

The Geography Of Electoral Competition in Mexico

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Until just a few years ago, elections in Mexico were amply dominated by the government party which managed to retain the backing of the majority of the population while the country managed successful economic growth, permanent social mobility and room for political participation. Elections, more than strictly a process for selecting public officials, were a mechanism for recognizing and accepting the policies the government carried out.

At the beginning of the 1980s, however, given the need to modernize the country's economic and political life, elections began to play a new role. The democratic project began when the economic crisis made it impossible to sustain the old development model, when welfare policies ended and consensus were jettisoned. All this forced the government to seek and generate legitimacy through elections, given that the old instruments for consent and support became very critical.

Little by little the process of democratization made headway in Mexico. As the development model tended toward an increasing opening up of the market, forcing economic agents to become more competitive, a corresponding need for a new political model emerged, in which the rules of competition were both clear and the same for everyone. The crisis brought to the fore the need to revise the economic model, and therefore also the political model. In that sense, elections in Mexico began to occupy a fundamental place in achieving access to government posts.

In addition, as the country developed and changed, substantial transformations were taking place in the citizenry. A constant flow

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of migrants to urban areas turned Mexico from a basically rural country into an urban one. The population's educational and informational levels rose and workers are today concentrated in industry and services. These changes are the basis, in the last analysis, for plurality and political diversity.

It is important to point out that the voters have not followed a single or homogeneous trend; changes in the economic and political model brought with them differentiated voting patterns. In general, the only provable hypothesis is that there is a long-term tendency for the official party to lose votes and for the opposition to benefit with a corresponding increase.

We can characterize this overall performance as a long, profound period of partisan electoral realignment. Strictly speaking, it is not only that the government party is losing electoral support due to "penalty" votes and momentary benefits to the opposition. It can also be shown that the opposition parties have been creating an electoral base, and in addition consolidating its share of the vote and its electoral current in different ways.

The party system in Mexico today is basically made up of three large political forces. In almost all elections, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) get most of the votes. But for this partisan configuration to emerge, many years had to go by and many battles be fought. The road followed also has to do with the affinities established between voters and the parties, what the parties represent and the view and the perception the citizenry has about politics as the result of its identification with a party.

We should mention that down through the years many elections have been competitive, to the degree that they represent

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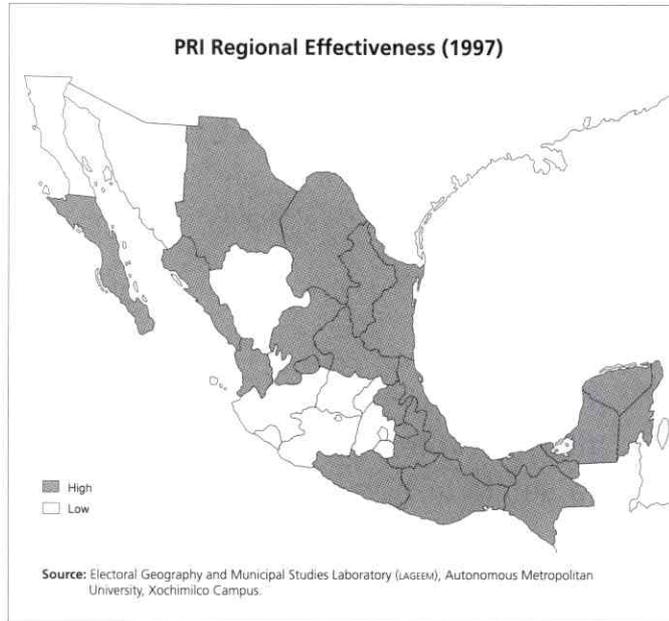
ed a formidable, emblematic impetus for the political transition. Competitiveness has also increased overall, although there does not seem to be a single dynamic—much less a single explanation—that would allow us to describe electoral behavior in the last two decades simply.

To analyze the dynamic of electoral trends and vote distribution in Mexico, we must refer to the significant breaks or splits that have occurred at different times.

What we have, then, is not a single foundational election, or, as some authors have put it, an electoral watershed, but a series of elections equivalent to small earthquakes among the PRI's electoral adherents. We mean by this that over a series of elections, the PRI suffered partial electoral breaks, thus beginning to see its condition as the hegemonic party undermined.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the PRI vote began to drop in different states around the country. Baja California and Chihuahua on the northern border, plus Jalisco, the State of Mexico and Mexico City's Federal District in the central part of the country, were the first to show a decline. These states are all highly developed economically, and therefore, at first, analysts closely tied regions with high socioeconomic development to a downward trend in the PRI vote and a strong presence of the opposition.

The states of Aguascalientes, Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Michoacán and Morelos were settings for the PRI's 1988 electoral shake-up. It had always enjoyed very high vote counts in all those states and its 1988 decline was very drastic. Perhaps for this reason that year was considered the moment of the great electoral breakdown of the PRI. However, only six states were won by the opposition, most of them because of the Cardenista¹ current's split from the PRI.



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In the 1994, six different states—Campeche, Chiapas, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Veracruz—left behind total PRI hegemony. The PRI vote nationwide, in percentage terms, was more or less the same in the 1988 and the 1994 elections. However, in these six states, it declined almost 20 percent. The interesting thing about this group of states is that they all have very different socioeconomic conditions: in

New León and Quintana Roo the economy is quite solid and diversified, while Chiapas and Oaxaca suffer from strong deficiencies and contradictions.

In other states where the PRI has long suffered vote loss, by 1997 parties were practically alternating in office. The official party's vote count has been dropping steadily during the 1990s. In Durango, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Tabasco and Yucatán, the breakdown of the PRI should be attributed to the successful work of the opposition parties. In these states charismatic politicians have emerged to lead movements of civic resistance against electoral fraud.²

In these 23 states of Mexico, we can say that there is equilibrium between the PRI and the opposition vote. The official party derives its advantage basically from the fact that in Mexican elections, particularly on a local level, there tends to be a polarization between two political forces. For that reason, it is very important to emphasize that it is not always the same party that challenges the official party, the PRI, for first place, but it is the latter which in every region must confront a party that concentrates the opposition vote.

For years, electoral trends seemed to show that in Mexico's north, the confrontation was exclusively between the PRI and the PAN, while in the south, the competing parties were the PRI and the PRD. This was

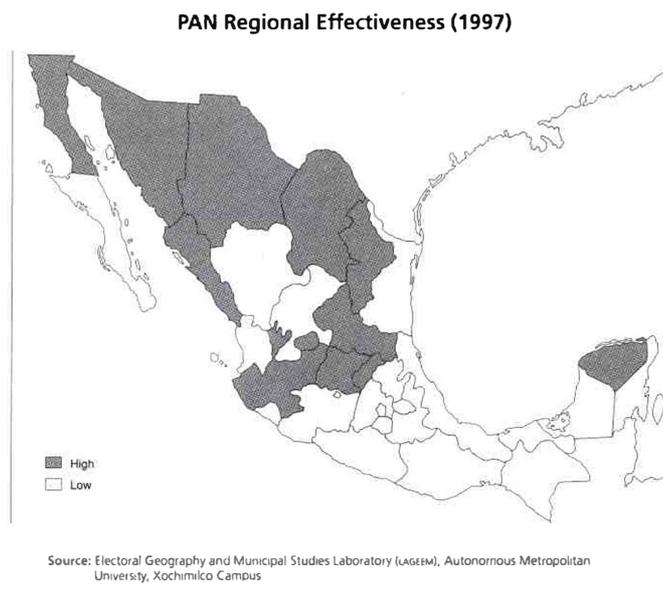
only a generality and today we can make a more precise assessment. It is true that the dispute for the main publicly elected posts looks like this, but different options and results are beginning to emerge.

While the segmented regional concentration of votes in federal elections makes it difficult to eliminate third parties nationally, in local elections, the excessive polarization between two political forces not only excludes third parties, but also makes it necessary to consider that a series of bi-partisan systems are emerging.

On the other hand, recently we have seen elections in which the polarization has fragmented. That is to say, in certain areas of a single state, two parties monopolize the votes while in other areas, two different parties do the same. This is relatively new, but it means that we are dealing here with the germ of plurality in Mexico, a plurality which is beginning to take root in some parts of the country.

The state always had less of a presence, with fewer governmental companies and corporativist organizations in northern Mexico, less populated and far from Mexico City, the symbolic political center. In this sense, the region's economic development rested more on the forces of private enterprise than on government investment and therefore there was more of a tendency to vote for the PAN, a party which has always questioned exaggerated state participation in the economy.

Most public companies were located in the south and development has been prompted with vast state participation so that, when the state presence diminished and corporativist controls began to erode, it was left forces, particularly the PRD, which attracted opposition voters. The PRD puts forward the need for the state to continue to take on



basic commitments for sustaining development, as well as for creating institutional mechanisms required for improving the distribution of wealth.

The 1997 federal elections showed us that the PAN still basically represented the opposition in the north, while in the south it focused around the PRD. Maps of opposition parties' regional effectiveness show that the PAN concentrates its greatest strength in the northern and central parts of Mexico, while

the PRD converges on the central and southern parts of the country.³ This trend, however, has been broken by the PRD in two northern states, Sonora and Tamaulipas, where it obtained positive results. Simultaneously, in Yucatán, in southeast Mexico, the PAN has also been highly competitive.

It is very relevant that in central western Mexico, the government party is broadly and roundly rejected. The significance of this region, where the PRI's effectiveness is below its national average, is that it represents 40 percent of the national population. Some of the opposition's most important support and loyalties come from this area, where it has an electorate closely identified with its ideals. Several other states are governed by the opposition, and everything seems to indicate an increasing tendency to have an influence on their neighboring states.

What is more, in three states (Zacatecas, Tlaxcala and Baja California Sur) where the PRI had been highly effective and no single opposition party had been able to compete in terms of votes, the PRI lost the gubernatorial races in local elections after 1997. In

these states, the opposition fielded candidates who had split from the PRI and were later able to attract a broad majority of the voters.

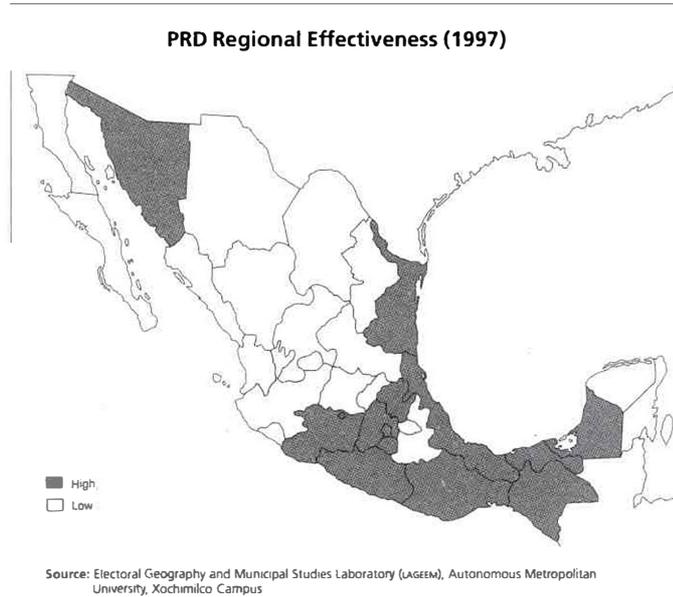
The accumulation of different tendencies makes it possible to suppose that the

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presidential elections of the year 2000 will be hotly contested. Different scenarios may develop, but undoubtedly three possibilities best fit both the electoral situation and the relations among the parties. None of these scenarios can be eliminated out of hand given that the situation in Mexico today is tremendously volatile.

The first scenario is that the three main parties will run independently and there will be an equilibrium of political forces in the different states. This would benefit the PRI since it is the only party that can compete in all the states, while the PAN and the PRD would end up with segmented results.

A second scenario would be that, while the three main parties run independently of each other, one of the two opposition parties would gain strength vis-à-vis the other. In this case, regardless of which is the stronger party, it would beat the official party in the race for the presidency.



A third scenario which cannot be disregarded is that the entire opposition would band together in a coalition. Undoubtedly, it would have to run a candidate who was not linked to either party but who had sufficient political merit to be able to situate himself above both. In this case, there is no doubt who would emerge the victor. ■■■

¹ A political current emerged in 1988 from a split in the PRI that was the basis for the founding of the PRD. Joining with the split were groups and individuals mainly from the left who gathered around the figure of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano [Editor's Note.]

² Outstanding among these politicians are [the late] Dr. Salvador Nava in San Luis Potosí, Adalberto "Baldy" Rosas in Sonora and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Tabasco.

³ High or low effectiveness of a party occurs when in a given state, its percentage of the vote is higher or lower than its national average. In the 1997 election for federal deputies, the PRI obtained 39.11 percent of the vote nationwide, the PAN, 26.61 percent and the PRD, 25.71 percent.