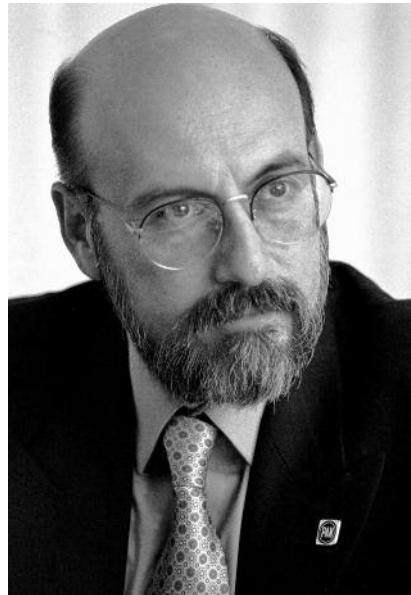


# The Party System In Contemporary Mexico

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How can we characterize today's party system in Mexico? This is one of the central questions guiding academic thinking in Mexico about political parties. The deconstructing of the hegemonic-party system has given rise to a new system that has not yet consolidated. The emergence of new parties during the 2000 presidential elections —some the result of splits in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) or the Party of the Democratic

Revolution (PRD)— indicate that the new system is still unstable.

A series of electoral reforms implemented since the end of the 1970s were key in deconstructing the hegemonic-party system and the creation of a new one. The most important were the 1994 and 1996 reforms which established the institutional bases for a competition among parties. Certain key elections that entailed a real reshuffling of party elites and voters also played a central role in this process. This is the case of the 1988, 1997 and 2000 elections. In 1988, the PRI's Democratic Current split, eroding the basis for PRI

hegemony in that it gave birth to a broad opposition front that brought together some sectors of the PRI and of the left, a grouping that would later give rise to the PRD. For the first time the Chamber of Deputies had a plural composition that forced the PRI to seek alliances in Congress for amending the Constitution. After the 1988 elections came the first experiences of alternating in office, beginning in states like Baja California, where the National Action Party (PAN) won its first governor's seat in 1989.

The 1997 elections for the federal Chamber of Deputies and a few state

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contests were key for completing the destructuring of the hegemonic-party system. The PRI lost its absolute majority in Congress: it took 39.1 percent of the ballots, vis-à-vis 26.6 percent for the PRD and 25.7 percent for the PAN. The PRI lost several governors' seats (among them Zacatecas and the mayor's seat in Mexico City's Federal District) to the PRD, which scored its first wins at a state level, and Nuevo León and Querétaro to the PAN.

The 2000 president elections confirmed the competitive nature of the party system with the victory of Alliance for Change candidate Vicente Fox. For the first time in seven decades, the PRI lost a presidential election.

Clearly, then, the current party system is situated in the camp of competitive systems. But, beyond this general description, what are its central characteristics?

One important characteristic is that it represents a certain continuity with respect to the previous system, not in terms of how it operates, but through some of the parties in it. Two of the most important parties, the PRI and the PAN, arose in the context of authoritarianism and have transformed their functions throughout the period of democratization. This element of continuity is a contrast with other cases of the democratization of similar —not identical— types of regimes; for example, the democratization of single-party regimes led to the extinction of the state parties and the creation of new ones.

On the other hand, the PRD emerged in the heat of the liberalization-democratization process as a result of a split in the PRI and was a driving force behind the deepening of democratization in our country.

Therefore, today's party system did not come out of nowhere, and competition has also given rise to other parties like the Labor Party (PT) and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM).

The trend since the 1990s has been the establishment of a system with three large parties, the PAN, PRI and PRD, and two other parties which, though small in electoral terms with localized sup-

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port in a few states, have become relevant, the PT and the PVEM.<sup>1</sup> These are the ones that have maintained a continual presence in elections and have established alliances with the larger parties. In 2000, the PVEM participated in the Alliance for Change in support of Fox's candidacy and the PT participated in the Alliance for Mexico in support of Cárdenas' candidacy. Both have a significant presence in the Congress. In 1997, the PT obtained 3.8 percent of the national vote in federal elections for the Chamber of Deputies, and the PVEM, 2.6 percent; and that same year, PT support was decisive for the PRI to pass the federal budget.

It is still premature to say that the five-party format has been consolidat-

ed. In the 2000 elections, six other new parties appeared; their presence indicates that the system could still undergo some changes. These parties are almost all the result of splits in the PRI and the PRD. They are Convergence for Democracy (CD), a PRI split; the Party of the Democratic Center (PCD), headed by ex-PRI leader Manuel Camacho Solís; Party of the Social Alliance (PAS), with roots in the *Sinarquista* movement; the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM), previously considered a satellite of the PRI that revived years after losing its legal registration and ran ex-PRI and ex-PRD member Porfirio Muñoz Ledo for president in 2000; and finally the Social Democracy Party (PDS), headed by former Communist Party leader Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, who left the ranks of the PRD repudiating Cárdenas' position as a caudillo and the lack of a modern left project.

Convergence for Democracy, the Social Alliance and the Party of the Nationalist Society supported Cárdenas' candidacy, and thanks to that, retained their legal registration in 2000. None of the six new parties supported Fox, although the PARM candidate, Muñoz Ledo, declined in his favor toward the end of the campaign. The PCD, PARM and PDS all failed to reach the two percent of the vote needed to maintain their legal status as parties (see table).

One of the issues raised has been whether the emergence of these parties is relevant for the party system as a whole. In this regard, I think that the majority of these organizations are not really the expression of new social actors seeking representation in the party system. They are groups and/or figures, who for the most part have come out of

VOTE COUNT FOR PRESIDENT AND FEDERAL DEPUTIES, 2000		
Party	President	Deputies
Alliance for Change*	42.52%	38.32%
PRI	36.10%	36.86%
Alliance for Mexico**	16.64%	18.63%
PDS	1.57%	1.88%
PCD	0.55%	1.16%
PARM	0.42%	0.73%
National totals	100.00%	100.00%
* PAN and PVEM. ** PRD, PT, CD, PAS and PSN. <b>Source:</b> Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).		

the PRI or the PRD, or the remnants of old groups like the PARM. They are part of a process of recycling the elites who have accompanied the destructuring of the hegemonic-party system. Generally speaking they center around well-known figures with no electoral influence whatsoever who are seeking a place in the political spectrum after having been ousted from important positions inside their parties: this is the case of Manuel Camacho Solís, who failed to win the PRI's presidential candidacy in 1994. They also enjoy the stimulus of the financing and prerogatives stipulated in electoral legislation. Rather than an ideological position, these parties are a reflection of fissures within the larger parties and of merely personal interests.

The case of the Social Democracy Party merits separate mention. In contrast with the other parties, it does propose developing an alternative center-left, or social democratic, project that would compete with the PRD's populism, repetition of old slogans around economic policy and the caudillo-marked nature of its leadership. Social Democracy proposes bringing together

a modern left electorate. The difference between it and the other parties was clear in the presidential candidates' debate, in which Rincón Gallardo was practically the only one who really addressed the substantive issues. The PSD's inability to maintain its legal registration was due, in part, to the plebiscite-like nature of the elections which led most voters to cast their ballots against the PRI more than anything else.

#### THE PARTY SYSTEM AND THE 2000 ELECTION RESULTS

What was the outcome of the 2000 elections, then? Three large parties and two small, but relevant, parties, and another three (Convergence, Social Alliance and the PSN) which retained their legal status thanks to their alliance with the PRD but which actually represent nothing in and of themselves.

It was very significant that no party holds a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies: of a total of 500 deputies, the PRI occupies 210; the PAN, 207; the PRD, 53; the PVEM, 15, the PT, 7; CD, 3;

the PSN, 3 and PAS, 2.<sup>2</sup> The party of President Vicente Fox does not have a majority in Congress, which means that the executive branch will have to negotiate to be able to govern. This has led some analysts to maintain that the new party system is one of moderate pluralism, alluding to Sartori's typology.<sup>3</sup> Their argument is that the number of parties (from three to five important parties), the slight ideological differences among them and the fact that none has an absolute majority, forcing them to share power, complies with the description of moderate pluralism.

At first glance, this characterization seems correct, particularly because we have no other finished typologies of party systems. Nevertheless, we should consider several issues that are matters for later reflection.

First, the so-called "third wave democratizations" have given rise to party systems not included in Sartori's typology, which is based fundamentally on the U.S. and European cases, all examples of consolidated democracies whose parties are based (or were at some time based) on clear political identities with

social roots and a long electoral tradition. Thus, the differences between systems like the Mexican and the Belgian (which Sartori cites as the model of limited pluralism) make the appropriateness of grouping them together in a single category doubtful. A central difference between the new and the old systems is their level of institutionalization, some of whose indicators are the parties' electoral stability, their social roots and their ideological solidity.<sup>4</sup>

The other problem is that by no means are more internal changes and split-offs from the PRI and the PRD out of the question, and they could lead to the creation of new parties that could affect the electoral performance of the larger parties. Up until now, this has not been the case, but it could certainly happen given that both parties are going

through restructuring processes (perhaps even amounting to being refounded) given the 2000 electoral results. The PRI is now in opposition and the PRD suffered an electoral setback of such magnitude that it now has only 53 deputies compared to the 125 seats it won in 1997. Both parties are processing their voting results and repositioning themselves. Their splinters and splits will continue to affect the party system as a whole, which means that it is still impossible to say that we have a consolidated system that can be classified under one of the dominant typologies. ■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here, I am using Sartori's definition of relevant parties which says that the parties that count

are those that can form coalitions and practice blackmail; that is, they have made coalitions or supported other parties in their bid for office, and they can exercise a veto in Congress. Giovanni Sartori, *Partidos y sistemas de partidos* (Madrid: Alianza Universidad, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Aída Escamilla Rubio, "El 2 de julio en cifras," *El Cotidiano* 100 (Mexico City:UAM-A, 2000), pp. 100-116.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Miguel Ángel Romero et al., "Hacia la consolidación de un nuevo sistema político," *El Cotidiano* 100 (Mexico City:UAM-A, 2000), pp. 168-182 and Juan Reyes del Campillo, "2 de julio: una elección por el cambio," *El Cotidiano* 104 (Mexico City: UAM-A, 2001), pp.5-15.

<sup>4</sup> A systematic look at these issues can be found in Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, eds., *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) and Scott Mainwaring, *Rethinking Party Systems in the Third Wave Democratization: The Case of Brazil* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).