

THE JULY 2, 2000 MEXICAN ELECTIONS:

A REPORT BY A TEAM OF ACADEMICS FROM SOUTHERN ONTARIO

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SUMMARY:

Mexico's electoral process has undergone significant improvements since 1988. Voter registration, the impartiality of electoral institutions, the vote count, pluralism and choice, and alternation among political parties are all areas of reliability and effectiveness. Nonetheless, this report demonstrates that there is still a substantial urban/rural divide in terms of reliability and effectiveness of elections. Numerous areas still require improvement in order for elections to be truly fair and transparent in Mexico. While the 2000 elections have represented an important advance over previous ones, the transition to a reliable, effective electoral democracy remains to be completed.

INTRODUCTION: OUR MISSION AND REPORT

This report was prepared by Nibaldo Galleguillos, Mark Juhasz, Thomas Legler, Marie-Josée Massicotte, Erin McCaughan, and Jean F. Mayer. We are a group of academics from Southern Ontario who attended the July 2, 2000 Presidential and Congressional elections in Mexico as international visitors (observers) accredited with the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) of Mexico and invited by Alianza Cívica. Marie-Josée Massicotte assisted in the preparation of the report but did not participate as an international visitor. We visited Mexico for ten days and spent the election day in two mountainous zones in the state of Puebla of mainly indigenous and rural communities: the Sierra Norte and the Volcano zone. We would like to thank Alianza Cívica, the IFE, and our hosts from Alianza Cívica- Puebla. The Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) at York University provided valuable administrative support and assistance in obtaining our accreditation. We are also indebted to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for financing a pre-election briefing session and information exchange held in Toronto on June 23 as well as the Canadian Embassy in Mexico for their support. Our gratitude also extends to the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) for the

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since 1977, and especially during the 1990s, numerous electoral reforms were undertaken in Mexico. They have facilitated the development of political pluralism as well as improved the conditions conducive to free and fair elections. One of the greatest accomplishments has been the creation of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). Born originally as an extension of the Ministry of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación), it became fully autonomous in 1996. The IFE has been responsible for the creation of a national voters registry and fool proof voters' cards, the development of a voters' list with pictures, the development of national civic education programs, better media access, as well as ensuring federal funding for political parties and administering the entire electoral process. The IFE's role in promoting free and fair elections has been widely recognized. Most Mexicans today believe that elections are an important mechanism for democratic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In spite of these significant improvements there are still important deficiencies that have been highlighted by credible organizations, such as Alianza Cívica, the National Democratic Institute, the Mexico Working Group (John Foster & Meyer Brownstone), as well as the IFE itself. In addition, based on our own observations, our own concerns are:

1. *Vote buying and coercion.* Payments from social assistance programs such as PROGRESA and PROCAMPO have been tied to recipients' support for the PRI. As an indication of the government's role in vote buying and coercion, the special commission of the Chamber of Deputies against diversion of public funds for electoral purposes received 145 documented denunciations of alleged misuse of public monies. An Alianza Cívica survey also corroborated the practice of pre-electoral coercive practices on public employees, obliging them to participate in PRI campaign events. Furthermore, in these particular elections, approximately 25,000 teachers served as elections observers. There were many allegations that these teachers used their authority to intimidate parents into supporting the PRI.
2. *Access to media.* The analysis of the IFE and Alianza Cívica indicated imbalance in national media coverage of the different political parties. The privately owned media has continued to deny equal access and

objective coverage for all political parties. Despite the meetings of IFE with private media to resolve this problem, it persists.

3. *Use of public resources for partisan purposes.* The traditional practice of using government public works in support of the electoral campaigns of the ruling political parties continues.
4. *A climate of confusion and disorder in many rural voting stations.* The inadequate training of *casilla* (voting station) officials and the poor level of basic literacy in many indigenous and/or rural communities contributed to a situation of confusion, disorder and numerous procedural irregularities.

We therefore recommend:

1. Legislation must be enacted in order to provide the IFE with the legal mechanisms to ensure equal access to the media for all political parties, ideas and opinions.
2. Current civic and political education programs, such as the ones undertaken by IFE and Alianza Cívica, must be extended and amplified in rural and/or indigenous communities where this type of training is particularly lacking.
3. Consolidating electoral democracy in Mexico will require that greater efforts be made to ensure that basic education reaches rural and/or indigenous communities.
4. Every effort should be made to bridge the communication gap between indigenous languages and the current IFE training programs that are predominantly in Spanish.

OUR OBSERVATIONS ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN PUEBLA

In coordination with Alianza Cívica, our team of international visitors travelled to the state of Puebla to observe the elections. We separated in order to cover two mountainous, indigenous zones within the state: the Sierra Norte and the Volcano Zone.

Sierra Norte

Three of us visited two polling stations, No. 2438 Básica and No. 2438 Contigua, located at the Centro de Educación Inicial Indígena Tahitic in the Community of the same name. Each *casilla* had 471 voters registered. This community was

comprised of Nahuatl-speaking indigenous people. We arrived at 8:00 AM along with the IFE representative as well as party representatives. The *casillas* could not open at 8:00 AM as stipulated by electoral law because of organizational problems. Verifying that the number of ballots corresponded to the number of voters was a difficult task for the *casilla* officials. Despite the legal limit of two political party representatives, the PRI had two official representatives in each *casilla*, plus other representatives in and around the *casilla*. They were all coordinated by another PRI official whose role included supervising PRI representatives in five other *casillas* in other communities. This person claimed to be part of Antorcha Campesina, a hard line faction of the Mexican Peasant Confederation, itself a PRI sector. There was one representative from PAN, while other parties were not represented. Voters coming to the *casilla* could see a Labastida banner on a hill overlooking the *casilla*.

Throughout the day there was a general lack of understanding regarding the voting process, both on the part of *casilla* officials and the voters at large. There was little secrecy of the vote in the majority of the cases. After leaving the booth and before casting their ballots, voters would often openly exhibit the ballots so that bystanders could see their preferences. The PRI representatives were the closest to the ballot boxes and made note of the voter's choice. On occasions, *casilla* officials rose to assist the voters. While these irregularities could be attributed to cultural reasons, little attempt was made to enforce voting secrecy by either a local IFE representative or the *casilla* officials. We estimate that over 50% of the ballots cast were visible to onlookers.

It was evident that the *casilla* officials were following directions and suggestions from the PRI representatives. The counting of the ballots was disorganized but fair. Voter abstention was higher than in other parts of the country: less than 50% of the voters cast their ballots in these two *casillas*. Overall the proceedings were conducted in the spirit of the law, but there were serious deficiencies that electoral authorities need to address in future elections.

Volcano Zone

Two of us visited eleven *casillas* situated in four communities: San Nicolas de los Ranchos, Santiago Xalitzintla, San Pedro Yancuitlapan, and San Mateo Ozolco. The *casillas* section numbers were: 1793 Básica, 1793 Contigua, 1794 Básica, 1794 Contigua, 1795 Básica, 1796 Básica, 1796 Contigua, 1797 Básica, 1797 Contigua, 0251 Básica, and 0252 Básica. Among our main observations were the following:

- confusion among polling officials and disorder at the polling stations we visited

- widespread ignorance of voting procedures among both polling officials and the electorate;
- this climate contributed to a large number of irregularities in the voting process and compromised the secrecy of the vote;
- indications of alleged vote buying and coercion before and during the process.

We visited most of these communities on Saturday, July 1, and found a very important military presence in the main plazas of San Nicolás de los Ranchos and Santiago Xalitzintla. Troops were stationed directly in the Town Hall where various *casillas* would be located the next day. Although officially in place in order to ensure quick evacuation of the region in case of a volcanic eruption, the soldiers were all carrying assault rifles. We were told by Mexican observers from Alianza Cívica that unofficially the military troops were there to combat guerilla forces and drug traffickers. The Alianza Cívica observers who accompanied us indicated that the military presence was also a form of intimidation in these indigenous communities. Nonetheless, on election day the soldiers were no longer present in the vicinity of voting stations. During this pre-electoral visit, the mayor (*presidente municipal*) from Santiago Xalitzintla refused to meet with us and sent a local police officer to ask us questions regarding the reasons for our presence, our credentials, and our intentions regarding the electoral contest.

Our observation on election day began in Santiago Xalitzintla, where the mayor and the local justice of the peace were supervising the installation of the *casillas*. Overall, the first few hours of voting were marked by confusion. *Casilla* officials were generally very nervous and encountered many difficulties in assembling the voting booths, were not certain of the proper procedure for beginning of the voting process, and consequently encountered minor delays in opening their stations. *Casilla* officials allowed voting to begin even though they were clearly not ready to receive voters. They were also uneasy with our presence. Voting booths proved inadequate for ensuring voting secrecy in this region, for the wind frequently lifted the protective curtain and on one occasion blew an entire booth away.

In all the localities we visited, voting was characterized by various irregularities. In the great majority of cases, both regular *casilla* officials and their substitutes all took active part in the process. In one *casilla*, several people surrounded the officials' table who were unrelated to the process and were allowed to touch the voters' list. In a number of voting stations, more than two party representatives from the PRI were present. On numerous occasions, two people entered the voting booths; in other instances, people outside the booths conversed at will with voters inside. Voters also communicated with each other from both sides of the booth.

In general, both *casilla* officials and voters seemed to know very little about voting procedures. As a result, voting secrecy was repeatedly compromised. Throughout the day, many citizens showed the wrong means of identification. Many also asked *casilla* officials and party representatives for whom they should vote. In one *casilla*, the first voters did not have a marker at their disposal in the booth, but did not signal this to *casilla* officials until after an hour. Voters frequently came out of the booth with their ballots unfolded, some showing their votes to a PRI representative or unidentified individuals standing close to the voting booth. Many times a PRI representative instructed voters instead of the *casilla* officials to fold the ballots and put them in the ballot boxes. In all eleven *casillas*, we noticed people sitting much too close to both the voting booths and ballot boxes, making it possible often for bystanders to see inside the booth and how people voted.

As a final indication of the state of confusion and disorder that prevailed, in one voting station in Santiago Xalitzintla, the voting officials made serious errors in the vote count. For instance, they proceeded to count votes before counting, nullifying, and recording unused ballots. PRI and PAN party representatives were allowed to participate in the counting of ballots as well as handle them and instruct *casilla* officials about process. Only the timely arrival of an IFE official allowed the vote count to conclude.

Lastly, in Santiago Xalitzintla and San Nicolas de los Ranchos, PRI supporters passed out breakfasts (coffee, pastries, and atole) and lunches (soft drinks and sandwiches) to *casilla* officials and voters. They were driving a Plymouth Voyager van with a PRI sticker but without license plates.

THE 2000 ELECTIONS IN THE BIGGER PICTURE

As the accompanying table on political reforms indicates, Mexico's electoral process has made significant improvements since 1988. Voter registration, the impartiality of electoral institutions, the vote count, pluralism and choice, and alternation among political parties are all areas of reliability and effectiveness. Nonetheless, the table also demonstrates that numerous areas still require improvement in order for Mexico to have truly free, fair, and transparent elections. There is still a substantial urban/rural divide in terms of the reliability and effectiveness of elections. As our observation showed, rural areas continue to suffer from procedural deficiencies, irregularities, and low levels of basic education among *casilla* officials and voters. Electoral justice has improved but remains problematic. Media coverage continues to have problems of unequal access and biased coverage. While important advances have been made, the 2000 elections still suffered from campaign spending problems. Vote buying and

coercion is still a serious concern. Voter turn out has declined after a peak in the 1994 elections. Finally, there is still a great need to strengthen civic participation and civic/democratic education. In sum, while the 2000 elections have represented an important advance over previous elections, the transition to a reliable, effective electoral democracy remains to be completed.

POLITICAL REFORM IN MEXICO, 1988-2000

	1988	1991	1994	1997	2000
Urban/rural divide	X	X	X	~	~
Voter registration	X	X	X	✓	✓
Electoral justice	X	X	~	~	~
Impartiality	X	X	~	✓	✓
Media coverage	X	X	X	~	~
Campaign spending	X	X	X	~	~
Vote buying and coercion	X	X	X	~	~
Voter turn out	X	X	✓	~	~ ¹
Vote count	X	X	X	✓	✓
Pluralism and choice	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alternation	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
Civic participation	X	~	~	~	~
Civic/Democratic Education	X	X	~	~	~

LEGEND:

- X = problematic
- ~ = some improvement but still problematic
- ✓ = reliable/effective

1. 1994 represented the highest point of voter turn-out. In 1997 and 2000, turn-out was lower than 1994 but better than 1988 and 1991.

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