

Women's Electoral Participation in Mexico

Carlos González Martínez*



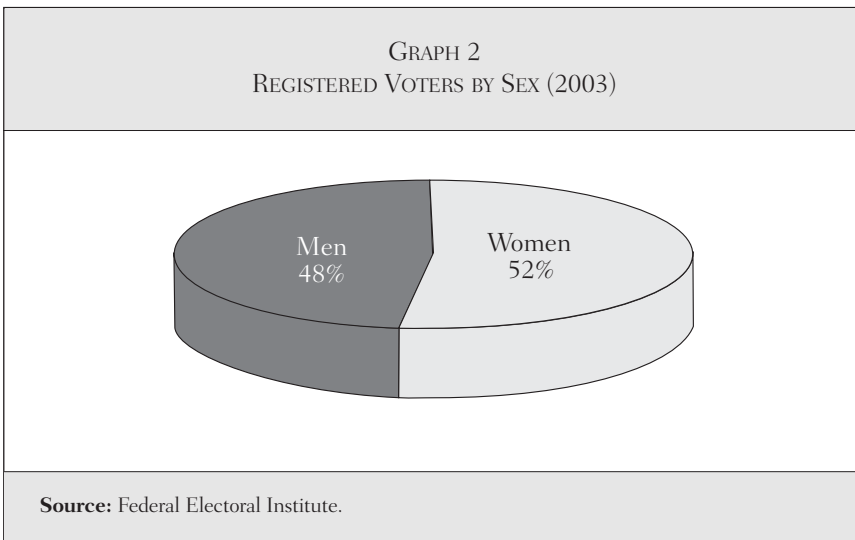
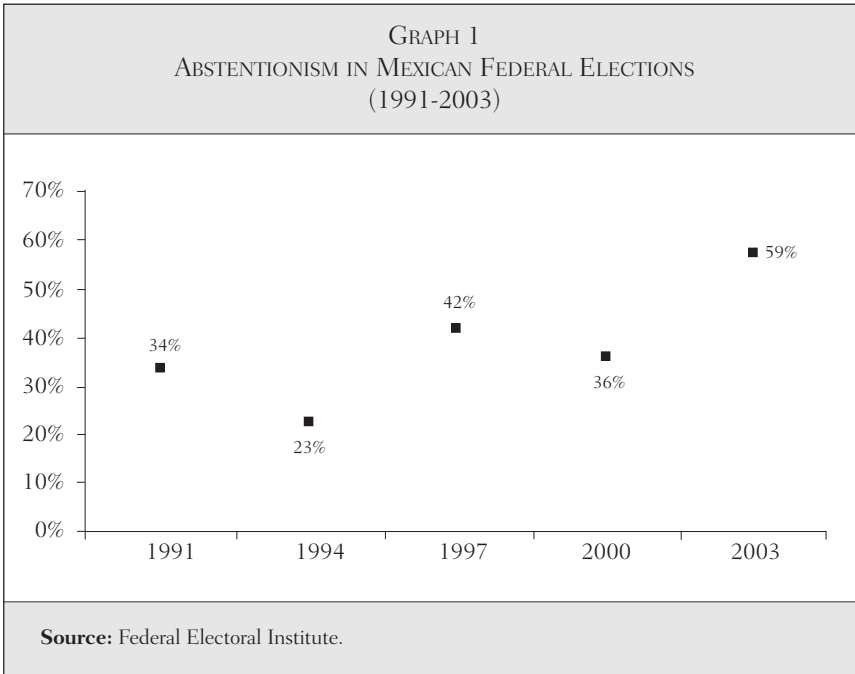
To my daughters, with love and hope

Among the main challenges to Mexico's young democracy is the expansion of the content and forms of public participation. For a couple of decades now, Mexican democracy has made notable achievements in establishing the legal and institutional framework necessary for its consolidation, but we must advance toward more consistent citizens' participation, in form, quantity and quality. This will be the true indicator of its roots in Mexican society, if we continue to think that democracy is a form of government linked to public participation, that is, to the presence of the citizens

in the *polis* and the ways that they participate in the construction and exercise of public power.

Paradoxically, one of the fields in which most challenges have been faced and advances made is in that of elections. Here, Mexico has managed to establish a legal, institutional system which became the axis around which the process of democratization has turned in recent years and through which procedures and equilibriums of the political system have been transformed. In the Mexican transition, elections, with their new rules and institutions, played a fundamental role as the support that buttressed the changes in the political regime. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is the field in which public participation has dropped and lost quality. In short, abstentionism has once again grown in both federal and local elections¹ at the same

* Executive director of electoral training and civic education of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).



time that levels of mistrust and discredit are expanding and deepening.² Graph 1 illustrates abstentionism in recent years.

Even though participation rates fluctuate everywhere depending on the kind of election and the political situation in which they occur, it is clear that abstentionism has maintained a tendency to grow over the last 14 years. This was precisely the period when

Mexican democracy's legal and institutional changes bore their best fruit, establishing equitable conditions for competition and clear rules of legitimacy increasingly based on the new legality.

A glance at local elections will give us similar results in recent years. But the problem does not lie only in the size of abstentionism but, fundamentally in its quality. Recent studies indicate that abstentionism in Mexico —like in

the rest of Latin America— is increasingly more glaringly related to expressions of political dissatisfaction, mainly among young people and population groups whose socio-demographic traits would make us think that there would be greater willingness to participate, even beyond just voting.³

Therefore, the challenge for Mexican electoral democracy today is not only increasing the number of people who vote, but, above all, improving the quality of those votes. That is, Mexican voters are more just *electors* than *citizens* to the extent that voting does not completely reflect a fully sovereign, free, informed and reasoned will.

This issue is truly a very broad one. Here, I will only touch on two matters that I consider relevant to citizens' electoral participation in Mexico: the presence of women and young people. Both merit broader exploration than these pages afford, and therefore my aim will not be to go into qualitative explanations, but rather just to remark on the relevant phenomena.

WOMEN, A GROWING PRESENCE

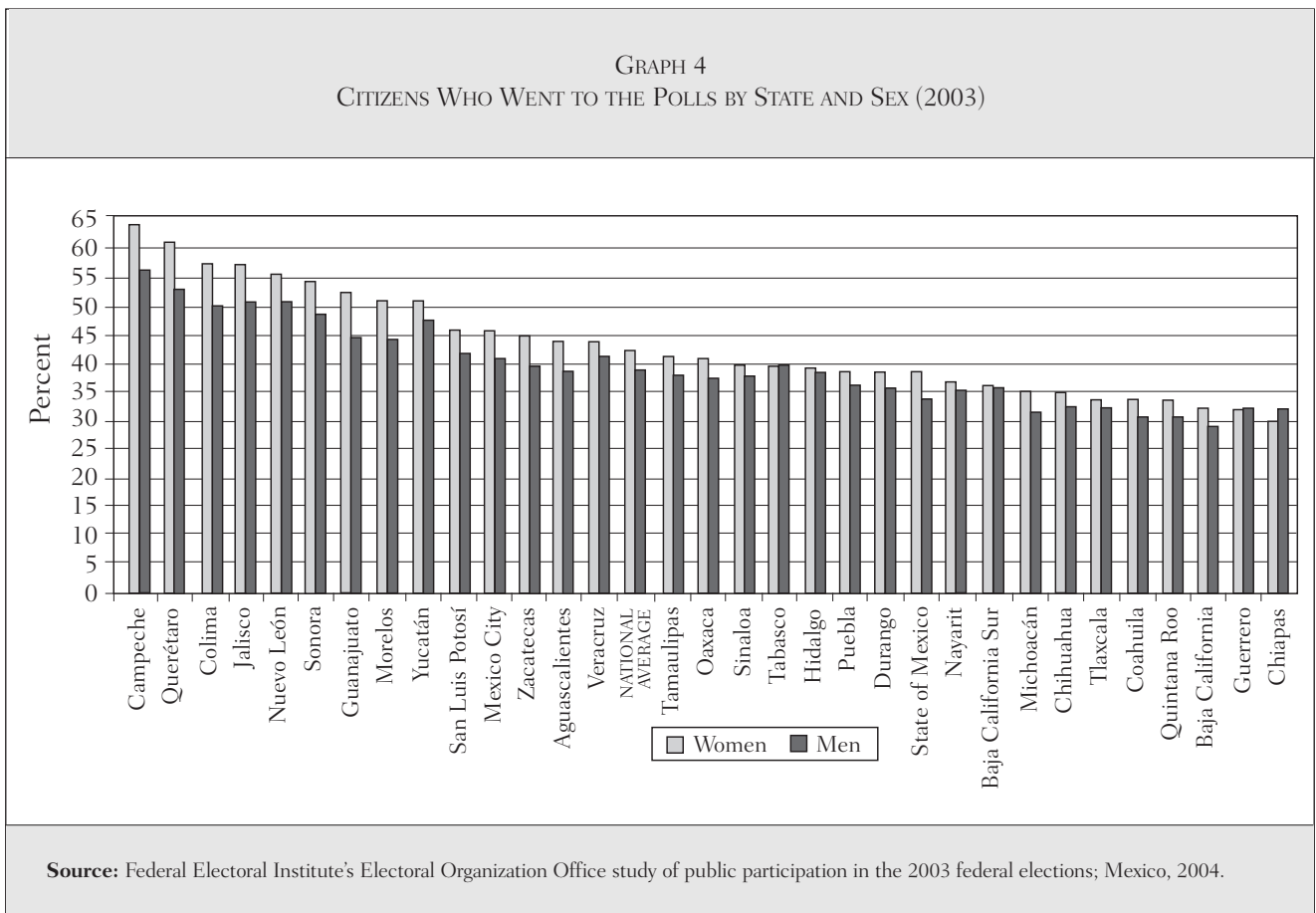
The number of women voters is growing. According to Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) figures, more women than men are registered to vote and have a voter's registration card, a prerequisite for balloting in Mexico. This may be explained by the fact that there are more women than men in the total population. But the important thing is that the percentage of women on the voters rolls is higher than their portion of the population, and that they vote in considerably higher numbers than men, and significantly more than their percentage of the population.

Graphs 2 and 3 illustrate the greater number of women on Mexico's voters rolls and the percentage they represent of the total number of people who actually vote.

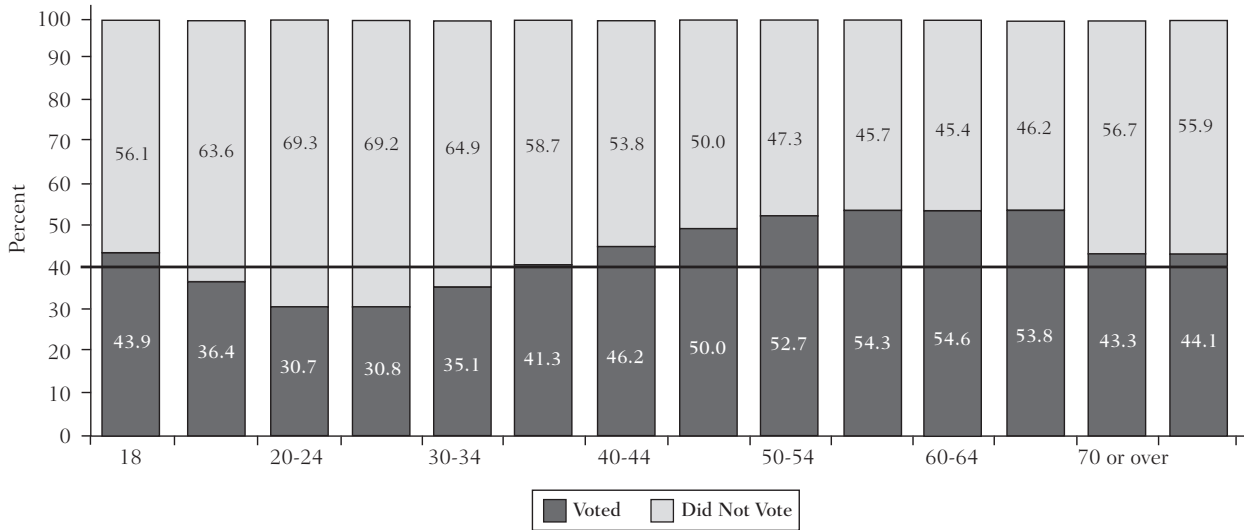
Graph 2 shows that women make up 52 percent of all people registered to vote. Graph 3 shows that they make up 54 percent of those who actually go to the polls. Women constitute a little over 51 percent of the population. This means that women prepare more than men to be able to vote and that they go to the polls in greater numbers than men.

But these aggregate national figures do not show the variations on a state and regional level, as does Graph 4.

This graph shows electoral participation by sex and by state. From left

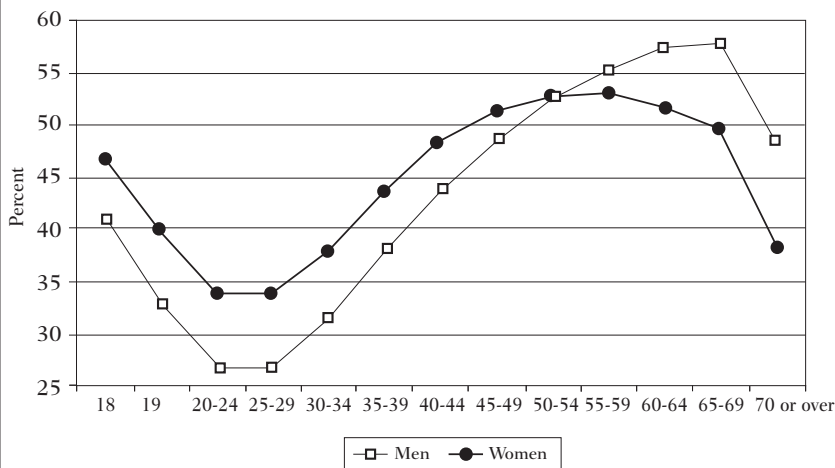


GRAPH 5
PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS ON THE VOTER ROLLS BY AGE GROUP (2003)



Source: Federal Electoral Institute's Electoral Organization Office study of public participation in the 2003 federal elections; Mexico, 2004.

GRAPH 6
CITIZENS WHO VOTED BY SEX AND AGE (2003)



Source: Federal Electoral Institute's Electoral Organization Office study of public participation in the 2003 federal elections; Mexico, 2004.

to right, it orders voting from the highest to the lowest. As it shows, in those places where voting rates are higher, so is the number of women *vis-à-vis* men voters. Chiapas is the only state in which clearly more men than women vote, but it is also one of the least developed states with a corporative, authoritarian political culture and one of the three states in the country with the lowest voting rates overall. Why is it that in a state where men vote more than women, there is also one of the highest abstention rates and the greatest poverty in the country?

YOUNG PEOPLE, A DECLINING PRESENCE

While women have a growing presence in Mexican elections, young people seem

to be in frank withdrawal since their participation tends to decline. The largest number of abstaining voters are found among people between the ages of 19 and 34, as can be seen in Graph 5.

The horizontal line indicates the number of people who voted in the 2003 elections: a terrible 41 percent. Under that line are only young people between the ages of 19 and 34. Above it is everyone else, including young people of 18 who were voting for the first time.

But this figure is even more remarkable if we consider that people between the ages of 19 and 34 make up more than one-third of registered voters and are also the group that most distrusts politics and its institutions and is most liable to accept corruption, illegality and even domestic violence.⁴

In a country of young people, Mexican democracy finds its greatest detractors among the young. This is a formi-

dable challenge for a country that is tending to age. What will happen in a few years when this sector of disappointed abstentionists achieves greater presence in public spaces? If current trends continue, women will achieve greater presence. And that is a good thing at least if we heed what Graph 6 tells us, highlighting voters by age and sex.

This graph shows that young women abstain significantly less than young men: there are almost 7 percentage points of difference. At least this is a good sign among all the bad news that this article has to share.

We can place our hopes on young women changing things, at least in terms of expecting greater electoral participation by citizens. Hopefully, unlike up until now, we will be able to make that higher women's participation be reflected in a greater presence in the bodies

that not only elect the authorities but also where the decisions are made that the authorities have to formulate thinking about all of us. Hopefully. **MM**

NOTES

¹ We should not forget that Mexico's electoral system is divided into federal and local. In the first, the president, senators and federal deputies are elected. Local elections are for governors, city councils and state congresses. Both kinds of elections have their own sets of legislation and a structure of electoral, administrative, judicial and, in some cases, criminal officials.

² All surveys of political culture in the country in recent years show the same trend: most Mexicans do not trust politics or its institutions. See the surveys done by the IFE, the UNAM Institute for Social Research and the Ministry of the Interior.

³ See the work of Benjamín Temkin of the Latin American Social Sciences Center (Flacso).

⁴ See the studies by the IFE itself, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Functions, the Mexican Institute for Youth and several specialized firms like Consulta-Mitofsky.