

Electoral Education Programs in Mexico

María Macarita Elizondo Gasperin*



Electoral training course for polling place officials.

INTRODUCTION

Mexico's Constitution stipulates that the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) is responsible for carrying out direct, comprehensive civic education.

The political transition in Mexico, whose fundamental reference point was the 1977 electoral reform, definitively marked the nature of our political change, by moving from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. Over the years, different electoral reforms gradually gave the IFE the faculty to carry out civic education. Civil society in general, as well as the parties and political forces, no longer wanted an elec-

toral body that showed partisanship or political inclinations in its actions. That is why it was necessary for the IFE to take charge of civic education. The institute's two fundamental objectives in fostering civic education, then, point exactly in this direction: to contribute to educating the citizenry and to participate in training for the democratic application of the law.

THE IFE DESIGNS AND IMPLEMENTS CIVIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In 2001, the IFE made a first effort to discuss a civic education strategy that would not be subsumed in the electoral calendar. So, it created a long-term strategy that was con-

* Member of the Federal Electoral Institute General Council.

cretized with the approval of the 2005-2010 Strategic Civic Education Program.¹

2005-2010 STRATEGIC CIVIC EDUCATION PROGRAM (PEEC)

The general objective of the 2005-2010 PEEC is to foster coordinated civic education activities that will permit Mexican society to exercise its right to vote and elect its representatives to different public bodies. It also aims to make people aware of their rights as citizens and stimulate constructive participation in government and the administration of justice; to create social gender equality; and to encourage greater social justice.

The lines of action of its implementation in 2006 were the following: respect for basic rights; collective, organized participation; casting a free and reasoned vote; and living together in a democratic society. Since then the program's scope and goals have grown, and it has never stopped its activities.

CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS AND GETTING OUT THE VOTE

The main value to be respected and protected is impartiality in promoting the vote. What the IFE seeks is for citizens to be able to freely exercise their rights, with the appropriate, pertinent information they need. The PEEC criteria for promoting the vote are:

- Impartiality. Voters must not be subject to any kind of intimidation or coercion that could imply the possibility of their vote being endangered or not counted.
- Civic participation. The IFE underlines democratic values and practices that have a repercussion in the quality of our democracy.

CITIZENS' ACCOMPANIMENT PROGRAM (PAC)

The PAC seeks to insure that citizens are informed of their political-electoral rights in two very fundamental ways: democracy as a form of government and democracy as a way of living together in society.

The PAC uses different tools that take advantage of the most advanced technology and the following mechanisms: *Boletín Electrónico 2009* (Electronic Bulletin 2009); radio spots; informational articles; multimedia capsules; and the federal electoral process timeline, which includes information about all the activities and scheduling for the 2009 federal and local elections.

THE MEDIA

The IFE has received consensual support from the political parties to carry out campaigns on civic education and promoting the vote. Impartiality in promoting the vote through the institute is essential for the parties.

One of the problems encountered in this is the ever-present possibility of affecting equity in the elections. This is even more of a danger when ideas are not disseminated exclusively through each party or candidate's means, but through radio and television broadcasters.

Civic education aims to make people aware of their rights as citizens and stimulate constructive participation in government, to create social gender equality and to encourage greater social justice.

Aware of this situation and its responsibility in organizing and carrying out equitable elections, since 1993, the Federal Electoral Institute has issued guidelines for broadcasting and covering electoral news and information during the entire process. The most recent are "General Guidelines Applicable for Radio and Television Newscasts for Covering Information or Dissemination of Political Parties' Primary and General Campaign Activities."

The aim is not for the institute to impose any specific line of action or establish any kind of censorship. Therefore, this strategy must be seen solely as another step toward establishing a clear electoral race based on a fair balance of party publicity through the news media.

For their part, the officials of the National Chamber of the Radio and Television Industry of Mexico (CNIRT) have committed themselves to aiding electoral authorities and the federal government in this effort and insuring that their day-

to-day activities respect the agreements signed, thus contributing to the development of Mexico's democracy.

It should be pointed out that equitable dissemination and informational coverage of primaries and general campaigns is absolutely necessary to guarantee that no contender has the advantage over any other. The difference between opinion pieces and informational coverage is also important to note. The former are comments, value judgments or references that editorialize their content, which undoubtedly contribute to enriching the information and offer citizens food for thought. The latter are generally clear, complete descriptions of events, statements and, above all, the proposals and content of the political parties, coalitions and candidates' electoral platforms.

In both cases—but particularly in the case of informational coverage—electoral legislation stipulates and regulates the “right to reply.” The political parties all agree that wrong information can cause negative effects if not cleared up immediately. That is why Article 64, paragraph 3 of the IFE's “Regulation for Access to Radio and Television in Elec-

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toral Matters,” stipulates that in Mexico, requests for clarification must be dealt with swiftly so the audience can see both sides of a single news item.

Regarding candidates' private lives, in our country, expressing ideas is not the object of any kind of legal or administrative inquiry, except in cases of attacks on morality or the rights of third parties or of actions which cause a crime to be committed or disturb the peace. For this reason, the respect for contenders' private activities is unrestricted and must be protected both by the IFE and the CNIRT to the extent that it has no implications for the public interest.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The IFE was a pioneer in Latin America as an electoral authority with the faculty to promote and develop civic education and political culture without benefiting or damaging any political party. This reflects its commitment to impartial civic education to forge citizenship and respect for the law.

The IFE has a structure and a significant budget, plus the ability to cooperate and coordinate institutionally to convene non-governmental organizations, the media and civil society in general to carry out civic education and promote the vote.

The institute has an area specialized in civic education and political culture that does research and sociological electoral and political marketing activities to create and implement different programs in this area. It has a permanent technical team working on designing and establishing specific, concrete programs so the citizenry can receive different messages of support for its political-electoral activities.

One of the IFE's important activities is based on the fact that more than 145,000 polling places are staffed by randomly selected citizens, which means that the elections are directly managed by the public. The work is voluntary since private citizens are asked to participate as polling place authorities, thus guaranteeing impartiality. This kind of electoral administration is a novel type of civic participation for political-electoral systems where distrust prevails, as in the Mexican case.

These civic education and political culture programs help create a culture of trust in Mexican electoral institutions and procedures. It is an ongoing medium- and long-term job that implies the participation of political parties, legislators, the media, academics, non-governmental organizations, opinion leaders, businessmen and women, churches, and a long “et cetera” of others from Mexican society. **MM**

NOTES

¹ See http://www.ife.org.mx/docs/IFEv2/DECEYEC/SeguimientoDeProgramas/DECEYEC-ProgramaEstrategicoEducacionCivica/DECEYEC-peec-docs/peec_2005-2010.pdf.

