

The Profile of Mexico's Citizenry

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Several aspects of the process of democratic consolidation in Mexico are still to be resolved, not only with regard to institutional reforms, but also in matters of political culture and civic practices. In effect, issues on the national political agenda include: a) regulation of primary elections and the right to vote for Mexicans abroad; b) the adoption of mechanisms and attitudes favoring a more productive relationship among the different branches

of government; c) increased civic participation and channels for it; and d) a greater commitment of authorities and citizens to the rule of law.

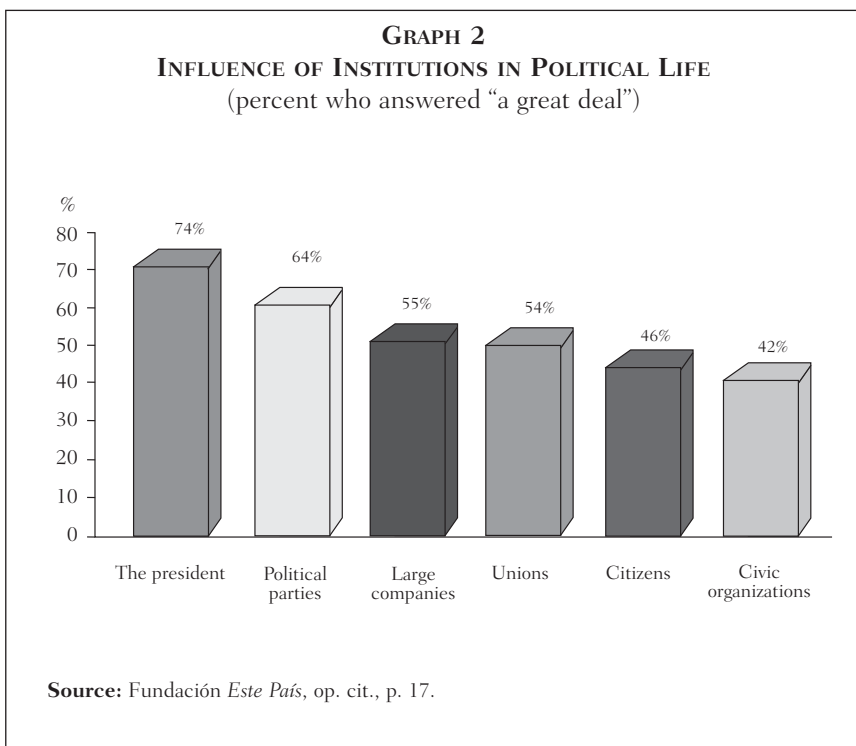
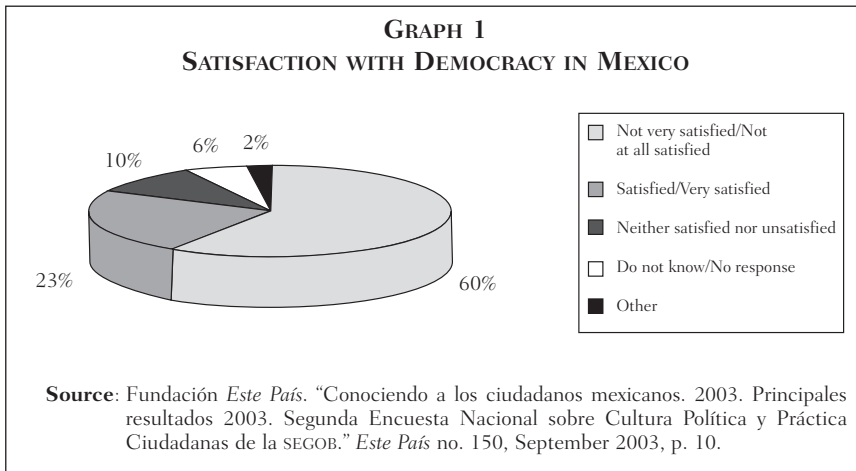
The country's democratic institutions require a political culture and practice to make them functional to guarantee sufficient levels of governability. It is true that the latter also depend on satisfactory economic performance. Thus, the battle must be fought on all fronts.

Political culture and civic practices in Mexico have undergone important transformations in recent decades. U.S. researchers, like Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, Ann Craig, Wayne A. Cornelius,

Roderic Ai Camp and Pippa Norris, among others, have contributed significantly to their study and analysis.¹

Generally speaking, Mexico has gone from a political culture founded on revolutionary nationalism to a democratic culture, from the acceptance by the majority of a hegemonic party to that majority's preference for political pluralism. However, the public's support for the political system and a participatory role continue to be more abstract than concrete; this may be associated with different variables, among which are the public's scant satisfaction with democracy's results and the little civic

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trust in political institutions and individuals.

This can be seen in the Second National Survey on Political Culture and Civic Practices, carried out by Mexico's Ministry of the Interior in February this year, the results of which were announced recently.

According to this survey, the majority of Mexicans prefer to retain freedom of expression if faced with the option of losing it in exchange for the e-

limination of economic pressure. This opinion coincides with the last poll by the company *Latinobarómetro*, which reports that 53 percent of Mexicans prefer a democratic regime to an authoritarian one.

The preference for democracy does not equal satisfaction with its concrete results, since 60 percent of those questioned said they were "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with democracy in Mexico (see graph 1).

This dissatisfaction may be associated with the fact that 59.8 percent of those surveyed see the direction the country is taking as inappropriate, while 54 percent think Mexico's economy is in bad or very bad shape.

On the other hand, the Ministry of the Interior survey reports certain public recognition of the important role that political institutions and the citizens themselves play, as well as a positive opinion of pluralism. Thus, 74 percent, 64 percent and 46 percent, respectively, consider that the president, the parties and the citizenry have a great deal of influence on the nation's political life, while 50.4 percent consider that they are all necessary for the country to improve (see graph 2). At the same time, 44.3 percent of those surveyed thought that all the parties should make the important decisions in the Chamber of Deputies.

It should be noted that the recognition of the importance of political parties and pluralism is affected by the public's distrust and feelings of being divorced from them. On a scale of one to 10 evaluating trust of different political and social institutions, political parties come in at 6.4, next to the last place, besting only the police (see graph 3).

In addition, when making laws, 53 percent of those polled think deputies take the interests of their parties into account before the interests of the population; this shows that those polled perceive party interests and the citizens' interests as different, if not opposed. As if that were not enough, other surveys show a drop in the identification of the citizenry with any political party.² In this sense, the scant civic participation (41.7 percent) in last July's federal elections is no less eloquent. In light of these figures, we can speak of

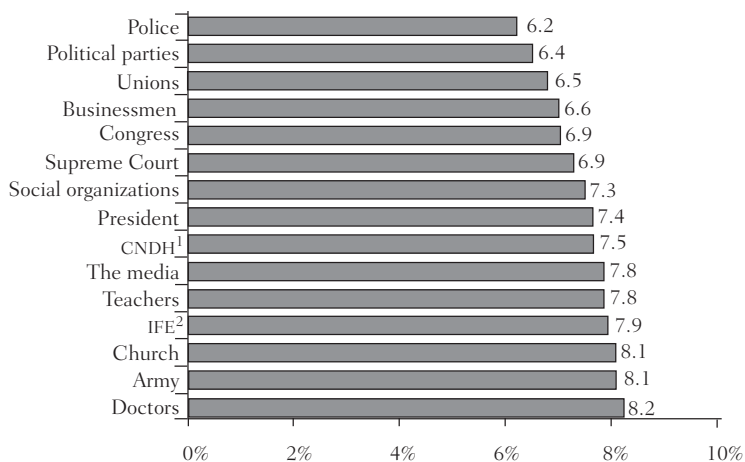
a crisis of representation of the political parties that may be linked to the weakening of the ideologies and political actors current during the Cold War and to the decline in the national-popular state challenged by globalization.

Those polled also consider the role of the citizenry important in public and community life: 71 percent think that people are the ones who should do something about the problems that public officials try to solve; 67 percent disagree with the idea that the public has nothing to say about what the government does; 51 percent think that people owe their first allegiance to their communities and only in second place to their own well being; and 49 percent think citizens are influential in national political life. Another example of the feeling those polled have about the co-responsibility shared by government officials and the governed is the following fact: 59 percent recognize that citizens are the ones who allow corruption to exist.

This recognition of the weight of the citizenry in collective life, in accordance with the meaning of the idea of citizenship that 58 percent of those polled have (having rights and obligations or responsibilities), contrasts with the low level of civic participation revealed by the Ministry of the Interior survey, both in terms of belonging to civic, social or political organizations and in terms of being involved in activities aimed at solving common problems (see graphs 4 and 5).

These low levels of civic participation may be linked to negative opinions about politics, laws and the effectiveness of civic action. Thus, 87 percent of those polled said they were not at all interested or not very interested in politics; 54 percent said that the laws

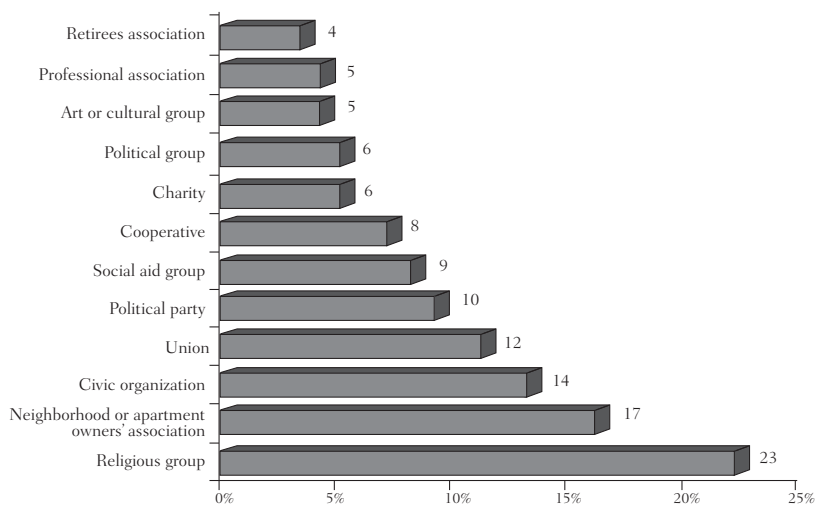
GRAPH 3
TRUST IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS
 (Scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “very much”)



¹ CNDH = National Human Rights Commission.
² IFE = Federal Electoral Institute.

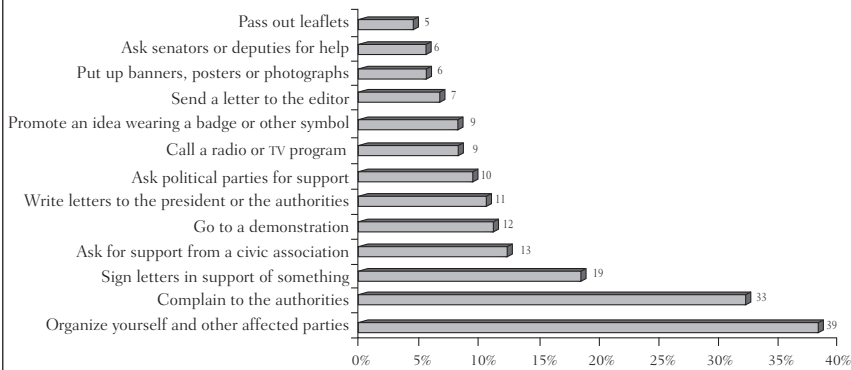
Source: Fundación *Este País*, op. cit., p. 18.

GRAPH 4
MEMBERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS
 (percent of those who answered “yes”)



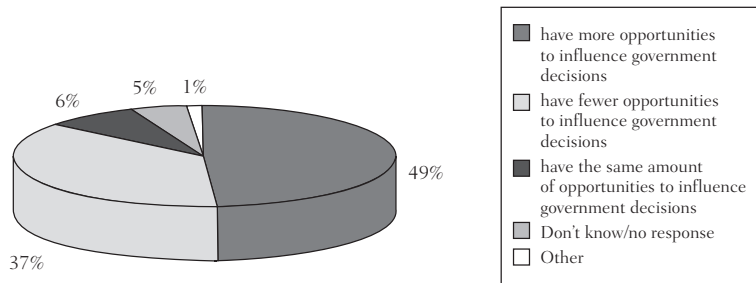
Source: Fundación *Este País*, op. cit., pp. 25 y 27.

GRAPH 5
ACTIONS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS
AFFECTING THE INDIVIDUAL OR OTHERS
 (percent of those who answered “yes”)



Source: Fundación *Este País*, op. cit., p. 27.

GRAPH 6
 ¿DO YOU THINK THAT CITIZENS WILL...?



Source: Fundación *Este País*, op. cit., p. 30.

in Mexico are used to defend the interests of people with power or as an excuse for committing arbitrary acts; 57 percent think that citizens can have little or no influence in government decisions; and 56 percent think it is difficult or very difficult to organize themselves with other citizens to work for a common cause. The feeling of civic ineffectiveness, clear in the last two questions, may be linked to the low index of interpersonal trust that

those polled showed: 88 percent said that if you do not take care of yourself, people will take advantage of you, and 72 percent said that most people are only concerned about themselves.

In open, but encouraging, contradiction with some of these figures, 46 percent of those surveyed said they were in the habit of watching or listening to the news or programs about politics every day; 84 percent thought that the police should be used to force

those who break the law to obey it; 64 percent think the police should be used against demonstrators who snarl up traffic; and 56 percent think that most people show solidarity. These figures show a modicum of interest in politics, preference for legality and interpersonal trust that could be the basis for launching a citizenry committed to public matters and willing to work for common interests in the framework of the law. It is also encouraging that 49 percent of those polled said they believed that in the future, citizens will have more opportunities to have an impact on government decisions (see graph 6).

It is in our interest to strengthen these reserves of social capital in Mexico, both in the sphere of institutional reforms and at the level of forming a civic culture and also to rescue politics from the disrepute it has fallen into thanks to corruption, apathy, incompetence, video-politics and electoral marketing, and to turn it into a factor for coalescence around a social order including everyone and into a space for democratic deliberation, accountability and the convergence of efforts for constructing the public good. **MM**

NOTES

¹ See Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Ann Craig and Wayne A. Cornelius, “Political Culture in Mexico. Continuities and Revisionist Interpretations,” Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980); Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Pippa Norris, “La participación ciudadana: México desde una perspectiva comparativa,” Santiago Creel Miranda et al., *Deconstruyendo la ciudadanía. Avances y retos en el desarrollo de la cultura democrática en México* (Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrúa/SEGOB/SEP/IFE/CIDE/ITAM, 2002).

² See Alejandro Moreno, *El votante mexicano. Democracia, actitudes políticas y conducta electoral* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003), pp. 32-33.