

# Dilemmas in the Looking Glass

## The July 2 Elections

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The vertigo of the election campaign is in the past. The citizenry put an end to it with its ballots. Fortunately, the process was sincerely, democratically normal. Although during the heady days of the campaign, there were those who, like six and 12 years ago, insisted that the crucial issue of this election continued to be the referendum on the plural political system, the fact is that this time, the alternative between democracy and authoritarianism did not play the most important role. Today, we can calmly say that that choice

has been surpassed: the citizens organized the elections, went to the polls, cast the majority of votes for one of the options. The electoral authorities counted the votes and, with all of that, the state consolidated its democratic vocation.

Mexico has definitively moved toward democracy and fortunately, we have once again verified that the doors that could lead us back into the past are firmly closed. However, the feeling remains that we have seen a very intense electoral process go by. Although democratic, we witnessed an episode full of passions, disputes and contrasts. Therefore, it would not be fair to reality to close this recent chapter con-

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cluding that it was merely a matter of votes, of constituting majorities, of winners and losers.

During those long days of the campaign, other dimensions were also in play that it would be a mistake not to analyze, matters that slipped out of the strictly political sphere to have an impact in the most unexpected corners of everyday Mexican life. With the recent election, we citizens discovered that, in addition to being an arena for disputing important government posts, campaigns can be a mirror that faithfully reflects our most acute social tensions, amplifies the dilemmas, deepens our fears, sharpens disagreements and also shows up our agreements and the hopes of those of us who live in the same community.

Thanks to that looking glass, democratic peoples program the regular review of their beliefs. Just as happened to Lewis Carroll's Alice, at election time, societies have the opportunity to take a long look inside themselves, to unmask their Mad Hatters, their March Hares, their talking flowers, their respective Humpty Dumpties. At these times, warning alarms tend to go off, identities are reinforced or weakened, convictions questioned, faith in ourselves subverted and eye-glasses adjusted to understand and understand each other inside the human group. It would not be exaggerated to say that election time ends up turning into a kind of analyst's couch where the patient regularly comes to review pending social issues that in more normal times go unnoticed.

For that reason, it is a good thing that elections come to an end; that the period of consultation about the state of different social controversies concludes. However, with the single object

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of making sure the nightmare does not repeat itself the next time we sit in front of the mirror, this article will attempt to take a bird's eye view of some of the dilemmas that the recent electoral process threw up on our beaches to be observed. What did we find out about our reality while we were on the other side of the looking glass? What should be reviewed if we want the next election to be different from the most recent one?

#### DILEMMAS OF AN ELECTION

From my perspective, the most recent chapter in Mexican political history was dominated by two paradoxes put firmly in play during the recent campaigns: rich vs. poor and old vs. new. The originator of the first was Andrés Manuel López Obrador and of the second, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa. It is true that the third candidate, Roberto Madrazo Pintado, toward the end of the campaign, tried to put forward a third paradox: the center vs. the extremes. However, since this last is the most deeply rooted paradox in Mexican public life, most of the electorate decided not to make it their own. And most probably they made that decision because it had already been around too long. A very

long time will pass before the option of unity is once again appreciated in Mexico.

More than as a moderate position, we Mexicans perceive centrism as synonymous with dominating discussions; we link it to the idea of a single party. Losing the center, in contrast, has led us to finally making a clear distinction between agreements and disagreements. It was precisely the explosion of the ideological monolith that helped us clarify many points. The reduction of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to one third of its former weight was what made it possible for us Mexicans to haul out of the closet so very, very many issues that had previously been put away. The end of hegemony is giving rise to diversity, to the confrontation of projects, of ethical frameworks and alternative world views.

It is very probable that it was in 2000 when we Mexicans last contemplated this dilemma. The question then was whether the conditions existed for handing over the presidency to any party other than the PRI. Neither the campaign proposals nor the candidates' teams nor the economic or political visions expressed in the platforms were as important as this single value judgment. Put in the language of that time, the essential issue in the 2000 race was reduced to deciding at the polls whether to throw the PRI out of Los Pinos. The big difference between that election and the most recent one is that, once the issue of alternation was resolved, in Mexico it is no longer possible to concentrate the complexity of an election in a single question, much less expect a single answer. For the time being, today we can say that, just as ratifying democracy was not an important issue in this election, neither

will it be the dilemma of center vs. periphery. In any case, fortunately, as a terrain for agreement, the center is now in dispute and therefore it cannot and will not again have a single occupant. As a result, the Mexican voter faced 2006 with a long list of options, perhaps the longest list of alternatives that Mexican society has experienced in its relatively short electoral history.

#### RICH VS. POOR

The dilemma raised by Andrés Manuel López Obrador during the recent electoral process tried to place the issue of inequality on the highest pedestal of Mexican politics. To do that, this left candidate opted to use polarizing rhetoric underlining the different visions that divide the rich from the poor in Mexico, or, in the words of economist Rolando Cordera, marking the differences between the plebians and the oligarchs. It was not just a matter of making an economic distinction based on income—granted, a central component of the difference—but of going beyond that and contrasting the differences in identity that subsist in our country given the existence of social classes, opposing identities that can hardly be underestimated in Mexico, above all if we realize that almost 80 percent of all opportunities are in the hands of the richest 20 percent of the population. During his campaign, this candidate emphasized and made very visible one of the most characteristic traits of our society: the class asymmetries that separate us, making up a country where the sense of injustice abounds, as does, therefore, the dissatisfaction about the recently inaugurated plural regimen. Based on the principle that “a democ-

racy that does not resolve the problem of poverty is no democracy at all,” López Obrador placed the accent on the issue of inequality and called on voters to ratify that concern with him.

It is undeniable that this dimension of the campaign had a profound effect on public debate not only by the candidates, but by society as a whole. López Obrador’s continually pointing his finger at the privileged few did have an impact on the diverse circles of those who consider themselves as such, whether they are or not. The surprising thing was not so much the identification of the least favored estates of the population with the PRD candidate’s proposal, but the discomfort that this challenge created among the middle and high classes. “*Naco*,” the class-prejudice-laden term *par excellence* used by Mexicans to put each other down, was an intense part of chats in the home, at work or in cafés during the months prior to and during the electoral campaign. I presume that the most uncomfortable challenge did not come from this candidate’s social roots—several other Mexican presidents have social backgrounds similar to that of López Obrador—but his proud defense of his beginnings. One gets the impression that in Mexican power circles,

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plebian origins are not important as long as you do not make much of them. Or, more precisely: it is irrelevant as long as you avoid publicly joining your condition as a plebian with that of the population that shares that origin, which turns out to be the vast majority.

It is true that in the public debate no one dared use the same derisive terms that were used in private. However, without abandoning the derisive tone, the word “populist” replaced the word “*naco*,” making it possible for the rest of the combative argument against the dilemma López Obrador was putting forward to continue intact. In that context, the slogan “For the good of all, the poor first” was demonized, arguing that it was mere demagogic manipulation. Then it was quickly turned around and argued that this political plebianism was dangerous for the country, whether because it was similar to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s authoritarian discourse or because it foretold an irresistible violation of the law. Nevertheless, even for someone who had taken this argument on board, it would be difficult to deny that, as never before since the time of the Mexican Revolution, the time of Villa and Zapata, class identity and the frictions derived from class antagonism were placed front and center during the first six months of this year. That was the left candidate’s main victory, revealing the hypocrisy that the PRI had situated us in for too many years, because there is one undeniable reality: we are a society profoundly marked by class divisions.

#### NEW VS. OLD

Felipe Calderón, for his part, picked from among the realities that beat in

the heart of Mexican society a very different, but perhaps equally vibrant, dilemma. From the time when he won the nomination in the internal party contest, the PAN representative maintained that the great alternative posed in the recent presidential election was to choose between the past and the future, between the old and the new. In a linear reading, this could be interpreted as though the alternative were to pick between PRI thinking and its derivatives (the PRD), and those who recently took office thanks to the alternation decided in 2000: the PAN. However, in Calderón's discourse, this was not reduced to political cleavage

During the campaign, this choice was developed until it attained broader stature as an argument. Putting young people at the center of things, the PAN candidate focused on the generation gap in Mexican society. In effect, it is not the same to look at reality from the standpoint of someone who directly experienced 1968, or who experienced the political instability born of the guerrilla movements of the 1970s, as to evaluate reality using the alleged electoral fraud of 1988 or—for those even younger—the political events of 2000 as a backdrop.

While for the former, what happened more than 20 or 30 years ago was very much a part of their lives, for the latter, it is only a historical fact that they have been told about. No one is to blame; this is just the natural evolution of society. What is important, however, is that demographically, there are more people who identify with the present and fewer who lived through the past. Today, the electoral weight of the recent arrivals to democracy is more important than that of its builders.

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It is curious that PRI members did not stop to think about this. While Calderón emphasized this point time after time during the campaign, Roberto Madrazo built his first campaign discourse marking the difference between the experts and non-experts, a more elegant formula than between young and old, but at the end of the day, very similar. There is nothing less attractive for a young person than to force him/her to listen to the voice of experience, above all if he/she is with other citizens of the same age. Therefore, it was not difficult for many young people to find in Calderón, the youngest candidate in the race, the best person to identify with, while Roberto Madrazo made the decision to play the role of the representative of the old guard.

In contrast with other times, in Mexico like in so many other Western democracies, the youngest sector of the population feels little affinity for politics; to a great extent, this is because while the interests and forms of communication have been transformed beyond recognition, in the terrain of politics, the messages continue to be too similar to what was said in the twentieth century. Suffice it to listen to most of Mexico's political class to confirm that a good portion of them suffer from what the French call "wooden

tongue," the proclivity to express themselves using impenetrable jargon full of words but lacking in meaning. This makes their discourse unbelievable for the new generation.

It is symptomatic that Mexican politics has resisted change in a world in which the methods for transmitting messages have changed as much as they have. However, this symptom has a simple explanation: despite the fact that the system of institutions has been profoundly reformed in the last two decades, those participating in it continue to be essentially the same people. Generally speaking, the generation that governed Mexico 20 years ago continues to do so today.

Precisely in the midst of this contradiction of Mexican society, Felipe Calderón put forward his campaign dilemma making the young the main people he wanted to dialogue with. For that, he needed to substantially innovate along the traditional routes of political communications and also shape the product that his candidacy represented. In order to shore up his legitimacy among the young, the PAN candidate made employment his main proposal. This was obviously not an issue chosen by chance; the lack of jobs is this sector's main demand. Every year, 1,100,000 young people enter the work force, and only one-third get a formal job in the professional world. Calderón's intelligent discourse not only hit the mark by picking his target audience, but he also put the accent on the content. Much more could be said about the PAN candidate, but it would be impossible to deny that his campaign successes included having brought to the fore the lack of justice done by Mexican politics to the generational transition until now.

## UNTIL THE NEXT LOOKING GLASS

It is very probable that what we have seen during the recent campaign will end up becoming an immovable reality in the future. Once the country renounced worshipping at and lending listening time to the hegemonic pulpit of discourses, now it will be the multiplicity of dimensions that will characterize it at election time. The inten-

sity with which both dilemmas (rich vs. poor and new vs. old) were presented in the arena of public debate is only the first symptom of what is to come: a form of doing politics in which society's most pressing concerns are systematically brought forth. We can be sure that if these moments become recurring mirrors to take a long hard look at reality, we Mexicans will end up by knowing each other better. Therefore, it might be

worthwhile jettisoning our fear of the polarization of the discourses, since only through them can the dilemmas be seen in their entirety. Since the choices are normally presented as counterpoints of contradictory options, in the future the discussions will not be able to elude confrontation when they are analyzed. However, we Mexicans still have much to learn about the art of disagreeing without stopping being civilized. ■■

