

## The Not-So-New Electoral Landscape in Mexico\*<sup>T</sup>

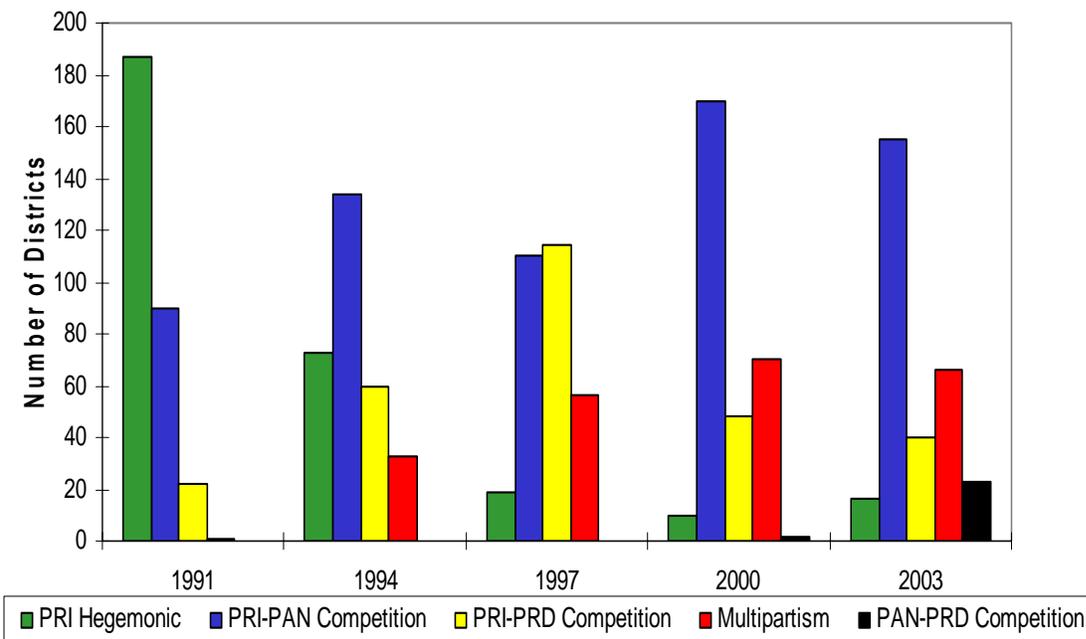
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Most observers have regarded the 2003 Mexican midterm elections as a severe setback for Vicente Fox's National Action Party (PAN). Certainly the PAN lost much ground in the Chamber of Deputies, dropping over 50 seats from its 206-member deputation in the 2000-3 Congress. Losing the Nuevo León governorship also cost the party control of an important statehouse. If the 2003 election was a referendum on President Fox's performance, the message of the Mexican voters was a resounding negative.

In the aftermath of the elections, though, we must ask how much change really came to Mexican electoral politics in 2003. A careful look at the results—patterns of competition, the social bases of the parties' vote, emerging partisan attachments, even the great decline in participation—would suggest that Mexico's electoral landscape has not changed so much in the past three or even six years, which is why Fox's party was sanctioned by the electorate and why neither the PRI nor the PRD really gained that much in the July contest.

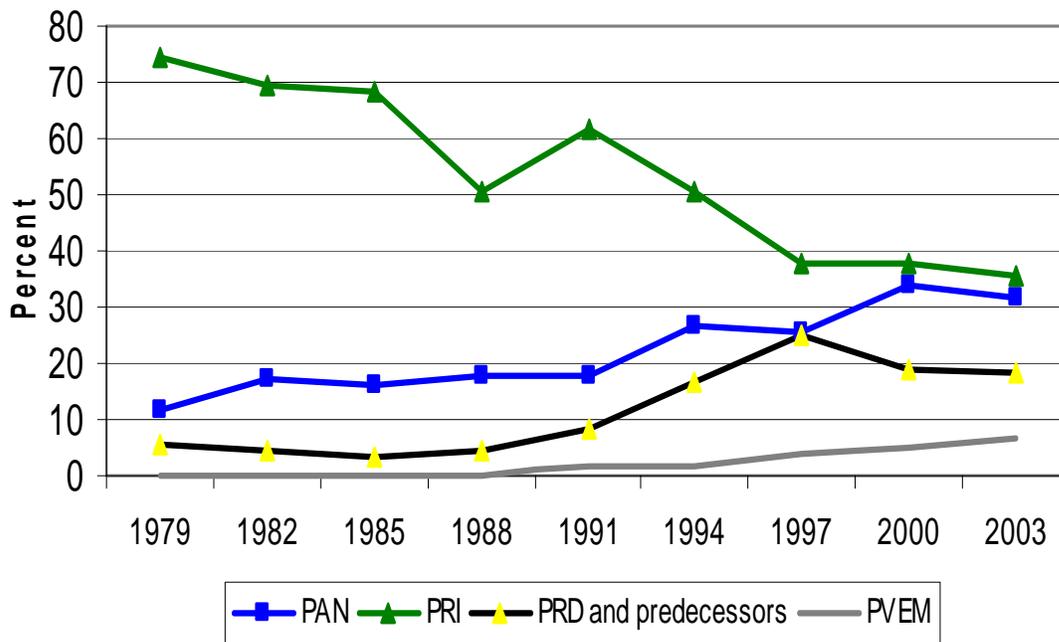
In terms of the competitiveness of Mexico's party system, 2003 looks remarkably like 2000 and 1997 before it. About a third of the electoral districts have two-party contests, in another third a third less competitive party joins two strong competitors, and in about a quarter, three or more parties compete relatively evenly. This pattern, which emerged in 1997, has changed little since then. In more than half of the nation's electoral districts, the PAN and the PRI face off; in a much smaller number of districts, the PRD competes against the PRI. In 2003 it became apparent that in a small number of districts—less than 10 percent—the PRI has declined so much so that the competition is between the PRD and the PAN. All of these districts, as well as most multiparty districts, are in the greater Mexico City area.

### Types of Electoral Competition in Mexico



Examination of vote shares to the parties over time would indicate an important decline for the PAN between 2000 and 2003. However, we must remember that in 2000 the PAN ran in alliance with the PVEM as the Alliance for Change, an alliance that promptly changed. If we subtract the PVEM's contribution to the PAN in 2000—setting it at roughly 5 percent, about halfway between the 3.8 percent it received in 1997 and the 6 percent or so that it gained this year—the PAN's trend line does not look so unfavorable. And both the PRI and the PRD did no better compared to 2000. The gain in the electoral arena has gone to the small parties, including the PVEM, but others too. And we should remember that small parties have regularly complicated the political arena in Mexico, drawing votes and seats from the three main parties.

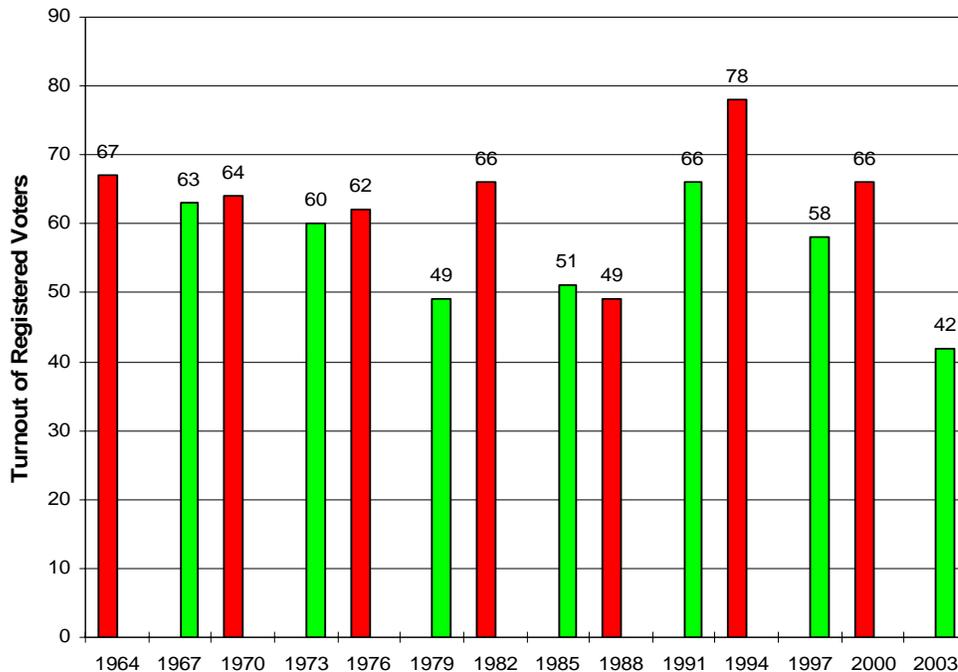
### Vote Shares, Reducing PVEM Contribution to PAN in 2000



If we consider the social bases of the parties by means of ecological analysis of aggregate electoral data at the district level, we find very little change in the significant explanatory variables in the past three years. The PAN's strength lies in districts that are urban and where there is a significant manufacturing sector workforce. It does better in the center-west than in the Mexico City area, the south, or even the north, after controlling for socioeconomic modernization. There are new patterns; however, the PAN did more poorly in areas with concentrations of Catholics than in recent years, again controlling for the other factors just mentioned. The PRI does better in rural areas, as we all know, and for some time it has performed poorly in the center-west and Mexico City area. Its novel partial alliance with the PVEM in 2003 yielded some interesting results in patterns of electoral support. If we aggregate votes for the Alianza para Todos, the PRI, and the PVEM, we find that the two parties together performed well in districts with larger shares of the labor force in manufacturing and poorly with higher percentages of individuals who declare themselves Catholic. For the PRI alone (in the 200 districts where it ran alone), these patterns do not hold. So, the PVEM seems to have carried along the industrial and secular districts. The PRD's biggest strength is now in districts with lower percentages of the workforce in manufacturing—it does well where people are employed in services—and its real base is the Mexico City area.

Turning to turnout, the unprecedented low rate of electoral participation has caused much concern. The 42 percent turnout rate was certainly low, even for a midterm election of late—participation rates in 1991 and 1997 were considerably higher. However, more was at stake in those midterm elections; when compared to 1979 and 1985, when about half of the registered voters cast ballots (and registration rates were lower), the 2003 turnout does not compare as unfavorably. Still, 42 percent is a low rate of participation, and that low rate of participation probably hurt the PAN more than the other parties. In recent elections, higher turnout rates have been associated with higher rates of voting for the PAN, a relationship that continued to hold in 2003. So, when and where turnout is low, the PAN suffers. An important pattern in 2003, however, was that the recent trend in which low turnout favored the PRI did not emerge this year.

### Electoral Participation in Mexico, 1964-2003



This brings us to partisanship and the role of floating voters. First, the PRI and PRD were much more able to hold the allegiance of those who voted for Labastida and Cárdenas, respectively, than the PAN was with Fox voters. Of course, Fox outperformed the congressional candidates of the PAN in 2000 by a considerable margin, so we know that some Fox voters were ticket splitters in 2000. That barely half of the 2003 voters who voted for Fox cast ballots for the PAN this year cannot be encouraging for the president's party. Who new voters and those who otherwise did not go to the polls in 2000 supported this year is a little less clear—different exit polls (*Consulta Mitofsky* and *Reforma*) give different suggestions. However, regardless of poll is more accurate, neither indicates that one party took the lion's share of new voters.

**FloatingVotes  
(Consulta Mitofsky Exit Poll)**

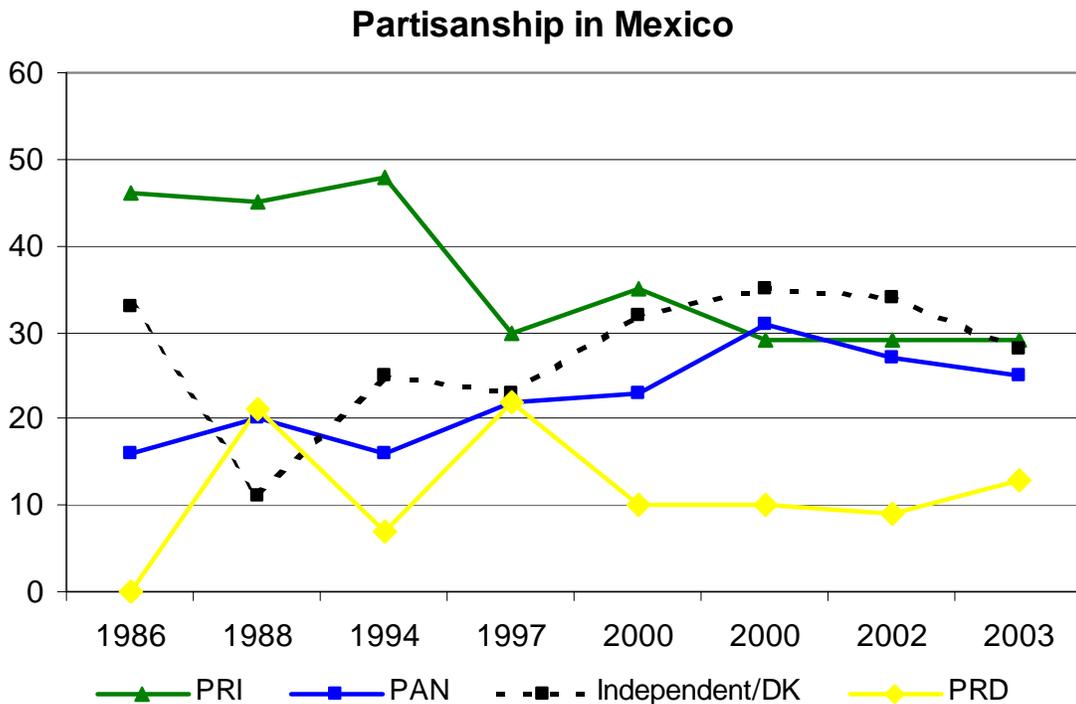
Vote in 2000	Vote in 2003					
	PAN	PRI	PRD	PVEM	Others	Total
Fox	52.0	16.4	16.3	9.7	5.6	100
Labastida	6.8	79.9	4.5	6.1	2.7	100
Cárdenas	6.3	3.8	79.1	4.6	6.2	100
Non-voter	36.8	24.6	12.1	15.1	11.4	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>33.7</b>	<b>19.4</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>8.2</b>	100

An important bottom line is that a significant part of the Mexican electorate remains independent (or unwilling to indicate its partisan attachment). Mexican partisanship is not low by regional standards, but enough Mexicans remain unattached—or dealigned—to allow for relatively large swings from election to election—we’ve now had 1997, with a significant PRD upsurge behind Cárdenas’s Mexico City coattails; 2000, with the Fox phenomenon; and 2003, where a mediocre PAN campaign allowed the PRI to regain some ground. The PRI retains the allegiance of those who formed their attachments before 1988. The partisan attachments of *panistas* and *perredistas*, in contrast, are relatively new. And many young people remain independent and available for recruitment to any of the parties.

**New Voters and Non-Voters from 2000:  
How Did They Vote?**

Vote in 2000	Vote in 2003					
	PAN	PRI	PRD	PVEM	Others	Total
Non-voter (Consulta Mitofsky)	<b>37</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>
Non-voter (Reforma)	<b>27</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>101</b>

Dealignment has characterized the sociology of Mexican elections for at least fifteen to eighteen years. Floating voters allow campaigns to matter. Campaigns and candidates mattered a lot in 1997 and 2000. Nothing about 2003 suggests that campaigns and candidates will not matter in 2006—indeed, with a large part of the population unattached, with many voters choosing not to vote if they're not won over by convincing campaigns, and with no incumbent advantage to speak of, we can fully expect that a rousing campaign in which the stakes are high will bring out large numbers of voters in 2006 and could well lead to the victory of the presidential candidate of any of the parties.



\* Presentation given to the conference on "Mexico's 2003 Mid-Term Election Results: The Implications for the LIX Legislature and Future Party Consolidation," Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, September 15-16, 2003.