

Women and Politics

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In the Chamber of Deputies.

Antonio Nava/INE

Without a doubt, the successful organization of the most recent federal elections was a definitive step toward the consolidation of democracy in Mexico, particularly with regard to the public's trust in elections. And, I am entirely convinced that its success is due in great part to women's committed political efforts.¹

On July 2, great numbers of women participated in the most diverse ways: as polling booth officials, party representatives at polling booths, electoral observers, electoral officials and councilors in all levels of electoral councils and, of course, as candidates and vot-

ers (we might note, however, that we did take one step backward in that no woman ran for president in this race).

This could lead us to believe—erroneously—that, in addition to other democratic objectives reached, important advances had been made with regard to gender equality in political participation. This would be even more the case if we take into consideration the November 22, 1996 electoral reform which stipulated that:

National political parties will include in their by-laws the stipulation that the number of candidacies for deputies and senators filled by a single gender will not exceed 70 percent and that they will promote greater political participation of women.²

And women's candidacies grew from 25.4 percent in 1997 to 33.4 percent in 2000. The Social Democracy Party (PDS) registered the greatest number of women hopefuls (40.4 percent) and the Party of the Democratic Center (PCD), the fewest (30.25 percent).

However, paradoxically, the number of women actually elected to the Fifty-eighth Congress dropped from 18.8 percent in 1997 to 17.2 percent (that is, in the Chamber of Deputies, there are only 86 women, compared to 414 men).³ In the Senate, only 17.2 percent of the seats are held by women (22 out of 128). In absolute numbers, there are 8 fewer women legislators than in the Fifty-seventh Congress.

Internal organization of the Chamber of Deputies follows suit: of 40 reg-

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ular commissions, only five (12.5 percent) are presided over by women: Attention to Vulnerable Groups; Health; Science and Technology; Equity and Gender; and Population, Borders and Migration.

Of the Senate's 49 commissions, only 11 are headed up by women: Indigenous Affairs; Social Development; Equity and Gender; Youth and Sports; Environment, Natural Resources and Fishing; Agrarian Reform; Parliamentary Rules and Practices; Foreign Rela-

tions for North America; Foreign Relations for Latin America and the Caribbean; Foreign Relations for the Asian Pacific Region; and Foreign Relations for Europe and Africa.

This contradiction between having a greater number of female candidates and a smaller number of women actually elected is due to the fact that most parties applied the letter, but not the spirit of the law. They relegated women to secondary positions such as the candidacy for alternate (in the case of deputies elected by absolute majority) and the last places on the lists for proportional representation. Worse than that, they did not fulfill their own by-law requirements that demand that they effectively promote women's political participation in public decision-making through greater access to elected positions.

Despite this, however, we should point to women's enormous political responsibility in organizing and monitoring the 2000 federal elections.

Women made up 51.68 percent of all registered voters and 51.75 percent of the final voters' list for the July 2 elections.⁴

More women than men acted as polling booth officials after all proposals had been drawn by lottery from the registered voters' list. Of the 452,125 people who monitored voting and

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counted the votes at the 113,405 polling stations nationwide, 240,998 (53.3 percent) were women and 211,127 (46.7 percent) were men.

We should point out, however, that women are under-represented among the Federal Electoral Institute's (IFE) leadership bodies and operational executives. This is clearest in the makeup of its General Council, composed of eight men and only one woman, each with full voting and speaking rights. In the lower decision-making bodies, 1,319 (66.21 percent) of the electoral councilors were men, and 673 (33.79 percent), women, out of a total of 1,992. Of the IFE's six Executive Departments, only one (16.6 percent) is headed up by a woman (for the moment, another is temporarily headed by a woman, but under the title of "office head"). Of the 1,660 officers of Local and District

Councils on July 2, 1,424 (85.78 percent) were men and only 236 (14.22 percent), women.

A total of 38,433 Mexican citizens participated as electoral observers, of which 21,606 (56.21 percent) were men and 16,827 (43.78 percent) were women. Among the 860 foreign observers registered with the IFE, 586 (68.13 percent) were men and 274 (31.86 percent) were women, indicating that electoral gender inequality is also a concern in other countries.

The *Reforma* newspaper put voter participation at 63.9 percent, of which 48 percent were women and 52 percent, men.⁵

I think that the underlying basis of this brief review of women's electoral participation is our level of political culture. Let me explain. In my opinion, there is still a deeply rooted—and erroneous—understanding that women are less effective in performing public functions.

In any case, I think it is very important to look further into the consequences that this step backward in gender equality could have for women's social and political interests with regard to their participation in formal politics. And I use the expression "formal politics" intentionally because women's political participation is not limited to attaining public office or participating in elections, nor is the struggle for their equality restricted to the political sphere.

The figures show what many political analysts and studies done from a gender perspective had already uncovered: that women's participation in public decision-making bodies does not correspond to their level of effective overall participation in political activities.

The July 2 election results —so transcendental for the democratic life of the country in general— are not quite so positive if looked at from the vantage point of gender equity. The 86 women deputies and 22 women senators in the Fifty-eighth Congress are by no means proportional to the 51.68 percent of women registered to vote. Nor does their number correspond to the proportion of women who undoubtedly sympathize with and are active in political parties, working very hard during the campaigns and on election day as party representatives at both polling stations and the IFE's councils. Much less does it correspond with the spirit and intention of the law fostering gender equity.

Innumerable studies have already been done about the relationship between advances in gender equality in legal and political regulations, legal bodies and political parties' founding documents and the real levels of equality in society.

It is true that legal recognition of gender equality and its explicit expression in the Constitution and many pieces of legislation are a positive symptom of the perception by certain social groups (generally an elite like academics, party leaders, independent professionals and some sectors of government) who have the duty to propitiate women's political equality. This equality is understood as equal opportunities, autonomy and prestige. An example of this can be found in the recent National Women's Institute Law,⁶ which stipulates that the institute shall promote, coordinate, execute and follow up on actions and programs designed to guarantee equal opportunities to women in legal matters and in the country's political, cultural, economic and social

life. Among its tasks will be the fostering and strengthening of public, governmental and social policies that make non-discrimination and equal treatment for the sexes possible.

To that end, the law posits the importance of stimulating a culture of non-violence toward women, as well as the promotion and supervision of compliance with international treaties aimed at protecting women and fostering their development, as well as encouraging every part of the federal

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administration to include a gender perspective in all their programs. However, this is not enough.

If we compare the formal expression of gender equality in the law and political bodies with the specific indicators of inequality on a social and cultural level, we will be faced with a rather pessimistic panorama. The spirit and intention of the law is not even remotely reflected in real relationships in society.

Suffice it to point out that in the new president's cabinet, only three ministers (16.67 percent) are women (tourism, social development and agrarian reform). In addition to the aforementioned dearth of women in the federal Congress, the situation is no better —rather, it is even worse— in the case of women's participation on a state and municipal level. According to the Na-

tional Women's Commission (Conmujer), today, only 115 out of 2,487 of the country's mayors are women (an insignificant 4.6 percent). Of the country's 2,167 *síndicos* (a kind of city manager),⁷ only 107 (barely 4.94 percent) are women, and of Mexico's 14,692 city councilpersons, 2,474 (16.84 percent) are women.

State legislatures follow the same pattern: of the 1,113 state deputies in the 32 local legislatures, 954 (85.7 percent) are men and only 159 (14.3

percent) are women. The one with the best ratio is Mexico City's Federal District, whose Legislative Assembly has 18 women (27.3 percent) and 48 men, followed by the states of Tlaxcala, with 25 percent women deputies; Yucatán, with 24 percent; Sinaloa, with 22.5 percent; and Chihuahua, with 21.2 percent.

In the other 27 state legislatures, fewer than 20 percent of the deputies are women. Of all 745 state congressional commissions, only 14 percent are headed up by women, many of whom, obviously, lead commissions in charge of gender and equity issues, family care, childhood, youth, senior citizens and the physically challenged. To cite a few examples, in Durango, no legislative commission is headed up by a woman, whereas in Aguascalientes, only the Style Commission is lead by

a woman. A certain qualitative difference is the case of Campeche, where a woman heads the Industrial Development, Economy and Tourism Commission.

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For that reason, it is absolutely necessary to reinforce cultural policy—as

with the issues, their implications and the context in which their participation takes place); and responsible, in the sense that concrete actions make possible the conciliation of individual interests with those of the general good.

The IFE takes particular care to imprint a gender perspective in the design of the content and materials for its civic educational programs, regardless of the public at which they are aimed, be it children, young people, marginalized sectors, politically vulnerable groups or people with limitations in democra-

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the IFE has done with its strategic lines of action and annual programs—if we want to help change women’s political participation in national decision making.

The IFE has included among its principles and long- and medium-range objectives the design of strategies for civic education that imply the dissemination of the appreciation and understanding of democratic values, practices and institutions among the general public. As part of this task, one institutional priority is fostering citizens’ participation with strict respect for the legal framework; peaceful by nature, divorced from any form of violence; free, not subject to any form of pressure or impositions from without, and therefore the product of individuals’ self-determination to become involved in public matters; informed (which implies a minimum, objective familiarity

tic political culture. Beyond this, we have also assigned ourselves the task of designing civic educational and dissemination programs on democratic political culture specifically for women.

We have commissioned specialists to do research projects on the state of democratic culture in general and society’s perception of women’s political participation in particular in order to design these programs. One such study is “Citizens and Democratic Culture in Mexico,” by Yolanda Meyenberg and Julia Flores of the National Autonomous University of Mexico Institute for Social Research; another is “Women and Policy: Balance Sheet and Perspectives,” by Autonomous Metropolitan University researcher Anna María Fernández Poncela.

Among their conclusions, Meyenberg and Flores state that, in effect, there is a slightly lower level of politi-

cal socialization on the part of women than of men. According to Fernández Poncela, however, the degree of interest and involvement in politics is similarly and equally low among both. She also says that the truly important indicator for political participation is schooling levels, since greater education corresponds to higher interest and vice versa.

These studies also lead us to conclude that, socially speaking, people perceive men as better qualified for political posts, although this perception is less pronounced among young people.

When Flores and Meyenberg asked people, “Who do you think is better qualified to be the president of Mexico?” only 14.2 percent said women. Of those surveyed, 37.3 percent responded that men were; 37.3 percent said either; and 11.2 percent said they did not know.

Perhaps the most worrying thing about these figures is that some women also share these perceptions, which could lead us to conclude that perhaps, some of them are less socialized to and interested in politics, have less information and participate less in organizations of all kinds. This is a serious matter given that women make up 51.71 percent of registered voters, or over 31 million adults.

What is clear to us at the IFE after reviewing these research results is that in terms of political culture and social practices, a serious lack of information has a negative effect on women’s political participation. For that reason, one of the main challenges we face in civic education is having an impact on political culture and even on some institutional policies in order to foster increased women’s political participation, not only

quantitatively, but particularly qualitatively. That is why the IFE includes in its strategy the idea of becoming a space for different institutions and public, social and private organizations interested in providing information, designing and developing programs for women about their rights and obligations in a democratic political system to come together and reflect on how to do that.

The aim is to establish a common agenda that will aid in creating a democratic political culture with gender equality, that will propitiate a faster transformation of the legal and political precepts contained in our Constitution, legislation and treaties, conventions and other international instruments that Mexico has signed⁸ into a reality of the social relations between men

and women. We must recognize that women are social actors with their own interests, needs and specific demands and that, therefore, this agenda must include all the social phenomena that involve women, with a priority on those directly linked to their condition as women, among others, reproductive health, intra-family violence, the access to health, education, employment and wages similar to those of men and, of course, effective access to the exercise of political power. ■■■

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank Cecilia Tapia Mayans, Susana Garaiz Flores and Diego Bugeda Bernal for their invaluable help in gathering and systematizing the information used in this article.

² *Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales* (Cofipe), Article 22 (Mexico City: IFE, 1996).

³ Interview with the Chamber of Deputies Press Office, 9 January 2001.

⁴ The final voters' list is made up of all those registered voters who picked up their voter registration cards. [Translator's Note.]

⁵ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 3 July 2000, p. 8.

⁶ *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (Mexico City), 12 January 2001.

⁷ *Síndicos* are elected officials who work under the mayor in different executive capacities that vary from town to town. They may be members of the opposition since they are not elected as part of a slate with the mayor.

⁸ I am referring specifically to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Platform of Action that came out of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1996.