible presidential candidates not only differs widely by region, but it also varies depending on whom they might be running against.

	North	West	C-W Mexico	South	Total
If you had the following presidential candidates to choose from, whom would you vote for?					
Roberto Madrazo (PRI)	28%	22%	23%	29%	25%
Vicente Fox (PAN)	24%	36%	26%	14%	25%
Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD)	15%	13%	18%	19%	16%
If you had the following presidential candidates to choose from, whom would you vote for?					
Francisco Labastida (PRI)	29%	21%	20%	21%	23%
Vicente Fox (PAN)	25%	35%	26%	17%	26%
Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD)	15%	12%	18%	21%	16%
If you had the following presidential candidates to choose from, whom would you vote for?					
Francisco Labastida (PRI)	34%	21%	24%	24%	26%
Vicente Fox (PAN)	26%	34%	25%	18%	26%
Porfirio Muñoz Ledo (PRD)	7%	11%	14%	16%	12%

Source: *Reforma*, 26 May 1999.

Alliances

Although improbable, it is possible that all the opposition parties could unite to run a single presidential candidate.

According to a survey published in the Mexico City daily *Reforma*,

27 percent of those polled thought Vicente Fox (PAN) would be the most likely coalition candidate.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD) came in second, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo (PRD) third and Manuel Camacho Solís, of the Party of the Democratic Center (PCD), fourth.

If all opposition parties united to run a single presidential candidate, who would you like him to be?	
	May '99
Vicente Fox	27
Porfirio Muñoz Ledo	8
Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas	18
Manuel Camacho	6
Other	1
None of the above	12
Don't know/No answer	25

Source: *Reforma*, 26 May 1999.