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**THE 1994 MEXICAN  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

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# THE 1994 MEXICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

## Introduction

It is only a few months since the 21 August 1994 election in Mexico, when 77.7% of those eligible attended the polling stations to vote for who should govern their country for the next six years. Electoral results have not yet been fully analysed. We are still waiting for full details on voting patterns, irregularities and financial balance sheets. Therefore, the following remarks should be taken with due reserve. They are intended as preliminary impressions of a series of political events that will surely have important consequences for the future course of Mexico's political development.

The paper is organised into four sections. First a general perspective is given on the electoral and party systems. Secondly the last period of President Salinas's term in office is analysed, and in particular the events of 1994 that so drastically altered the course and expectations of the election. In the third part I turn to the distinctive characteristics of the election. Finally, I offer a preliminary analysis of the results and their political significance.

## The Electoral System and the Role of Elections

Traditionally, elections in Mexico have *not* served the purpose of expressing popular preference about candidates, parties and policies. It is something of a puzzle, therefore, that elections have been regularly held since 1917 and that all presidents<sup>1</sup> and literally thousands of candidates have come to occupy popularly elected posts through a majority or plurality of votes. However, elections have not been superfluous and have served several important purposes without which the stability of the system would have been either impossible or, at least, more difficult to achieve.

In the first place, elections have legitimised choices that are made within a closed circle (Padgett, 1966), thereby sanctioning the periodical renewal of the political elite. Elections have served as a mechanism of elite circulation which contributes to discipline, recruitment and the socialisation of new participants and the continuous renewal of expectations. But elections have also served as a form of plebiscite on the government's legitimacy, and they have provided a democratic façade that sets Mexico apart from other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes. In addition, they have

demonstrated to potential adversaries the government's ability to mobilise support and, more recently, they have proved to be a useful way for the government to inform itself about trends in popular support by sending consent or protest signals to the authorities (Bailey, 1988).

The different roles assigned to elections within the system were performed more or less efficiently for some time. However, a brief review of the development of the electoral and party systems from 1946 onwards will readily show that both systems had to be periodically adapted to face the growing demands of legitimacy, participation and representation.<sup>2</sup> Although until recently reforms did very little to transform elections into an instrument for expressing voters' preferences, they did effectively maintain political competition within the bounds set by the system. The 1946 electoral law defined the main characteristics of the system that was to rule electoral (and party) competition for the decades to come. These included: centralisation of political and electoral processes under the executive; self-validation of candidates; the absence of reliable appeal procedures; the fusion of party and government and indiscriminate transfer of resources from the latter to the former; the coexistence of opposition and 'parastatal' parties;<sup>3</sup> and the systematic manipulation of elections by party and electoral agencies of the executive (Molinar 1991, p. 28). Soon after, the hegemonic party system was established.<sup>4</sup>

The 1946 law placed the whole electoral process under the control of federal agencies; local and regional parties were banned; independent candidates could no longer run for office. In addition, the emergence and development of legal political parties was restricted by an official registry which introduced several constraints on eligibility. The 1946 law (and the modifications made to it in the following years, 1951 and 1954) undermined the possibility of opposition parties attaining substantial shares of power. By 1943 the official party had already secured an absolute majority (92% of votes) in the Chamber of Deputies.

However, political participation through elections was not eliminated. In 1946 eleven parties were granted registration and allowed to participate in elections. Although this number decreased dramatically in the following years,<sup>5</sup> participation was still substantial. From 1946 until 1952 the electorate was presented with two or more options in most electoral districts (Molinar 1991, p. 41)

Control over the registration of parties allowed the government to regulate the number and type of parties admitted in the electoral processes. Since the most important electoral challenge came from members of the revolutionary coalition who threatened to defect from the official party when it failed to be nominated, this authority, together with fraud, proved to be a particularly useful instrument in blocking electoral defections. Having eliminated what

has been termed the 'revolutionary electoral opposition', the only challenge that governments had to face came from the extra-revolutionary coalition. This was not dangerous, but served the purpose of presenting options and maintaining a democratic façade.

In this period of Mexican history (1940-1960) parties could not effectively confront the state. Defections were crushed and extra-revolutionary opposition would have to wait many years before it could make headway. Only with the growth and greater complexity of society could the extra-revolutionary opposition advance.

Political pluralism was excluded through the combination of tight legislation, fraud and discipline. These mechanisms proved effective in the consolidation of a hegemonic party system, but they gave way to problems of representation and credibility. A system that could produce permanent majorities of over 90% of members of Congress for the same party over a period of some 20 years could not maintain its democratic façade. The need to tackle this problem was soon perceived, and reforms followed. This time it was electoral rather than party regulations that were reformed.

No more parties were admitted to the electoral arena,<sup>6</sup> but the existing ones were promoted through the introduction of a form of proportional representation in the chamber of deputies. The main motivation behind this 1963 electoral reform was to lend some credibility to the electoral process and to persuade opposition parties not to engage in behaviour that could threaten the system. In the short run the electoral reforms were successful. Parties not only abandoned anti-system tactics, but helped to legitimise the regime electorally by giving their support to reform and by increasing their participation in the political process.

The reforms also produced other consequences. Parties now had an incentive to grow and diversify geographically and their efforts were rewarded by an increasing number of seats in the chamber of deputies.<sup>7</sup> However, the advances brought about by more active participation by parties and by the increased proportion of votes for opposition parties were soon neutralised by an electoral system that over-represented the official party and under-represented the opposition (Molinar 1991, p. 83). The development and growth of parties therefore led to demands for larger quotas of power. These demands were accompanied by a request to reopen the electoral field to other forces (especially of the left) that were willing to participate if they could be found a place in the party system.

In fact, the political elite responded relatively quickly to these demands. Several factors were responsible. The 1970s opened with a crisis of legitimacy caused by the authoritarian response to the student protests of 1968; economic growth had also slowed; and a series of destabilising

movements appeared;<sup>8</sup> finally, for the first time, the 1976 presidential election failed to produce any candidate apart from the PRI contender.

Political reform took place in 1978, but it fell short of the expectations of some political parties. It has nonetheless been regarded as the starting point for Mexico's political opening or liberalisation. The many political and technical changes that it introduced cannot be reviewed here,<sup>9</sup> but it is important to note that it tackled one of the most pressing problems, that of representation. On the one hand, the new law opened up the 'book of registers' to new parties and lowered standards for registration. On the other, it made it possible to obtain larger numbers of seats in the lower chamber of Congress. However, and this was the main charge against the limited character of the reform, it did not reduce the absolute control that the executive had over the whole electoral process; this included not only the organisational aspects of elections, but also the counting of votes.<sup>10</sup>

The 1978 political reform was introduced as a means of expanding and stimulating political participation through elections without relinquishing governmental control over them, and in that sense it can be counted a success.<sup>11</sup> The demand for greater representation without loss of control was successful.<sup>12</sup> However, if we were to judge the results by electoral support and legitimacy the reform did not fare so well. The decade that followed was full of electoral controversies, charges of abuse, corruption and fraud, and it witnessed the electoral decline of the PRI. The original idea of maintaining full control of the electoral processes and an absolute hegemony of the official party in a land populated by political parties that were seeking and winning support proved difficult.

The legal framework that regulated politico-electoral matters after 1978 served its purpose but, by increasing participation and competition, it fostered further demands that it could not meet. Moreover, the combination of a number of factors, ranging from the strengthening of parties, the disaffection of growing sectors of the population, and international responses to the 1988 presidential elections, posed the most serious threat to the survival of the system that had been consolidated in the 1940s.

Until the 1980s, opposition parties participated in the reproduction of the system or, at least, did not pose any serious challenge. But the conditions for electoral reproduction of the hegemonic party system were seriously undermined during that decade. Such reproduction rested on several conditions that by the end of the 1980s were being questioned.

Control over the electoral process was faltering. Although during the 1980s (and until the reforms introduced in May 1994) the government still had a firm grip over the institutions in charge of conducting electoral matters and it still held enough resources to force its own solutions, the exercise of such

control and the deployment of such resources were increasingly costly. Parties had grown in size and resources – partly as a result of previous reforms, partly out of electoral support that was more anti-PRI than pro-anything – and could afford different strategies with greater chances of success.

Finally, electoral support for the PRI has traditionally come from segments of the population associated with low educational levels, agricultural occupation and rural dwelling. However, while in 1960 only one fifth of the population lived in cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants, by 1988 more than half of the population did.<sup>13</sup>

To all these developments, electorally damaging to the PRI, must be added other factors that further contributed to the weakening of the system: lack of consensus among the political elite, poor economic performance and an international context that not only favoured democracy, but that was also characterised by a significant number of regimes undergoing democratic transition.

Electoral processes during the last three years of De La Madrid's term in office (1982-88) were questioned in terms of their legitimacy. Victories for the opposition were seldom recognised and fraud and other unlawful methods were widely used. By 1988 a realignment in the party spectrum had taken place. The official party underwent a split in its ranks that proved to be irreversible, while the number and type of parties remained roughly the same as in 1982 (three to the left of the PRI, two to its right and the three traditional parastatal parties). However, the three parastatal parties decided not to align themselves with the PRI and, instead, offered their support to the defectors from the ruling official party.<sup>14</sup> In addition, two of the three left parties also supported the presidential candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who emerged from the PRI split. Finally, most parties (right and left) followed a common strategy of denouncing unlawful practices, defending the vote and threatening civil disobedience.

It was the electorate that gave the final blow to the hegemonic party system, however. After the 1988 presidential and congressional elections it was no longer possible to speak of a hegemonic party system, although most of the rules that gave birth to it and then permitted its consolidation were still in place. The proportion of votes secured by the opposition was large enough and sufficiently diversified to break the monopoly held by the hegemonic party.

Although the collapse of the system was avoided and chaos did not follow, the consequences of the 1988 election can hardly be overestimated. The lessons that opposition leaders and voters drew from the electoral results were of the utmost importance. Voters learned that, in spite of fraud, their

preferences could be made to count and that there were alternatives to the established system. In other words, they learned that a vote for the opposition might not, after all, be a wasted vote. In truth, opposition parties learned the value of building alliances and saw, for the first time, the possibility of defeating the ruling party.

Perhaps more important were the lessons that *priistas* and government had to learn: corporate sectors were no longer reliable as vote deliverers, discipline could no longer be sustained with the same methods, the opposition could not be articulated at the government's will, leaders and members of the opposition would have to be accepted as peers in the political processes, and, equally important, being nominated by the PRI did not automatically lead to office.

Two further consequences of the electoral results must be added. On the one hand, the ruling party lost the majority needed to alter the Constitution and was therefore not only forced to try to keep a tight discipline among its own deputies, but also to forge alliances with other parties. On the other, the 1988 official electoral results<sup>15</sup> giving a majority to the PRI presidential candidate were questioned by politically-minded citizens and by most opposition parties.

This situation provided the opposition with some advantages that it was ready to exploit. Although the Cárdenas coalition emerged as the clear second electoral force, most gains were in fact for the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). This was due to two factors: first, the government made the destruction of the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), formed by Cárdenas after the 1988 elections, a major political objective; and secondly the strategy chosen by the PRD of not recognising the validity of presidential elections, denouncing the illegitimacy of Salinas's government and refusing to 'cooperate' or even enter into negotiations of any kind with it, did not find favour with the electorate.

In contrast, the strategy pursued by the PAN was based on the acceptance of the conclusive fact that Salinas was to be president for the coming term. The party knew, however, that its assets had grown and that its collaboration was to be invaluable in the legislative arena, as well as being a countervailing force to the enormous electoral strength shown in favour of Cárdenas.

The claim is not that the PRD was behaving in a way that damaged the reproduction of the system while the PAN worked in the opposite direction. In fact, both parties made it difficult for the system to be reproduced along the same lines as it had done before. The growth of the electoral support for the PAN and the PRD had already undermined the possibility that the executive could continue to distribute political rents in the way, to the extent and with the degree of certainty that it had done before. Discipline could not



easily be obtained through this reward system, since the political careers of deputies could not be guaranteed in a system that no longer controlled the resources. After all, a competitive system offers chances of mobility that are not necessarily linked to the governing elite. These new political conditions diminished the actual political power of the President.

Finally, the strengthening of the party system and the electoral gains by the opposition complicated the maintenance of legislation that patently favoured the official party both in the electoral institutional arrangements and in the rules that regulated elections. Reforms that further levelled the electoral playing-field were to follow.

### **The Recent Context**

Salinas's rise to the presidency in 1988 was the most controversial in the whole post-revolutionary period. Not only were the results of the election widely questioned, but they were also exceptional by comparison with any previous election. Salinas officially received 48.7% of the total of votes (50.7% if one does not take into account the annulled votes), the smallest percentage a presidential candidate had ever received. He lost the presidential race in the capital city as well as in four other states (Estado de México, Michoacán, Morelos and Baja California). While in the period from 1946 to 1985 the government party had lost altogether 72 seats, which represented 2.6% of the total number of single seat districts in the whole period, in 1988 Salinas's party lost 66 majority seats, 22% of the single seat districts. Finally, it must be mentioned that of the 350 seats (70% of seats in Congress) that the majority party could have won, it secured only 260. This meant that for the first time the party did not, by itself, have the required majority in order to alter the Constitution (Molinar, 1991).

The newly elected president was therefore obliged to govern not only with the smallest electoral majority in Mexican history, but also under the charge of having come to power through fraud. But, as mentioned above, collapse of the system did not ensue. In spite of this initial weakness Salinas proved to be one of the most powerful presidents and he was able to push forward his project of state reform with little hindrance.

Although a substantial political reform was expected, what in fact occurred was a great leap in the economic restructuring of the country and a strengthening of presidentialism. This is not the place to review Salinas's performance, but it is noteworthy that in the 1991 mid-term elections the PRI captured 320 of the 500 seats in a contest in which voter turnout increased to 65.3% as against 50% in the 1988 election. In fact, the PRI won 61% of the vote nationwide and surveys reported that over 60% of the population

approved of Salinas's performance. Somehow the Mexican elite had managed a radical transformation of the economy, albeit with very high social costs, while simultaneously maintaining political stability and retaining the basic authoritarian traits of the political system.

Although it is true that economic reform was given priority, some progress was still achieved in the political field. Before 1994, two electoral reforms were implemented. The legislation passed in July 1990 created the semi-autonomous Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) as well as the Federal Electoral Tribunal with 17 magistrates to deal with electoral complaints. Several provisions to reduce the chances of fraud were introduced (e.g. voter registration cards with photographs, new protection for assuring secret balloting, new lists of registered voters). In 1993 the governability clause, whereby the party obtaining 35% of the national vote in deputy elections gained a majority in the chamber of deputies, was eliminated. A new rule was introduced disallowing any one party from obtaining more than 315 seats in that chamber, rendering it impossible for any party to amend the Constitution without engaging in coalition building (the majority needed is 325 deputies). Additionally, the number of Senate seats per state increased from two to four, making it easier for one of them to be won by the runner-up party. In this manner the opposition was assured of 25% of seats (32 out of 128). Spending limits, as well as mechanisms to monitor compliance, were set up. A mild reform to the media completed the reforms of 1990 to 1993.

Notwithstanding the importance of these reforms, they did not appear as a sufficient guarantee of a cleaner and fairer electoral competition. They also suffered from a lack of legitimacy, since they were passed without the vote of the PRD. But the real problem regarding elections was linked to the increasing reliance on extra-legal solutions. Electoral legality and legitimacy during Salinas's term were badly damaged by the way his administration handled contested elections and post-electoral challenges. There were indeed some improvements in the way elections were conducted, and opposition victories were occasionally recognised. However, in cases where an apparent PRI victory was followed by widespread allegations of fraud and protest, PRI candidates were replaced by interim or provisional governors after closed-door negotiations between the executive and opposition party leaders. Apart from the expected frustration these negotiations caused among local PRI representatives, they no doubt contributed to the lack of confidence in elections as a means of expressing voters' preferences and attaining office. The lesson to be learnt was that elections need not be won, but instead could be negotiated with the executive. It was in this context that the three major parties selected their candidates to run for the presidency in 1994 and designed their campaigns.

The 1994 elections were dominated by three main threats, by great efforts to increase the credibility of elections and at the same time by a widespread disbelief in the fairness of the process. The first threat concerned the possibility of violence arising from a sequence of events starting with the Chiapas uprising in January 1994 and the assassination in March of the PRI's first presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, the kidnappings of businessmen, the increase in drug-traffic activities, and the perception of greater public insecurity. The second threat came from within the PRI, where fears of a new schism were generated by what was judged an ambivalent position in Salinas's backing of Colosio and, later on, by the process that led to the nomination of Ernesto Zedillo as the PRI presidential candidate. The third threat arose from the possibility that the PRD might withdraw its support from the negotiating efforts and even make an alliance with the Zapatista movement. In the end none of these threats materialised, but they all served to provide impetus to a political reform that has been judged by most analysts as the most important since 1978.

On 1 January 1994 the political prospects were totally altered by the Chiapas uprising. Neither parties nor government were sure of the extent of this threat nor of the likely development of the conflict. However, it soon became clear that it had a direct and beneficial effect on the development of the electoral process. On 27 January all parties except the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) signed an agreement that led to an important set of reforms. Apart from its content, the relevance of the 1994 reforms springs from the fact that they were initially set out by the opposition parties and were the first to receive the backing of all three major parties.

Regarding the reforms, the composition of the IFE's General Council – the supreme decision-making body – was changed to give control to citizen councillors without party affiliation. With the new composition, the General Council has 11 voting members: the chairman (who is the Minister of the Interior), six citizens nominated by political parties and approved by a two-thirds vote of the chamber of deputies, and two members each from the senate and the house of representatives (one for the majority party and the other from the first minority party). Thus, for the first time the supreme electoral body is not controlled either by the majority party or the government. The same scheme was to be reproduced for the state and district levels (IFE's 32 state councils and 300 district councils) where out of seven votes six belong to citizens with no party affiliation.

Some other measures were introduced to ensure fair competition: acceptance of domestic and international observers; the establishment of an electoral prosecutor's office; modification of the criminal code to specify electoral crimes; external audit of the voter registry; increase in the official television and radio time; the end of self-validation of elections; televised debates; precinct level officials chosen by random lottery; numbered ballots

and the commitment to hand in preliminary results on the night of the election.

The importance of these reforms and the process of negotiation between government and the major parties cannot be overemphasised. Nonetheless serious doubts about the free and clean character of the elections remained. As late as June 1994 half of the population did not believe that the elections would be fair. The explanation for such disbelief probably lies in 65 years of fraud and unlawful practices, of broken promises and permanent arbitrariness.

### **The 1994 Elections**

The election of 21 August 1994 was unique by whatever standards we want to judge it. Many untried rules and practices were adopted and so many extraordinary events surrounded this election that no one was sure what to expect. Also, apart from the context in which they took place, several other issues contribute to the uniqueness of the 1994 elections.

On the procedural side the following deserve mention:

- the high degree of competitiveness
- the changing of electoral rules in the middle of the campaign
- the largest voter registration
- the most closely monitored elections
- the largest number of election officials
- the greatest media coverage
- the first to have foreign observers.<sup>16</sup>

Another exceptional feature was the expectations it generated, in terms of what direct participants and society at large believed to be at stake. For many, the fate of the country was to be decided on 21 August. The elections would be the proof of whether Mexico could advance peacefully to a genuine democratic outcome. They would also serve to assess the extent to which the polity had become institutionalised. Despite the fact that nearly half of the population had doubts about the clean character of the election, there was a sense that an alternation in power could be brought about through the expression of preferences in the ballot box. This belief was shared by the

three major political parties and society at large. However, paradoxically, the credibility issue was the one that dominated the electoral process.

To the extent that all political parties and their candidates decided to work within the legal framework that the government and they had set up, the legitimacy of the process was secured. But at the same time, two of the three major parties did not believe that such a framework could guarantee a fair election and this situation undermined the credibility of the elections.

With regard to the presidential electoral campaigns, these were not unusual in their methods if we compare them with previous ones – except for a much publicised television debate among the three main candidates.<sup>17</sup> Novelties could be found elsewhere, however. Public discussion was centred far more on the way elections were to be conducted than on policy proposals, which played a subordinate role in public discussion. This could be explained by the fact that what was at stake was not who would govern. The issue in this election was much more how to attain power than how to exercise it or what to do with it.

Another novelty of the 1994 election was the polls. Public discussion gave an unusual attention to opinion polls, and yet there was a tendency to disbelieve their results. From June, and until the last polls of August, a clear first place was given to the PRI candidate and, apart from MORI's results, all of them were consistent in giving the PRI between 41 and 52%, the PAN between 18 and 29% and the PRD between 8% and 11%. In these polls the percentage of people that did not declare their preferences, or expressed indecision, ranged between 18 and 25%. (See Table 1.)

Nevertheless, as has already been mentioned, polls tended to be disbelieved by parties and public opinion in general. On the one hand, it was argued that people lied about their preferences, especially those inclined towards the opposition. On the other, it was believed that all those who manifested indecision were going to vote for one of the opposition parties. Finally, it was held that reduced abstentionism was going to damage the vote for the PRI.

Enthusiasm for polls gave way to another novelty in the 1994 election, that of sketching possible scenarios for different electoral results. But this leads us to what, in my opinion, really constituted the exceptional character of the 1994 election. What made this election different – even before it took place – was the uncertainty it generated. Uncertainty in this case was not so much about the results, but rather about whether all participants would agree to play right to the end within the framework that had been designed and, as the election day approached, about whether the major participants – including the government – would accept the results of the election.

**Table 1**

OPINION POLLS Voting Preference % (June, July, August 1994)					
Name of Poll	PRI	PAN	PRD	OTHERS	Undecided
<b>JUNE</b>					
Covarrubias	41	21	8	2	28
Reforma	41	29	9	3	18
GEOP	44	24	11	7	14
EPI	52	29	8	3	8
<b>JULY</b>					
Covarrubias	47	17	8	3	25
Reforma	46	18	9	2	25
Belden	46	19	9	8	18
<b>AUGUST</b>					
MORI	38	22	11	5	24
IndermecHarris	44	19	11	4	22
GEOP	42	24	11	5	19

Regarding the first element of uncertainty, there was a constant fear that one of the major parties would defect. The second aspect of uncertainty grew in importance as the election approached and gave way to the analysis of different scenarios based on the expected behaviour of parties in relation to alternative results.

The uncertainty that characterised the election is, I believe, very revealing about how much Mexico has advanced along the road to democracy. This conclusion is further reinforced by the fact that, while in established democracies the electoral issues centre around the alternative offers that parties have to make, in the Mexican case this was not a very significant issue in spite of the fact that each of the three major parties are supposed to hold different views on the way the country should be governed. The parties and public opinion were both far more worried about the procedural aspects of the election than about the policy offers that the citizens were receiving. In the same manner, citizens were far more interested in stability than in what candidates were offering by way of policy proposals.

Table 2

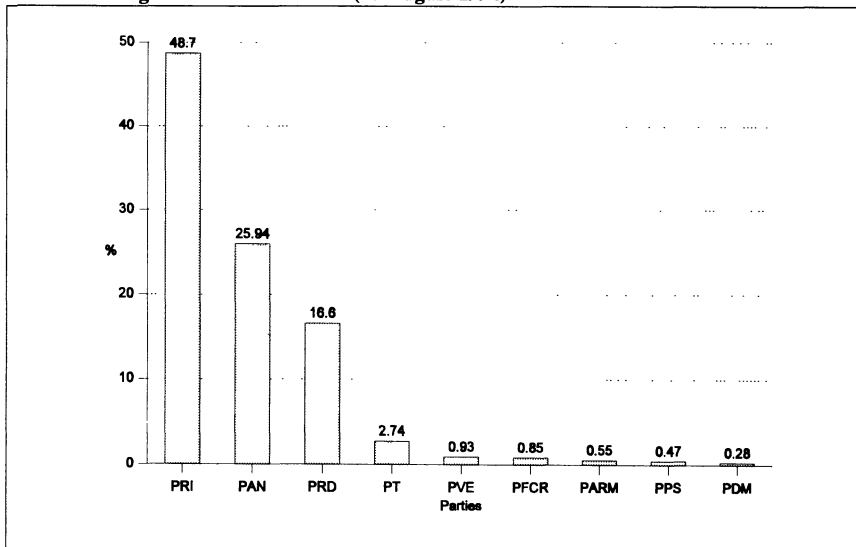
**EXIT POLLS AND QUICK-COUNTING**  
% of votes

Name of Poll	PRI	PAN	PRD	OTHERS
ALIANZA CIVICA	47.8	27.7	15.2	3.3
COPARMEX	49.1	27.9	13.7	5.5
CNIRT	50.0	27.0	16.0	1.5
CNAOE	50.4	26.6	17.6	-
CDSE	50.3	26.6	17.1	6.0
ONOEM	50.2	26.8	17.0	6.0
REFORMA	49.7	29.7	14.7	5.9

Election day, 21 August, came as a surprise for two main reasons: its peaceful character and the great number of voters who turned out. Results from authorised quick-counting methods or exit polls (see Table 2) – came three hours after polling stations were closed and gave a clear victory to Zedillo with around 50% of votes.

As had been previously agreed, the IFE released results of the presidential race when 15% of the voting had been counted. This gave the result as 47.1% for the PRI, 31.3% for the PAN and 15.5% for the PRD.

**Figure 1**  
IFE's Counting of Presidential Votes (28 August 1994)



Thereafter results did not change substantially. The final results, given seven days after the election were (see Figure 1):

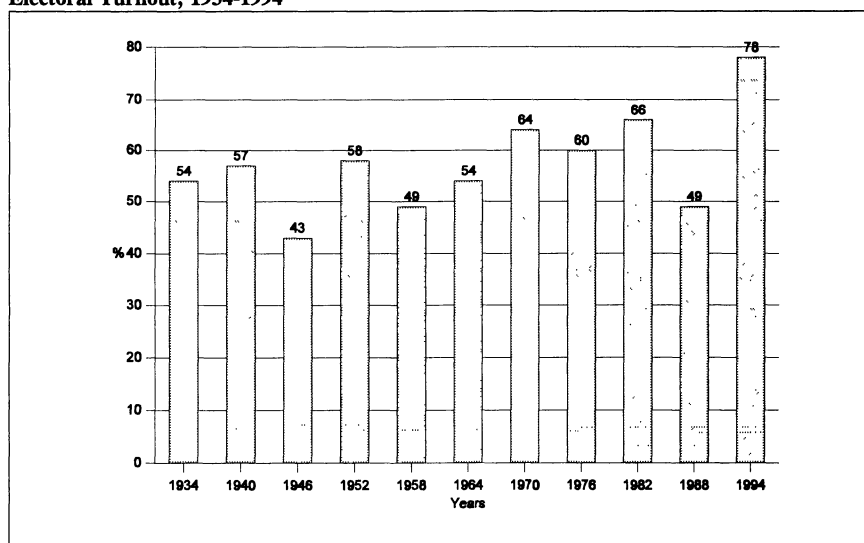
PRI 48.7% with 17,336,325 votes

PAN 25.9% with 9,222,899 votes

PRD 16.6% with 5,901,557 votes

The total number of votes cast was 35,550,283, amounting to 77.74% of voter turnout, the highest in Mexico's history (Figure 2). Apart from these general results, the following figures are worth highlighting: the PRI won every state including the capital city; while the national average for Zedillo was 48.7%, his vote in predominantly rural districts was 60%; a greater proportion of young people (54%) than of adults (38%) voted PRI; Zedillo received 7 million more votes than Salinas did in 1988; Diego Fernández de Cevallos, the PAN candidate, received 5.5 million more votes than his counterpart in 1988; the PAN was unable to win in the states under its control;<sup>18</sup> and the PRD was unable to retain its majority in any of the states it won in 1988.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Electoral Turnout, 1934-1994**



For Congressional elections the figures are given in Table 3. Although the results of pre-electoral polls came close to actual voting figures, these nevertheless came as a surprise. I have already mentioned the two main reasons underlying widespread disbelief in the polls. Both the PAN and the PRD thought that they were going to fare better in Congressional elections



because of the expectation of cross-voting or split tickets: that is, there was an expectation that people would vote PRI for president, but they would balance this by voting for opposition parties in Congress. This did not happen.

Table 3

CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES 1994 ELECTION				
SEATS	TOTAL	MAJORITY	PROPORTIONAL <sup>b</sup>	%
PRI	300	277	23	60
PAN	119	18	101	23.8
PRD	71	5	66	14.2
PT <sup>a</sup>	10	-	10	2.0
TOTAL	500	300	200	100.0

<sup>a</sup> Partido de Trabajadores

<sup>b</sup> 40% of seats are allocated according to a system of proportional representation: the rest are allocated on the basis of the candidate with the largest number of votes.

SENATE 1994 ELECTION		
PARTY	SEATS	%
PRI	64	66.6
PAN	24	25.1
PRD	8	8.3
TOTAL	96	100.0

The 21 August election was not exemplary if the whole process is judged by international standards. However, significant fraud has been discounted; that is, fraud that would substantially alter the results. Even in the very unlikely case, for example, that the PRD was right and there were 8 million voters missing from the voting lists and all of them voted for Cárdenas, Zedillo would still have won.

Fraud discounted, the only valid criticism we are left with is that the elections were not fair for one single, true and powerful reason: the symbiotic relation between the PRI and government precludes the possibility of fair elections and seriously reduces the opportunity for opposition parties to win. If the election was clean in the sense that electoral authorities were neutral and votes were duly counted, the conditions of the competition were not fair. Structural fraud persisted.

The two main opposition parties accepted their defeat and the majority of the population seems to be convinced that the elections were clean. Post-election polls revealed that only 24% of the population did not believe the elections were clean as against 61% that did and 15% that did not have an opinion. The claim that post-electoral behaviour would be destabilising proved false. All parties agreed to play within the rules and it was within this agreed framework that the opposition was defeated. The electoral results were not as close as some expected. Zedillo clearly won in the polling booths.

There must be an explanation for this, and different types of argument can be brought into the analysis. The first is that Zedillo won because of the unequal conditions. These are manifest in very many ways, from economic resources to coverage in the media. However, they all tend to recognise one single source: the close relation between the PRI and government. This leads to what has been called the vicious circle of Mexican politics: there seems to be no way of separating PRI and government while the PRI keeps winning; and the chances of the PRI being defeated seem low as long as the PRI maintains its marriage to government (Castañeda, 1994). There is, however, one flaw in this argument. Conditions for electoral competition in 1988 were far more adverse than they are today and yet the left opposition came close to winning that year.

This leads us to the second type of argument. Why did the PAN and the PRD fail to attract more voters? They both made miscalculated assumptions about the degree of discontent that would be prevalent among the population after a costly restructuring economic programme, after years of abuse and corruption, after arbitrary decisions, after living with an unlawful state. Yet perceptions, or perhaps their translation into political behaviour, were simply wrong.

The PAN in fact exceeded what most analysts had hitherto considered the limit of possible votes that a conservative party in Mexico could secure. An analysis of PAN votes shows that this party draws most of its votes from urban, prosperous and educated voters. The PAN could not (maybe it did not even try to) penetrate other segments of the population, notably in rural areas. Must we then wait until Mexico becomes more modernised, rich and educated to see a PAN victory?

The supposed failure of the PRD – it did, actually, double its percentage of votes in comparison to 1991 – can be analysed in a much more straightforward way: Cárdenas, the PRD presidential candidate, had much too radical a discourse. In a context dominated by the fear of violence and instability, Cárdenas and his party did not manage sufficiently to separate themselves from non-electoral alternatives. This failure can be attributed as

much to themselves as to the rebels in Chiapas, who openly adopted Cárdenas as their candidate, and to the official party who fuelled this identification.

Apart from the unfairness of the game and the mistakes made by the opposition parties themselves, there is also the argument that what we witnessed was not a massive vote in favour of the PRI and Zedillo but rather a vote of fear. Chiapas and the ensuing violence seems to have favoured a continuist option granting more votes to the PRI than it would have received in peaceful times. As the PAN's president said recently: it was the government's failure that generated the Chiapas insurrection, yet that same government was the one to sow the seeds of fear. It is now impossible to judge what would have happened had violence not appeared on the horizon. The probability is that the PRI's electoral support would have been smaller.

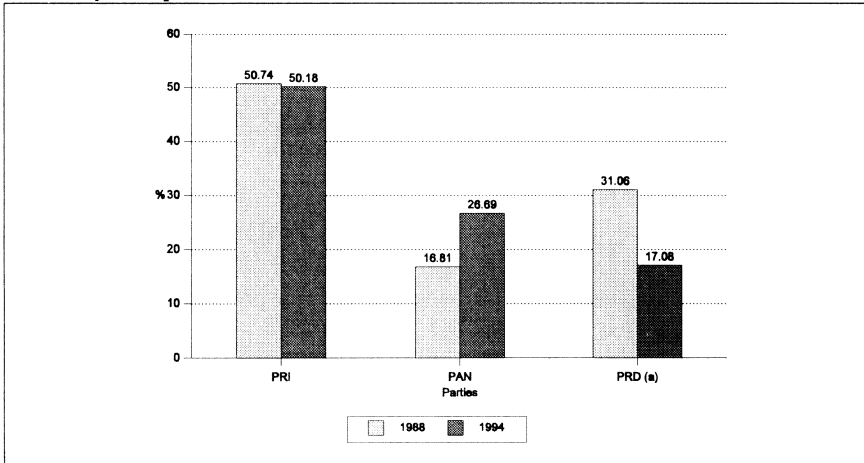
For years the disappearance of the PRI has been predicted with informed opinion insisting that, if a choice was given to the population, it would immediately oust the ruling party. Mexicans remained convinced that their increasingly modern society was no longer prepared to put up with what the government delivered. Recently it has been argued that the PRI's chances had been significantly damaged after the government's policies had inflicted such high social costs on the majority of the population. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the internal problems that the PRI was undergoing seemed to indicate that its chances of achieving a clear-cut victory were seriously reduced. In this view the PRI was so badly hit by Salinas's political style that it was unlikely it could respond to the great electoral challenge it was facing. After all, it has always been said that the PRI is not a party designed to win under competitive conditions (Aguilar Camín, 1994).

According to one exit poll, voters chose the PRI for two main reasons: fear of the unknown and tradition (because they had always voted PRI). They both boil down to the same motivation: the PRI has guaranteed stability for over 70 years, what else should we ask for? Why push our luck? Isn't it rational to stick to those that have governed us instead of turning to inexperienced politicians to run our public affairs? What Mexicans may need to learn is that it is far easier to introduce changes in formal institutions than to transform embedded habits and routines. Power breeds power.

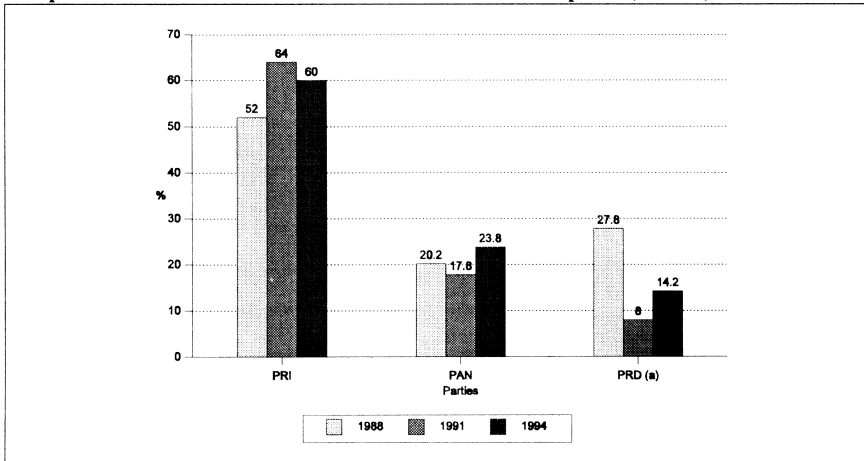
No matter what argument we use to explain the PRI's victory, the fact remains that this party is the option chosen by more than 17 million voters, half of the population that decided to express their preferences on 21 August 1994. But it is also true that the other half of the electorate voted against the PRI or in favour of the other two main options. The election results might not have been what non-*priistas* desired, but neither were they disastrous to the opposition, as some *priistas* might have wished.

What can we then make of the electoral results and what are the probable consequences? The figures can be considered in different ways. On the side of the PRI we could say that, given the conditions, it did very well. But we could also argue that it merely maintained its share of the vote in comparison to 1988 – or even saw it reduced by a significant 13%, if our benchmark is 1991. In contrast, the PAN almost doubled its vote and in absolute terms received as many votes as Salinas did in 1988. The PRD’s numbers dropped, compared to 1988, but it doubled its percentage of votes compared to 1991 (Figures 3 and 4).

**Figure 3**  
**Presidency: Comparative Electoral Results 1988-1994**



**Figure 4**  
**Comparative Electoral Results 1988-1994 Chamber of Deputies (% seats)**



<sup>a</sup> The name ‘PRD’ is used in 1988 for purposes of comparison, although it had not yet been formally created as a party.

The uniqueness of the 21 August election vanishes when we consider the results other than in terms of voter turnout. In fact, these results bear more resemblance to the pre-1988 situation: the PRI won every single state in the country; of majority senate seats all 64 are for the PRI; out of 300 majority deputy seats 277 are for the PRI; out of 40 majority *asambleístas* 38 are for the PRI. In sum, out of the 404 electoral posts to be decided by the first past the post system, 379, or 93.5%, went to the PRI. The remaining 6.5% is divided between the PAN and the PRD. Without the proportional representation portion of the mixed electoral system (Hinojosa, 1994), party representation would be grossly distorted. The picture is similar if we add the PRI's near monopoly in terms of governors, local authorities and state legislatures.

In spite of changes in the ways elections are conducted, the structure of power remained more or less the same as it always was. With an almost identical percentage of voting between PRI and opposition in 1988 and 1994, the opposition won far fewer seats in the last election. In fact the PRI fell short by only 15 seats of the maximum number of seats allowed for a party.

## Conclusions

It is difficult to draw clear conclusions at such a short distance from the elections and the following are intended only as preliminary thoughts about the possible consequences of the 1994 contest. Elections cannot be judged in themselves, but in relation to the aims being pursued. An assessment of the situation requires making clear the end to which we think elections should contribute. Two parameters can be put forward: stability and governability on the one side, and on the other, democracy.

In terms of democracy, advances can undoubtedly be identified. For a start, participants were able to organise a framework within which all players agreed to play. Moreover, they did so in very adverse conditions. Secondly, the framework was definitely more democratic than any of its predecessors, allowing a more even-handed game. Thirdly, the results have been respected.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Mexico has advanced in three of the conditions that determine a successful transition: agreement of new rules, playing under them and accepting the outcomes. However, we are still far from a fair contest. It is obvious that the competition did not take place among several parties, but among a number of parties and a party supported by the government (Castañeda, 1994) – a government that was ready to furnish it with enormous public resources.

A number of questions arise at this point: what does it take to make fair elections? Was it worth betting everything on a more equitable set of rules? Are rules as important as we think in order to secure a positive result? What

would be required in order to force a separation between party and government? Here the prospects have been less favourable since the chances of separating the PRI from government are greatly reduced in view of the election results, as are those of having a Congress strong enough to check the power of the executive. Similarly, advances towards a reasonable degree of federalism are less likely. All these are as important as procedural rules in the advancement of democracy.

Finally, there is the issue of governability and stability. This question can be tackled from two different perspectives. On the one hand, there is the perception that the PRI had a greater chance than the other parties of maintaining both stability and governability. This view says that Mexico is not yet ready for alternation of power at the national level and that we should continue to advance in gaining governing experience at state and local levels. The second perspective is that the results of the election can lead to instability for the reason that once again they show that there is no way of changing the structure of power through peaceful means. In this perspective an important consequence of the electoral results is that they could discourage political actors from continuing their participation within the institutional framework.

Has Mexico crossed the threshold of democracy? My guess is that it has not done so yet. This is for a single reason. Apart from the undoubted importance of rules, crossing the threshold of democracy implies checks and balances on political power. Up to now Mexico has focused the struggle for democracy on the ways and means of attaining power; the second step is that of checking, of assuring the responsible exercise of political power regardless of who has been favoured by the voters' preference. The conditions for the continued rule of an unbound presidentialism are still present.

However, pessimism should not necessarily prevail. The traditional contempt for democratic procedures and democratic values is withering away. The scorn for the Mexican public (the citizenry), the disdain for Congress and the disregard for legality are attitudes and forms of behaviour that cannot be sustained for much longer. The conditions that fostered them are not with us any more. Democracy seems a likely eventual outcome.

## Notes

1. Two elections - that of 1940 and that of 1988 - have been so severely questioned that doubts remain about whether the official candidates did in fact win the presidential race. In the case of Carlos Salinas in 1988 the impression is that he did win, although not with the percentage of votes attributed to him by the electoral authorities.

2. In this section I borrow extensively from Molinar (1991).

3. Parastatal parties are parties supported by the state for their role both in maintaining the credibility of plurality and competition, but also in fragmenting the party system. They normally back the official presidential candidate as well as his agenda and it is reasonable to believe that without state support they would have little chance of surviving.
4. This has been considered a mixed or hybrid form between single and dominant party systems. Hegemonic parties differ from state parties in that they share the political arena with other legally admitted parties; however, like state parties, they were created not to compete but to govern and, by virtue of their relation to the state, they can guarantee the vast majority of electoral posts (Sartori, 1980 and Crespo, 1994, pp. 51 and 58). On the other hand, they differ from dominant party systems: in these, competitive elections are the rule, alternation of power is not ruled out, electoral laws, processes and results are regularly accepted by most if not all political actors, and the proportion of votes is never as overwhelming as those present in the former (Pempel, 1991 and Crespo 1994, pp. 52-4).
5. Three parties in 1949, five in 1952, four in 1955 and 1958 and five in 1961.
6. By 1964 the party system consisted of four parties (Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) and Partido Auténtico de la Revolución Mexicana (PARM)) and no more registrations were to be allowed until the late 1970s.
7. To illustrate this point it is interesting to note that the principal opposition party (PAN) managed to secure 20 seats in Congress in 1964 while the sum of all seats for PAN in the previous four elections was 22 (Molinar, 1991, p. 66).
8. These included the formation of guerrilla movements, strong and widespread labour dissent, peasant revolts and business community threats.
9. The political reform has been a widely studied phenomenon. Good general accounts can be found in Rodríguez Araujo (1980), González Casanova (1981 and 1985), Molinar (1991) and Craske (1994).
10. Opposition parties viewed the political reform as limited in at least the following respects: no mechanisms against fraud were included, electoral institutions remained centralised and dominated by the executive, and it did not allow for independent candidates or regional parties.
11. Three figures can serve to illustrate that representation and participation expanded greatly as a result of the reform. The average number of parties jumped from four in the 1964-76 period to 8.3 in the 1979-85 period. The average number of candidates presented per electoral district increased from 3.6

to 7.8 for the same periods. While the 1976 presidential election had only one candidate, the 1982 election had seven (Molinar 1991, p. 101).

12. It must be noted that increased participation by opposition parties did not come at the expense of members of the PRI, for the number of seats in Congress was augmented by 100. The same expedient was to be used in 1986 when another 100 seats were added.

13. The rural-urban division and the association of rural electoral support for the PRI is analysed in Molinar (1991, pp. 144-5 and 168-70). Electoral support for the PRI in rural districts was 82% on average in the 1979-1985 period.

14. It is interesting to note that from 1946 up to 1982 all PRI presidential candidates had been backed by at least one of the so-called parastatal parties.

15. There are two different official figures for presidential votes: 50.74% and 48.74%. The first one is calculated after the deduction of annulled votes and those received for unregistered candidates (over 700,000 votes). The second one includes all votes that were officially counted.

16. A good account of the peculiarities of the 1994 election can be found in Grayson (1994). See also Serrano and Harvey (1994).

17. This debate took place on 12 May. Public opinion polls established that the winner in the debate was Diego Fernández de Cevallo, candidate of the PAN, with Cuahtémoc Cárdenas, candidate of the PRD, coming last.

18. During the Salinas administration the PAN won the elections for governor in Baja California and Chihuahua and, through, 'concertación', the governorship of Guanajuato.

19. According to the official results, during the 1988 Presidential election the FDN (Frente Democrático Nacional) won in Mexico City and the states of Baja California, México, Michoacán and Morelos. Although the FDN had replaced the PAN as the second electoral force in several states, by 1989 the newly created PRD managed to maintain second place position in only four of the eight states where elections were held. A similar pattern became evident during the 1991 mid-term federal elections.

20. The main exception is Chiapas, where the PRD has refused to recognise the victory of the PRI in the elections for governor.



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