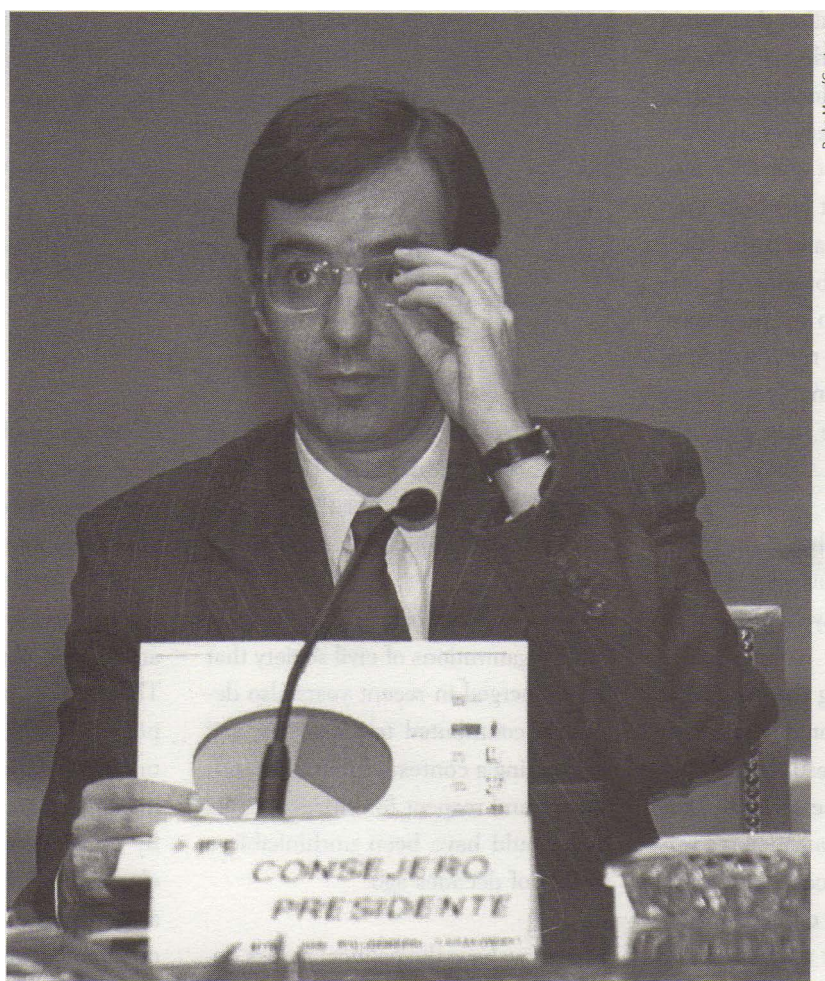


The Mexican Transition to Democracy

An Interview with Federal Electoral Institute President José Woldenberg*



Pedro Mera/Cuartoscuro

VOICES OF MEXICO: As seen from your posts first as an electoral councilor and then as president of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) General Council, what have the most difficult

moments of Mexico's transition to democracy been?

JOSÉ WOLDENBERG: The period of successive electoral reforms of the Mexican transition has been so long that it is not easy to distinguish any moment more difficult than others. Undoubtedly, 1994 was a year of sig-

nificant political changes in the country that had an impact on electoral processes and the IFE. In that year I was part of the General Council with other citizen councilors. Despite the grave political events that were taking place, the institute showed itself to be stable and was able to carry out a successful election.¹ That was possi-

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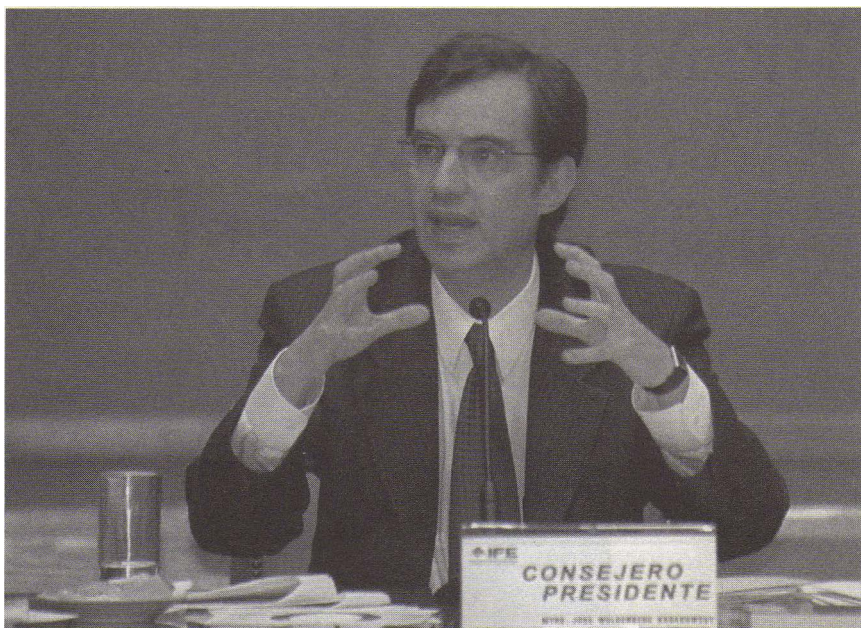
ble because the prior agreements among the political forces were solid.

VM: In your opinion, what is the role the IFE has played in that transition?

JW: The IFE was created as a result of a series of pacts among the political parties that aimed to establish a trustworthy electoral institution that would satisfy the persistent democratic demand for clean elections and could guarantee the legitimacy of electoral processes. I think that the IFE's fundamental achievement has been guaranteeing both citizens and parties that, today, without any doubt, elected posts are filled by those who get the majority of the vote through rigorously legal means and after reasonably equitable competition. No more than that, but also no less.

VM: Who have the other main political actors of the transition been and what role have they played, pro or con?

JW: Strictly speaking the IFE is not an actor in the transition, but rather an electoral institution resulting from it and providing channels for it. The Mexican democratic transition is a very complex, prolonged process of reforms that produced political changes which, in turn, required new reforms. From that perspective, the political actors were many. Undoubtedly, the different administrations, parties and their congressional caucuses have played a central role in building the institutions of democracy because they all contributed to developing the new rules of the electoral game and they all agreed to submit to them. At the same time, the parties' actions cannot be explained without taking into account the trans-



José Woldenberg during a session of the IFE General Council.

formation that the public's political culture has experienced. The media opened up a new era for the exercise of freedom of expression, which is an indispensable prerequisite —like oxygen— for democracy. The many diverse organizations of civil society that have emerged in recent years also decisively contributed to expanding and reinforcing a context of pluralism, tolerance and respect for citizens' rights that would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago.

VM: How have the political parties defined their responsibilities and acted vis-à-vis the process of national democratization?

JW: The political parties have been the central protagonists in the different stages of the electoral reforms. Since 1977, when the Mexican Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Mexican Democratic Party were legalized, thus guaranteeing the right

of parties to effectively participate in local elections, the political, electoral scene began to change. The 1986 constitutional and legislative electoral reforms were the result of a public call by the government for which the debate among the parties was fundamental. That reform instituted —among the positive changes— the new composition of the Chamber of Deputies, making it the current 300 deputies elected by majority vote and 200 deputies elected by proportional representation, and created the Mexico City Assembly of Representatives and the first autonomous court for solving electoral disputes. The 1986 reform also included unfortunate changes. For example, it established a formula for setting up the Federal Electoral Commission, the electoral authority of the time, that gave a majority of votes to the party in office and a procedure for a top-down decision making process to name polling officials. The application of that new legislation, the increase in parties' electoral



Vicente Fox registering as the PAN presidential candidate.

Carmén Romero/Cuartaescena

abroad in different ways. Congress is analyzing the necessary reforms that—and we should not sidestep this—have to take into account the solution of important legal, logistical, budgetary and even diplomatic problems. The political parties and the government itself have both made the specific commitment to establish mechanisms that would allow Mexicans abroad to participate in the 2006 presidential elections.

VM: What are the main risks for the consolidation of democracy in Mexico—if there are any—and, in your opinion, is there any real possibility of going back to a non-democratic regime?

JW: I have said on several occasions that, in the long run, the consolidation of democracy requires the country to start down the road to solving the problem of the growing economic and social inequality among Mexicans. That is the main long-term condition for democracy to be solid. In the shorter term, we need dialogue and negotiation among the parties, particularly in Congress, to come to agreements that will effectively deal with the issues on the national agenda. In my view, the political issues that must be addressed today are problems inherent to all democracies, with their national particularities of course.

VM: Do you think that elections in Mexico are already reasonably equitable, taking into consideration factors like the differentiated funding given to the parties, media access, the use of public resources and the prestige of public office in party activities? If you think not, how far have things advanced toward this goal?

weight and, above all, the experience of the conflictive 1988 elections, prompted yet again party debate between 1989 and 1990, which led to another cycle of reforms, making possible, among other things, the creation of the IFE. In 1993, accords were negotiated about party financing. In 1994, a new constitutional reform made the Federal Electoral Institute more independent: the parties' right to vote in the council was eliminated, the post of citizen councilor was created for all collective bodies and other legal measures were taken to make elections more transparent. In 1996, the rules for ensuring greater equality in political competition and the IFE's total autonomy were reviewed. To sum up, in such a short space, it is impossible to go into great detail about this very intricate process, but undoubtedly the parties were the ones who, acting in the electoral campaigns and negotiating the rules of the game, were the decisive actors in the transition.

VM: For the readers of *Voices of Mexico*, the majority of whom live in the United States and are of Mexican descent, it is important to know what the first citizen president of the IFE thinks about voting abroad.

JW: The important thing about this issue is that the 1996 constitutional reform opened up the legal possibility that all voting-age Mexicans can vote regardless of where they are. What was left pending was the development of the legal formulas so this right can actually be put into practice. The IFE was mandated to carry out a study about the legal conditions and the technical and logistical ways through which Mexicans abroad could eventually vote. In November 1998 the institute fulfilled that mandate and gave Congress the results of the study done by a group of the country's best specialists. Everyone interested in this issue should read this study, which concludes that it is technically possible to organize voting

JW: The question answers itself. Thirty percent of public funding for the parties is divided equally among them, while the other 70 percent is distributed proportionately according to the number of votes each received in the previous election. Private contributions are limited and all party finances are subject to legal regulation and oversight by electoral authorities. Legal mechanisms exist to ensure that all the parties have access to the media. This means that, as you say, elections are reasonably equitable.

VM: Do you think that the party system has already been consolidated in Mexico, with three strong parties and several small not-very-representative ones?

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the growing economic and social inequality among Mexicans.

Or do you foresee changes in this? What kind of party system do you think would be best for the country?

JW: The last word has never been said about the number of large and small parties, nor do I think anyone can say it. Our electoral system guarantees access for those who want to register new parties and also has a rule about those who lose their registration because they fail to get 2 percent of the vote. Based on that, it is the citizenry who decides the future of the party system at the polls. Ours is a very heterogeneous and diverse country and the best thing for it is that conditions for that plural citizenry to be politically represented be guaranteed through the ballot.

VM: What reforms are needed to strengthen the electoral system, and therefore the party system, in Mexico?

JW: I think that the layout of the electoral system is basically completed and well designed. This is shown in the successful results of all the federal elections the IFE has organized. The experience of the last few years has prompted proposals to be made to fine tune some specific aspects, for example, the matter of voting abroad. It has also been proposed that not all the IFE's electoral councilors be changed simultaneously in order to ensure continuity in the council's work. More recently, since the IFE has carried out its task of monitoring party finances, weak

nesses in the design of its instruments to do so have become clear and this will undoubtedly soon lead to certain adjustments by the legislature. For anyone interested in the details, in July 2001, *Nexos* magazine published an article I wrote to summarize these reform proposals and their motivations.

VM: How would you explain the high cost of public funding to political parties and national political groups,² as well as of the maintenance and operation of the IFE itself?

JW: We should not lose sight of the fact that all judgments about the cost of any electoral system are relative. No system is the same as any other. Let me give you

an example: in Mexico the electoral body is in charge of keeping the voters' registration rolls permanently up to date. In addition to their being an indispensable tool for elections, they have also become the most trustworthy instrument for personal identification. All banks and public offices require individuals to present their voter registration card to carry out any business. Well, managing the voters' registration rolls and issuing voter IDs accounts for almost 40 percent of the IFE's operating expenses. In most countries, these instruments are not considered an electoral expenditure.

On the other hand, by law the IFE must carry out a great number of tasks and procedures that were developed to make its activities trustworthy. Sometimes they seem excessive and redundant, but if they guarantee trust in electoral processes, the expenditure is more than justified.

With regard to public funding of parties, we should take into consideration that the overarching political decision made in our country was that we should make public funding supercede private contributions. This guarantees that there are balanced conditions for competition and that funding is not used to control the parties by corporatist or even underworld groups. In addition, this also ensures official monitoring of all party finances. Perhaps the system of financing could be adjusted in the future. But I think that the basic concept is operating fine.

VM: What is your perception of the current state of the national political culture and its relationship with the consolidation of democracy in Mexico?

JW: National political culture is evolving rapidly. A good number of the changes

derive from the opening of democratic spaces in recent years. All Mexicans are constantly learning about this. Recent polls on the public's political culture show that there are *chiaroscuros* with regard to the affirmation of democratic values like tolerance and respect for the law; but they also reveal Mexicans' support for democratic forms of government.

VM: What would be the best way to balance pluralism and democratic governability in Mexico, particularly in light of the legislative slowness—some would say paralysis—with which the so-called divided government has functioned federally?

JW: There is no other way forward to governability than negotiation and accords among political forces. Today, we have a legal framework, and institutions have been built that favor politics operating in its best sense: producing agreements that allow people and groups to live together even though they have different visions of the world, different ideological convictions and varied interests. Without denying that certain political reforms could contribute to governability, I think that currently, the responsible behavior of political actors and their respect for the law are the factors that most contribute to democracy being both effective and legitimate.

VM: Is there anything else that you would like to add for the readers of *Voices of Mexico*?

JW: Just my thanks. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Councilor Woldenberg refers here to the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas that broke out January 1 and, above all, to the assassinations of Institutional Revolutionary Party presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in March and of PRI General Secretary Francisco Ruiz Massieu in September. [Editor's Note.]

² In Mexico, national political groups, registered by the IFE that fulfill a series of legal prerequisites, are entitled to receive public money to finance several kinds of activities: political campaigning, operating expenses and research and dissemination of democratic culture and ideas, as well as political education. [Editor's Note.]