



At the Polls

Mexican democracy turns the corner

By Warren J. Mitofsky

The 2000 Mexican presidential election saw an honest vote count dethrone the longest ruling government party in modern history. The Institutional Revolutionary Party, known locally as the PRI, had run the government since 1929. Its momentous defeat did not occur without warning. Unlike in the past, the opposition had won nine governor elections during the last three years. In 1997, for the first time, the PRI lost its majority in the lower house of congress, and the opposition left-of-center PRD, Party of the Democratic Revolution, had won Mexico City's first mayoral election. The handwriting was clearly on the wall for all to see.

Altogether, the PRI's command of the vote had been slipping for some time. Still, in 2000, it had counted on big margins from its core constituents, from those living in rural areas, the very poor and the uneducated. It got strong support from those constituencies, but less than it received in 1994. Furthermore, those constituencies now made up a smaller share of the total vote. Rural areas were now only 21% of the country, and the number of poor and under-educated had declined by 10 percentage points each since 1994. The urban

areas, the middle income and those with a high school education or better had grown in size and increased their vote for the opposition. This shift is where the PRI lost the election.

Ironically, it was the success of the government's social and economic programs during the last 12 years that eroded the PRI's key constituencies. Their loss of the presidency, was, in large part, due to the success of their own programs. They put themselves out of office.

Perhaps an even greater irony of the 2000 campaign is that almost no one viewed it in these terms before the election. There were many national polls, and they all showed about the same thing—a close election. Some had the PRI candidate, Francisco Labastida Ochoa, ahead by a few points; others had the winner, Vicente Fox Quesada, the National Action Party (PAN) candidate, ahead. In the end, Fox garnered 44% of the vote, Labastida, 37%. Only one poll showed a Fox lead of such proportions, and that poll was generally dismissed because it was so different from all the other polls.

There has been a lot of backing and filling by pollsters about what went wrong with the polls. The most popular explanation blames the error on voters' reluctance to tell polltakers

Warren J. Mitofsky is president, Mitofsky International.

they would vote for an opposition candidate. I reject that explanation for two reasons. First, voters told exit pollsters on election day for whom they had voted, and those polls were mostly accurate. Response rates for the Mitofsky/Consulta exit polls conducted for the country's largest television network, Televisa, were close to 90%. Also, an experiment conducted in 1994 by Nancy Belden found no evidence that Mexican voters were reluctant to reveal their voting preferences to pollsters.

The explanation I favor is that there was a disproportional division of undecided voters in the pre-election polls. They ended up voting in much bigger numbers for the challenger, Fox, than for the incumbent party candidate, Labastida. This phenomenon, of the undecided favoring the challenger, has been observed frequently in US.

A different theory advanced by an article in the *New York Times* claims there were three pollsters who did predict a margin favoring Fox, but that their polls were effectively suppressed by the PRI and they could not get them published.¹

I would not be at all surprised if the PRI's spin-doctors did try to impede the circulation of these polls. That is precisely what they were paid to do. The same thing happens in the US. I have had Democratic and Republican spin-doctors try to keep CBS News/*New York Times* election polls from being published. Contrary to the *New York Times* claim, though, all the polls cited were published. In fact, more than 80 Mexican election poll results were published in this campaign with the participation of about a dozen different news organizations, three of them American.

During the last three years, media coverage of gubernatorial and congressional elections—including coverage by Mexico's two television networks, which are considered strongly pro-PRI—regularly projected victories without fear or favor for both opposition parties and the government party. The various state electoral commissions, which operate by their own rules, and the Federal Electoral Commission (IFE), certified both PRI and opposition winners, most without incident or question. The climate in the country, in the media, and at the electoral commission was

Table 1

Mexico Ushers in a New Era

	2000 Presidential Vote				1994 Presidential Vote			
	Total	PAN	PRI	PRD	Total	PAN	PRI	PRD
<i>Age</i>								
18-25	25%	49%	32%	15%	27%	32%	47%	17%
26-40	39	47	35	15	41	30	48	18
41-60	28	41	40	17	25	25	54	17
61+	9	33	47	18	7	22	61	14
<i>Education</i>								
Less than high school	61%	39%	42%	17%	71%	25%	55%	165
High school	22	53	28	15	16	37	41	17
College+	17	58	24	14	14	40	36	21
<i>Income</i>								
Low	59%	36%	43%	18%	69%	25%	55%	16%
Middle	31	51	30	15	23	37	41	17
High	10	63	23	11	9	40	36	21
<i>Type of Area</i>								
Urban	68%	50%	32%	15%				
Mixed	11	40	41	17				
Rural	21	26	52	19				

Note: Vote for other parties omitted. PAN = National Action Party; PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party; PRD = Party of the Democratic Revolution.
Source: Exit poll surveys by Mitofsky/Consulta for Televisa, latest that of July 2, 2000.

prepared for the possibility of an opposition victory in the 2000 presidential election.

Nevertheless, the reporting in the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* was anything but sanguine on this possibility. By far, their number one theme was electoral fraud by the PRI. In the three-week period leading up to this year's presidential election most campaign stories in these major US newspapers regularly mentioned the allegation. There were 13 news stories and one editorial in the *Times* during this period, all about the election. In nine of these news stories and the editorial, electoral fraud by the PRI was a prominent theme. Only four stories failed to mention it. *The Washington Post* was more reserved. It had nine news stories and one editorial about Mexico in the three-week period. Two of the nine news stories had nothing to do with the election. Fraud was a theme in four of the other seven.

The most outlandish, if not absurd, accusation was reported in the *New York Times*. It said Jorge Castaneda, a leading intellectual and adviser to Fox, "outlined one fraud possibility: the party might use bribes or other methods to intervene in an election day Televisa exit poll, ...thereby preparing public opinion for a Labastida victory that PRI poll workers would obtain through fraud in subsequent hours in rural precincts."² The reporter never bothered to ask anyone at Mitofsky International or Consulta who knew the location or identity of the polling places, or any other details about the exit poll, before lending the respectability of the *New York Times* to the accusation.

The same newspapers did almost the same thing during the three-week period leading up to the 1994 Mexican presidential election—except that year it was almost obligatory to say that Salinas' win in the 1988 presidential election was stolen for him by the PRI, thereby depriving Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of victory. This theme was repeated like a mantra, over and over again. The PRI were depicted as thugs, drug lords, and corrupt politicians, and were frequently accused of stealing elections, both local and national.

The *New York Times* had 14 stories and one editorial leading up to the 1994 election. Eleven stories and the editorial prominently mentioned electoral fraud by the PRI. The reporters offered such comments as, "Many Mexicans... believe that [Cardenas] won the presidential election in 1988,"³ and made reference to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, "whose own election in 1988 was tainted by reports of massive fraud at the polls...."⁴

So what did happen in 1988? At that time, IFE was not independent as it is today, or even semi-independent as it was in 1994. It was run by the government, which was controlled by the PRI. As best as I can piece the events

together from talking with different sources, here is what I believe took place that year.

“Ironically, it was the success of the government’s social and economic programs during the last 12 years that eroded the PRI’s key constituencies. Their loss of the presidency, was, in large part, due to the success of their own programs.”

Shortly after the last polls closed on election night the early count showed Cardenas ahead. As most observers of Mexican elections know, the early returns come from the largest cities. The cities are where the opposition has its greatest support. The rural vote, where the PRI is strongest, had not yet reported in significant numbers. When officials at IFE saw Cardenas leading in the early tabulation they shut down the computers that were being used for the count, rather than be the bearers of bad news to the President. When the count resumed publicly much later, Salinas was ahead. The official count claimed that he won by about 20 percentage points.

That count was not a fair reflection of the vote. I learned from people who had the 1988 presidential vote by precinct that they added up the returns independently of the electoral commission's count and got a different result. It appears that the vote was manipulated during the tabulation to give Salinas about 6 percentage points more than he won at the polls. Nevertheless, Salinas won the election, not Cardenas. The fraud that occurred pushed Salinas from below 50% to just over 50%. He won the election, but with less than a majority. By coincidence, Salinas' vote in 1988 was the same as that received this year by Vicente Fox.

Clearly, there is a lot of truth to the characterizations of the PRI committing fraud during presidential elections. However, a touch of logic leads me to believe that the stealing of a national vote for president in 1994 or 2000 was impractical, if not impossible. This belief makes me a naïve American here in Mexico. Even so, I heard so much nonsense about electoral fraud by the press and by politicians that I would like to challenge it.

With an honest election commission one cannot steal a national election, certainly not by manipulating voters at the polling place. When 40 million votes are cast on election day, as they were in Mexico on July 2, the arithmetic says one would have to switch the votes of 400,000 voters to change the outcome of the election by one percentage point, of 800,000 to close a two-point gap, and so forth. Bribing voters, threatening them, or using some other means to get more votes in the ballot box for your candidate is not a realistic way to change the outcome of a presidential election. It just cannot happen that way, no matter how many refrigerators are given away or how many welfare recipients are threatened or cajoled.

As indicated by the 1988 experience, stealing a national election would have to take place as the votes from the precincts are tabulated at the district or state level. Vote tabulations are accumulations of thousands of precinct totals. Fudging these tabulations would be the only practical way to manipulate a national vote to change the outcome. Effective fraud would have to happen at a state or regional level, and not at the polling place.

Here is where we run into a logic problem. It is generally believed that IFE is honest and does a good job conducting and monitoring Mexico's national elections. (State and local elections are run by local electoral commissions and are *not* as independent and free from suspicion as is IFE.) In 2000, IFE was an independent, citizen-run organization that had full power over the conduct and tabulation of national elections. It was praised by the US State Department before the presidential election, by the international election observers who came to monitor the process, and by former president, Jimmy Carter, who led his own election monitors.

This is the conflict. If the process is fair and the count is accurate, the only place for fraud is at the precinct level. I say fraud cannot happen at that level in sufficient numbers to change the outcome of a national election. No one has shown me any convincing evidence during the seven years I have been participating in Mexican elections that enough votes can be switched at the precinct level to change the outcome of a national election.

Mexican democracy appears to have turned a corner in the last 12 years. The election commission has done a good job for the two most recent presidential

elections. Post-election editorials and news stories in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* proclaimed the elections this year *and* in 1994 and 1997 as free and fair. Even though the stories this year made it sound as though this was the first time fair national elections took place, it was, in fact, the third national election in which the result was widely accepted as an honest reflection of the will of the people. In addition to the two most recent presidential elections, the mid-term election in 1997 was heralded as free and fair.

Among the electoral changes leading to this outcome is a registration and credential system that makes it almost impossible to vote illegally. There is an independent electoral authority. There are also limits on campaign spending, government financing of elections, monitoring of the time given by the media to each candidate, and laws allowing foreign observers and exit polls.

In addition, exit polls were viewed by President Salinas as an independent verification of the election commission's count of the vote. (He sponsored laws that made exit polls legal for the first time in 1994, when he sought credibility for that election so the United States Congress would approve NAFTA.) In 2000 there were three media-sponsored national exit polls. All came fairly close to the final margin reported by the electoral commission. Ten quick counts, which use actual vote counts in sample precincts, showed margins ranging from 3.2% to 9.0%. The official outcome was a 7% victory margin for Fox.

One final indication that fraud was not a determinant of the 2000 Mexican presidential election was the prompt reporting by Mexican television and radio of the opposition victory, and the appearance of President Zedillo on the air on election night to congratulate the opposition winner and offer his support during the transition. ●

Endnotes

¹*New York Times*, "Mexican Party Reported to Quash Polls Predicting Its Defeat," July 17, 2000.

²*New York Times*, "Clean Vote Vowed in Mexico, but Fraud Dies Hard," June 28, 2000, p. A3.

³*New York Times*, "A Novelty No More, Mexican Leftist is Struggling," August 14, 1994, p. A3.

⁴*Washington Post*, "Election Observers Face Obstacles in Seeking to Monitor Crucial Mexican Vote," August 12, 1994, p. A29.