

**THE ENIGMA OF ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN MEXICO:  
ELECTORAL REFORM, THE RISE OF OPPOSITION CONTESTATION,  
AND VOTER TURNOUT, 1967-1994**

Joseph L. Klesner

Department of Political Science  
Kenyon College  
Gambier, Ohio 43022

(614) 427-5311  
klesner@kenyon.edu

Prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest  
Political Science Association, Chicago, April 10-12, 1997.

**THE ENIGMA OF ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN MEXICO:  
ELECTORAL REFORM, THE RISE OF OPPOSITION CONTESTATION,  
AND VOTER TURNOUT, 1967-1994**

Joseph L. Klesner

Kenyon College

The world's mass media has presented election day in Mexico as an unusual display of civic patience as Mexicans of all walks of life have waited sometimes hours in long lines to cast their ballots, a day the end of which would bring announcements of victory by candidates of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI). These two acts pose the enigma of electoral participation in Mexico's hegemonic party system, particularly before the emergence of more tightly contested elections in the late 1980s and 1990s: Why have Mexicans chosen to devote much of a Sunday, a much-deserved day of rest, to wait to cast a vote in an election the results of which have seldom been in doubt? This would hardly seem to be a rational act for the individual voter, yet about two-thirds of registered voters made that choice before political crisis began to characterize the Mexican regime in the 1980s (see Figure 1). Mexico's rulers, though able to count on the PRI's astounding capacity to turn out voters and votes for the PRI, have long been anxious about electoral participation, in particular that turnout might fall off precipitously. Given their near monopoly on electoral positions, why should PRI leaders have feared low turnouts?

**FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

In 1988 the PRI faced its greatest electoral challenge in at least thirty-five years, the

presidential candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the founder of one of the PRI's previous institutional embodiments and the most revered of post-revolutionary presidents, supported by a coalition of parties of the left, the National Democratic Front (*Frente Democrático Nacional*, or FDN). Cárdenas lost in an election marked by irregularities, and turnout plunged to around half the registered voters. Since then the PRI has confronted charges of electoral fraud stemming from the PRI's Carlos Salinas's victory over Cárdenas and it has met stiffer challenges from parties of the opposition both on the left from the Party of the Democratic Revolution (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, or PRD) which emerged from the Cárdenas candidacy, and on the right from the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, or PAN), a party long in the opposition. Electoral participation has risen, too, to over three-quarters of the voters legally eligible to vote in 1994. This poses a third question: why has electoral participation risen in the aftermath of a highly suspected election in 1988?

In this paper I explore three questions: (1) Can we explain why Mexicans have chosen to vote in elections the results of which have usually been seen by all as predetermined? (2) Can we explain why Mexican political elites have worried about turnout given that until recently they faced only token opposition? (3) Have trends in electoral participation changed and, if so, how and why? The answers to these questions should tell us not only about trends in participation in the rapidly changing Mexican regime, but also give us clues about the role of electoral participation in non-competitive party systems. Few political regimes offer no opportunities to vote, but many provide no real choices at election time and yet voters turn out to cast their ballots. Why? The Mexican case offers some answers to this question. Further, this paper permits some exploration of the evolution of electoral participation as single-party rule decays.

## **PARTICIPATION IN A HEGEMONIC PARTY SYSTEM**

In Giovanni Sartori's typology of party systems, Mexico has had, since the formation of the PRI's first precursor in 1929, a hegemonic party system. According to Sartori:

The pattern can be described as follows. The hegemonic party neither allows for a formal nor a de facto competition for power. Other parties are permitted to exist, but as second class, licensed parties; for they are not permitted to compete with the hegemonic party in antagonistic terms and on an equal basis. Not only does alternation not occur in fact; it *cannot* occur, since the possibility of a rotation in power is not even envisioned. The implication is that the hegemonic party will remain in power whether it is liked or not.<sup>1</sup>

The PRI's leadership has seen itself in these terms too; the name of the party itself, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, suggests that its leaders have seen the PRI as a party that will not regularly alternate in power. How would it really be institutional or revolutionary if it did? Moreover, the PRI often refers to itself as the party of the majority, increasingly so as the fires of revolution have died out. Thereby, the party preserves a case for the legitimacy of its continued rule even while it has begun to surrender its revolutionary legitimacy.

In democracies, electoral participation permits citizens to help choose those who will control the state. However, for that choice to have meaning for public policy, there must be a serious possibility of alternation in power so that by voting citizens can encourage responsiveness by elected officials. If there is no expectation or intention of permitting an alternation in power through the electoral process, then voting is not an act of choosing among competing teams of potential rulers and is unlikely to have any effect on policy making. So why should the voter vote?

### **The Micropolitical Issue: Individual Voters in Hegemonic Party Systems**

Studies of the participation of individual voters have often approached the decision to vote or to abstain from the perspective of rational choice.<sup>2</sup> The individual decides to vote based on a

---

<sup>1</sup>*Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>The pioneering study was Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), esp. ch. 14. For a recent survey of the now voluminous literature, see John H. Aldrich, "Rational Choice and Turnout,"

comparison of perceived costs and perceived benefits. In competitive elections, major costs include the opportunity cost of the time involved in registering, deliberating among the alternatives (including the cost of obtaining information), and actually casting the vote. The calculus of benefit includes the voter's desire to see his party triumph and his calculation of the value his vote will have for his party's victory (which depends on his perception of the closeness of the race). Even in elections where effective choices confront the electorate, the voter may be indifferent among the choices, and thus choose to minimize his costs by abstaining. Otherwise, he may discount the value of his single vote because his vote will mean little among thousands of others or because the race is not sufficiently close that his vote will matter, again deciding to abstain to minimize costs.<sup>3</sup>

In a hegemonic party system, the consistent and apparently inevitable one-sidedness of election results should lead the rational voter to completely discount the value of her vote for the outcome, whether she supports the hegemonic party or not, thus reducing the perceived benefits from voting to below the costs of doing so. Why then do voters cast their ballots in hegemonic party systems? Of course, they must vote if the hegemonic result is to be obtained, but each voter apparently gains little by voting.

Downs and others have found in civic duty an explanation for why abstention does not run rampant in democracies. Downs argues:

Rational men in a democracy are motivated to some extent by a sense of social responsibility relatively independent of their own short-term gains and losses. If we view such responsibility as one part of the return from voting, it is possible that the cost of voting is outweighed by its returns for some but not all rational men.

Participation in elections is one of the rules of the game in a democracy. Since the

---

*American Journal of Political Science*, 37, 1 (February 1993): 246-278.

<sup>3</sup>Downs, *Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 267.

consequences of universal failure to vote are both obvious and disastrous, and since the cost of voting is small, at least some men can rationally be motivated to vote even when their personal gains in the short run are outweighed by their personal costs.<sup>4</sup>

The problem this approach illuminates for hegemonic party systems is two-fold: First, since elections are not close, no one has a strong motivation to vote to insure that his preferred candidates win. Second, the sense of duty to vote so as to contribute to regime maintenance may be absent. The legitimacy of such systems is often weak or may decline over time. Indeed, the Mexican "revolutionary" elite has drawn on the vestiges of its revolutionary legitimacy for decades after its actions have ceased to be revolutionary. However, cynicism has grown as the fortunes of ordinary peasants and workers, the supposed beneficiaries of the Revolution and those counted upon to insure the electoral success of the PRI, have worsened. The repression of the 1968 student uprising was a watershed because it destroyed the façade of revolutionary commitment and democracy.

Where the legitimacy of a hegemonic party system is weak, maintaining that hegemony depends upon the party's capacity to manipulate the costs and benefits involved in voting so as to induce more voting, particularly (but not entirely) more voting in its favor. To do so, hegemonic parties often rely upon the clientelist networks which their operatives have established among the politically weaker, who are often uninformed and sometimes disinterested. Alain Rouquié distinguishes between two kinds of votes produced by clientelist networks. Rouquié labels the first the "sold vote," in which an individual exchanges his vote for another scarce commodity, such as money, alcohol, or food, or "more often a job, a place to live, credit or irrigation for crops, or proper payment for the sale of agricultural produce."<sup>5</sup> The latter benefits should be underscored;

---

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 267-269.

<sup>5</sup>"Clientelist Control and Authoritarian Contexts," in *Elections without Choice*, ed. by Guy Hermet, Richard Rose, and Alain Rouquié (New York: Wiley, 1978), pp. 24-25.

where political and economic power combine in a local setting, an individual's lack of cooperation on election day can ruin his few economic opportunities. Through the sold vote the local powers-that-be increase the client's potential gain from voting enough to induce him to participate. Looked at from the other side, the operative of the hegemonic party's machine increases the voter's cost of abstaining, some times to very high levels, thereby encouraging participation.

The other type of vote Rouquié calls the “gregarious vote,” in which patrons from the hegemonic party organize groups of voters to collectively support that party. Usually, this “vote of the herds” responds to rewards of lodging, feasting, entertainment, and even presents: “Feasting and drinking reward organised civic zeal.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, again the gains to voting for the individual member of the herd increase, and moreover, the patron's agents' resort to violence raises the costs of not voting. “Beware the voter refusing the delights of patronal generosity and preferring to vote in another direction.”<sup>7</sup>

The Mexican revolutionary family has promoted the electoral fortunes of its electoral arm, the PRI, through the use of the Mexican variant on clientelism, *caciquismo*.<sup>8</sup> The PRI has employed both the sold vote and the gregarious vote to increase turnout and the PRI margin of victory.<sup>9</sup> The

---

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Caciquismo* is, of course, not unique to Mexico, but it is ubiquitous in rural Mexico and even certain urban areas, such as squatter settlements. The term might be translated as political bossism.

<sup>9</sup>Wayne A. Cornelius and Ann L. Craig, "Politics in Mexico," in *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*, 3rd ed, ed. by Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), p. 452. On the PRI as a machine, see John F.H. Purcell and Susan Kaufman Purcell, "Machine Politics and Socio-economic Change in Mexico," in *Contemporary Mexico: Papers of the IV International Congress on Mexican History*, ed. by James W. Wilkie, Michael C. Meyer, and Edna Monzón de Wilkie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 348-366. For case studies of the PRI in action, see Karl M. Schmitt, "Congressional Campaigning in Mexico: A View from the Provinces," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, 11, 1 (1969), pp. 93-110 and Phillip B. Taylor, "The Mexican Elections of 1958: Affirmation of Authoritarianism?" *Western Political Quarterly*, 13, 3 (1960), pp. 722-744.

use of either the sold vote or the gregarious vote necessitate the availability of individuals whose costs and gains of voting can be so manipulated. Historically, this has been maximized in the countryside, where both methods can be combined by rural *caciques*. Table 1 shows indirect evidence that sustains the hypothesis that turnout has been most effectively produced by rural *caciques* with correlation coefficients between the turnout of the potential electorate and various socio-economic variables at the federal district level in the federal deputy elections between 1967 and 1985.<sup>10</sup> The earliest elections in this series are most clearly in the period of PRI hegemony and PRI stability. Care must be taken in the interpretation of these statistics because they are correlations between aggregate-level figures and, strictly speaking, they measure aggregate behavior in districts, so they are correlations which describe types of districts, not types of individuals. However, *caciques* operate effectively in certain areas where there are aggregations of types of individuals, in particular where there are communities of indigenous peoples, engaged in marginally-productive agriculture, illiterate and marginalized in relation to the larger society. As Pablo González Casanova has argued, *caciquismo* is an integral part of the internal colonialism of such groups.<sup>11</sup> So, we are as interested in the types of settings in which the costs and benefits to individuals of participating electorally can be modified as we are in the actual calculations of those costs and benefits made by individuals.

#### **TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

While each of the elections considered in Table 1 has its unique characteristics, in each of those elections before an important electoral reform introduced in 1977, the characteristics associated with those most subject to *cacique* domination are among the variables most strongly

---

<sup>10</sup> I use potential electorate here because information on the registered electorate is not available at the level of the federal electoral district prior to 1979.

<sup>11</sup> *Democracy in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 71-103.



correlated with electoral participation. Specifically, districts with concentrations of those most marginalized socially and culturally (those still speaking indigenous languages), those least educated, and those who are illiterate tended to have the highest rates of electoral participation. Generally, participation was concentrated in rural settings, although the election of 1973 introduces some ambiguity into that relationship. Moreover, Table 1 demonstrates that participation also tended to be higher in districts with a relatively larger share of the workforce in agriculture.

The capacity of the PRI to manipulate the voter's cost-benefit analysis to encourage her to turn out on election day weakens as the voter leaves the rural setting. The use of the gregarious vote becomes problematic among more educated individuals living in the more anonymous city. By the 1960s urbanization and industrialization were contributing to an erosion of the PRI's capacity to get out the vote. The participation rate of registered voters declined in the nation as a whole after 1960 (see Figure 1). Moreover, the PRI's mobilizational capacity apparently was exercised with greater indifference in non-presidential elections, perhaps reflecting unwillingness to expend resources to manipulate voters' cost-benefit analyses of participation in non-presidential elections (note the larger and larger dropoff rates in non-presidential election years prior to the 1990s).

So, why vote in a hegemonic party system such as Mexico's? Both anecdotal and statistical data suggest that *those who vote do so because they can be convinced that to not vote would be more costly to them than to actually vote*. For most rural Mexicans and many poor urbanites by the 1960s, the gain involved in voting came not from the public policy made by the officials chosen in those elections. Rather, some individual or group benefits may have been provided by the PRI machine to those who voted and, more ominously, some high costs may have been imposed against those who did not vote (or did not allow their votes to be cast for them). This threat of violence undercuts any interpretation of Mexican electoral participation as primarily voluntary, at least in the countryside.

However, the parameters of this individual cost-benefit analysis of voting differ for those not sharing the characteristics of persons dominated by *caciques*. The urban voter, the educated voter, the voter not tied to the land by debt obligations, the voter able to communicate and to function in modern society has been less subject to having her costs of not voting manipulated. The gregarious vote or the "vote of the herds" is more difficult to organize in urban, industrial settings and the sold vote costs more to buy when individuals are more highly educated and thus more mobile in their employment.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in urban settings, in settings where people are more highly educated, and where they are not engaged in agriculture, the individual voter uses a cost-benefit model more similar to that proposed by Downs for competitive democracies with the proviso that such voters often do not even feel the citizen duty to vote so as to maintain the regime since they reject it.<sup>13</sup> By the 1970s, as a result of modernization, this component of the Mexican electorate had grown larger and larger, making older methods of producing votes less adequate for the electorate as a whole.

### **The Macropolitical Issue: The Function of Electoral Participation in a Hegemonic Party System**

Certainly it is important for Mexico's ruling elite to promote votes for the PRI and, by so

---

<sup>12</sup>Urban *caciques* in working class and migrant neighborhoods have, however, engaged in various forms of vote buying, generally with the goal of minimizing generalized demands by groups by distributing individualized benefits to members of the group. Wayne A. Cornelius, *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

<sup>13</sup>Kenneth M. Coleman's study, *Public Opinion in Mexico City about the Electoral System* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 45-56, showed that many in his 1969 survey who did not vote abstained because they did not enjoy voting. The enjoyment of voting was correlated with their evaluation of elections as being conducted fairly and as being democratic. That is, they saw little intrinsic value in the act of voting, so they did not enjoy it, and tended to abstain. This is not to say that the city is a radicalizing environment for those moving to it. As Cornelius's studies have shown, *migrants* do not tend to change their allegiance to the PRI or the revolutionary elite after they escape the countryside. Second generation urban dwellers are more likely to defect from the PRI, though. See Wayne A. Cornelius, "Urbanization as an Agent in Latin American Political Instability: The Case of Mexico," *American Political Science Review*, 63, 3 (1969), pp. 833-857, esp. p. 855 and *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City*, pp. 63-67. Despite Cornelius's conclusions, though, it is not clear that Mexican leaders view migrants in the *colonias proletarias* as being so docile. Interview with Federal Electoral Commission official, 21 May 1984.

doing, to promote increased turnout. Yet, the PRI won by comfortable margins in nearly all elections until into the 1970s and by overwhelming margins in a considerable share of those elections. Why the elite should expend such great resources to encourage even greater participation than that necessary to win comfortably is not on the face of it apparent. Why must the PRI machine manipulate the rational calculations of voters when PRI victories were not really endangered? That is, what is the function of electoral participation in Mexico's hegemonic party system?

Provisions for political participation make up one crucial dimension of any regime. However, political participation can take many forms.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the focus of participation may not even be governmental decision-making, but rather other ways of creating and distributing collective goods.<sup>15</sup> These alternative foci of citizen activism are frequently local level instances of that "behavior influencing or attempting to influence the distribution of public goods" which we call political participation.<sup>16</sup> The Mexican elite has characteristically suspected political participation it does not control and local PRI activists have been jealous of their monopoly on efficacious participation. Thus, the PRI tries to coopt as many such ventures as it can, creating links between the leaders of local groups and the PRI. Where co-optation fails, violence against local leaders often succeeds.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Joan Nelson provides a review of studies of participation and development in "Political Participation," in *Understanding Political Development*, ed. by Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), pp. 103-159.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell A. Seligson and John A. Booth, "Development, Political Participation, and the Poor in Latin America," in Seligson and Booth (eds.), *Political Participation in Latin America*, vol. 2: *Politics and the Poor* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> The definition is from John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, "Images of Political Participation in Latin America," in Booth and Seligson (eds.), *Political Participation in Latin America*, vol. 1: *Citizen and State* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978) p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> A myriad of new popular organizations have joined the political arena in Mexico, especially since the 1985 earthquake demonstrated the indifference and incapacity of the state to respond to popular needs and encouraged Mexicans

Samuel Huntington and Joan Nelson identify five modes of participation: electoral activity, lobbying government officials and political leaders to influence decisions on important issues, membership in organizations dedicated to influencing governmental decisions, contacting government officials to secure individual benefits, and violence directed at influencing governmental decisions or the composition of the state itself.<sup>18</sup> Those controlling the Mexican state have much preferred that the Mexican masses pursue electoral activity to any other mode of participation. Their hope, usually realized, has been that the PRI's corporatist structure would shackle the independent organizational efforts of and lobbying by the masses.<sup>19</sup> Individual contacting of officials to receive particularized benefits from the state presents little threat because these benefits can be cheaply dispensed to the extremely persistent. Thus, these three forms of participation which are usually complements to electoral activity have not usually threatened the Mexican elite.

Violence, on the other hand, is not usually a complement to other forms of participation, but a substitute for them, resorted to when other forms of participation fail to achieve the activists' goals. Violent forms of participation have been perceived as a great threat to political stability by

---

to organize themselves for collective action, especially at the community level. See Jonathan Fox, "The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship: Lessons from Mexico," *World Politics*, 46, 2 (January 1994) for a discussion of the challenges faced by popular organizations as they seek to find an independent and effective means of presenting their constituents needs to those with the resources to respond to them. Recognizing the organizational capacities of popular organizations and the increasing incapacity of the PRI to coopt them, Carlos Salinas launched the National Solidarity Program after coming to office in December 1994. For an assessment of the National Solidarity Program, see Wayne A. Cornelius, Ann L. Craig, and Jonathan Fox (eds.), *Transforming State-Society Relations in Mexico: The National Solidarity Strategy* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1994).

<sup>18</sup>*No Easy Choice: Political Participation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>19</sup>I do not want to deemphasize the various independent peasant associations and labor unions which have risen at different points in recent Mexican history. My point, though, is that the Mexican political elite usually confronts those independent *campesino* movements and labor unions with a combination of the carrot (to leaders anyway) and the stick with the intention to bring those groups within the corporatist structure it controls, or to destroy them for their refusal to be coopted. The spirit of independence exhibited by those *campesino* and worker movements must be admired, but realistically it must be recognized that their impact on public policy, even where they have survived, has not been great.

Mexican leaders. Given this fear of violence, electoral activity and the institutions which practice it, political parties, become all the more important to the Mexican elite. As Sartori argues, parties and participation through them (that is, electoral activity) can serve two functions in mass-based politics: channelment and expression. In a society in which the masses have been politicized (a role which the Mexican Revolution performed), a system of parties and the electoral participation in which they engage are far preferable to that society's rulers than a traditional authoritarian regime of no parties and no electoral participation. Sartori writes: "No parties at all leaves a society out of reach, out of control, and no modernized regime can afford, in the long run, to settle on this unsafe and unproductive solution. A post-traditional society either can be freed or has to be seized; but the more it modernizes, the less it can be left to itself or be expected to remain dormant."<sup>20</sup> Or, as Adam Przeworski argues, "new people are recruited into political institutions when the stability of these institutions is already threatened; . . . incorporation into the existing institutions is a strategy that serves to keep things as they are; in short, . . . electoral mobilization is a process through which electoral institutions preserve their stability."<sup>21</sup> For Mexico's ruling elite, electoral participation has provided a channel in which to direct the Mexican masses, an alternative to the path of violent confrontation. As Charles L. Davis and Kenneth M. Coleman suggest, "because the electoral process provides institutionalized channels for expressing opposition, it defuses the potential for direct, spontaneous, antiregime political activity based on coercion."<sup>22</sup>

This electoral channel has formed a vital complement to Mexico's corporatist system of

---

<sup>20</sup>Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup>"Institutionalization of Voting Patterns, or is Mobilization the Source of Decay?" *American Political Science Review*, 69, 1 (March 1975), p. 66.

<sup>22</sup>"Electoral Change in the One-Party Dominant Mexican Polity, 1958-73: Evidence from Mexico City," *Journal of Developing Areas*, 16, 3 (1982), p. 523.

interest intermediation. Without that corporatist control, and the efforts made to eliminate independent interest groups, the organizational basis for mass participation in non-electoral forms of participation (demonstrations) would have existed and defeated the channelment of the masses into electoral activity. Moreover, without that corporatist control, the capacity of the elite to predict with certainty its electoral success would have disappeared, making the electoral channel as great a threat to the elite as other modes of independent participation. In sum, electoral activity has historically provided to the Mexican elite a viable means to channel the participation of the Mexican masses into a safe (for the elite) mode of participation. The challenge has been to convince individual voters of the value of the electoral arena as the locus of their participation.

The view that elections primarily serve a channeling function in hegemonic party systems such as Mexico's tends to downplay the role that elections and electoral participation can play as a demonstration of the legitimacy of the regime. Yet, many have recognized that elections in hegemonic systems can serve to periodically organize consent for the rule of the elite and the way in which they rule, perhaps even to remind the citizenry that it does consent to that rule.<sup>23</sup> While this consent may not be the profound consent that a party winning an overwhelming majority in truly competitive elections would enjoy, nonetheless elections and electoral participation can serve to a limited extent serve to legitimize the governing elite's rule.<sup>24</sup>

Those studying Mexican elections often cite the legitimizing role of elections, even arguing that the electoral process is a valuable instrument of socialization. One North American scholar, writing in 1969, stated:

---

<sup>23</sup>Guy Hermet, "State-Controlled Elections: A Framework," in *Elections without Choice*, ed. by Hermet, Rose, and Rouquié, p. 15-16.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Juan J. Linz, "Non-Competitive Elections in Europe," in *Elections without Choice*, ed. by Hermet, Rose, and Rouquié, p. 65.

Most importantly . . . elections serve to create and fortify a sense of nationality among Mexico's urban and rural masses. To be sure, this process has long been underway and methods other than elections perform this same function. But congressional elections are times when the nation-building instructions are carried out nation-wide. Millions of people are bombarded with the idea that they belong to a community that extends beyond their neighborhood or village, that they are participants in the grand drama called the Revolution that is still being played out, that they must help protect the social and economic gains that the Revolution has accomplished, and that they can contribute to its ultimate fulfillment.<sup>25</sup>

The implication for participation is clear enough: electoral participation shows that the message is being heard, that the citizenry has agreed with the notion that the Revolution is being made for it, thus that the rule of the elite is legitimate. Davis argues:

authoritarian regimes are well equipped to generate support among deprived groups by dispensing psychologically satisfying symbolic reassurances about the regime's commitments to particular goals. In this way, "successful" authoritarian regimes manage to rule by means other than force alone, and to gain popular consent from politically and economically deprived groups at minimal cost in terms of claims upon scarce resources.<sup>26</sup>

Davis found a close relationship between diffuse support for the regime and electoral choice (for whom to vote and whether to vote).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, his early 1970s survey findings indicated that "the lower-class Mexicans in our sample who evaluate the PRI favorably do so mainly because they believe that the regime is committed to the long-term goals of the Revolution."<sup>28</sup>

Wayne Cornelius ties the legitimation function and the channelment function of Mexican electoral participation together:

The elections serve primarily to legitimize existing policies and to demonstrate mass support for the regime. If voter turnout is not high enough, or if the principal opposition party (PAN) makes a good showing, the legitimacy of the regime is diminished.

---

<sup>25</sup>Schmitt, "Congressional Campaigning in Mexico," pp. 109-110.

<sup>26</sup>Charles L. Davis, "The Mobilization of Public Support for an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of the Lower Class in Mexico City," *American Journal of Political Science*, 20, 4 (1976), p. 654.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 664.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 666.

In general, political mobilization in the Mexican context serves to channel the energies of the citizenry into carefully controlled, officially sanctioned activities. Controlled participation helps to build popular support for the regime, to legitimize its authority, and to minimize the possibility of "spontaneous" political activity that might have unpredictable consequences for the system's stability.<sup>29</sup>

Electoral turnout, then, becomes one way of measuring the legitimacy of the revolutionary elite's rule and of the PRI's capacity to channel the energies of Mexicans into safe modes of political activity.

Thus, abstention can have one or both of two different interpretations. First, it can signify that the mobilizer and channeler of citizen participation (in Mexico, the PRI) is failing in its task of directing participation into the safe, non-spontaneous electoral arena. This could mean that Mexicans are merely apathetic about politics or at least about electoral politics. Second, abstention can indicate that the legitimacy of the ruling elite or the method by which it continues to rule is being called into question. That is, Mexicans are alienated by the elite's dominance or by the regime itself.<sup>30</sup>

Either of these sources of abstention can pose a danger to Mexico's rulers. Observing declining rates of participation, Mexican commentators in the 1970s could not agree on which interpretation was correct. Was growing abstention due to *apathy*? Many were willing to argue that it was.<sup>31</sup> Others suggested that *alienation* was the cause of abstentionism, that abstentionism was a

---

<sup>29</sup>Cornelius, *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>30</sup>These two reasons for abstention correspond to what Rogelio Ramos Oranday calls on the one hand passive, or involuntary abstentionism and on the other hand conscious abstentionism. See "Oposición y abstencionismo en las elecciones presidenciales, 1964-1982," in *Las elecciones en México: evolución y perspectivas*, ed. by Pablo González Casanova (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1985), p. 174.

<sup>31</sup>E.g., see Ricardo Garibay in *Excelsior*, 28 June 1973; Miguel Bueno in *El Universal*, 25 February 1976; Pedro Gringoire in *Excelsior*, 10 April 1976; and Carlos Pereyra in *Proceso*, no. 144 (6 August 1979). Some commentators, such as Francisco José Paoli, *Proceso*, no. 136 (11 June 1979) argued that indifference had been produced by distrust, and thus a limited form of alienation (though not profound cynicism) has produced the apathy that leads to abstentionism. Rafael



form of protest or civil disobedience.<sup>32</sup> In either case, observers saw declining turnout as a danger to the PRI.

Table 1 provides statistical suggestions about who was still performing the actions in the 1960s and early 1970s which Mexican leaders could use to illustrate the legitimacy of Mexican "democracy." Alternatively, we might say that these correlation coefficients indicate who was still being channeled effectively. They indicate that the districts with the highest rates of participation were those with concentrations of those speaking indigenous languages, those with little or no education, and those in agriculture. Those districts in which the party of non-voters was strongest, i.e., where abstention was most frequently practiced, were those with concentrations of city dwellers, those who could read, those with higher levels of education, and those employed in the manufacturing sector. This tends to mirror the bases of support for the opposition in the same years.<sup>33</sup> But it is crucial to note that Mexico's electoral districts were increasingly taking on these latter characteristics as the society modernized.

The bottom lines of Table 1 go further to make suggestions about the organizational bases of participation and abstention. With the exception of the 1973 election, electoral participation was correlated with PRI voting. So, electoral participation was highest where the PRI was most dominant, in those districts where it most strenuously mobilized its electoral supporters (note they

---

Segovia, *Vuelta*, no. 68, July 1982, argued that decreased rates of participation in the 1970s were due to changes in electoral rules which made questionable practices more easily detected by opposition observers and those observers' complaints more likely to be redressed. Real abstention was due to apathy and indifference which was formerly covered up by electoral fraud.

<sup>32</sup>E.g., Enrique Maza in *Excelsior*, 27 June 1973, 4 February 1976, 25 February 1976; Heberto Castillo in *Excelsior*, 17 June 1976; Vicente Leñero in *Excelsior*, 21 January 1976.

<sup>33</sup>Joseph L. Klesner, "Changing Patterns of Electoral Participation and Official Party Support in Mexico," in *Mexican Politics in Transition*, ed. by Judith Gentleman (Boulder: Westview, 1987).

are not necessarily political supporters). Where the PAN competed more effectively with the PRI, participation was lower. We might infer that electoral participation was generally spurred by the PRI organization. Competition, on the other hand, did not seem to encourage a strong turnout, despite the normal expectation that it should do so by making the election more interesting and more of a choice.

What are the reasons for this high correlation between PRI support and electoral participation? To give Mexico's rulers the greatest benefit of the doubt, we might argue that PRI support and turnout both measure the legitimacy of the Mexican regime. Where voters were most dissatisfied with the regime, where they were most alienated, they responded in one of two ways: the more hopeful ones voted for the PAN or another opposition party, the more cynical ones simply did not waste their time voting.<sup>34</sup> An account which gives less credence to the PRI activists' honor would argue that the corporatist structure of the PRI produced both votes and votes for the PRI. This had its greatest effect in areas where peasants and workers are concentrated. Furthermore, the corporatist structure functioned most effectively where it could be combined with *caciquismo*, which again produced both votes and the right kind of votes. Finally, to give the least credit to the honor of PRI militants, we could argue that the PRI was most able to perpetrate electoral fraud in areas where the opposition was poorly organized and thus least competitive. This fraud, usually designed and implemented by local PRI leaders as much to impress superiors as to overwhelm the token opposition, produced high rates of participation and high percentages of PRI votes, at least officially. These arguments are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Probably some combination of these three factors combined to produce the high correlation between electoral participation and

---

<sup>34</sup>This opinion is shared by many Mexican commentators, among them those listed above in fn. 31.

PRI vote. Furthermore, in any single election, it does not matter whether the voters of a district willingly or unwillingly cast votes for the PRI and cast them in large numbers because it is, after all, the official results that matter so long as the electoral process is the method used to choose successors.

The 1973 election presents an anomaly. Some suggestions may be made about why the relationships described above did not hold for 1973. To begin, the administration of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) made promises when it entered office to begin a political opening, the *apertura democrática*. This political opening included some relatively insignificant electoral reforms but generally produced a climate in which there was hope that the democratic process would be respected. Also there was a great deal of internal ferment in the PRI, as Jesús Reyes Heróles took over the party intending to reinvigorate the party by conducting an internal housecleaning, including lessening the importance of *caciques* in the party. Such internal dissent may have led to both flagging effort on the part of the party machine and efforts by the central party administration to lessen the incidence of fraud. Finally, the opposition PAN mounted its most serious challenge to the PRI ever before in the 1973 deputy races, a mobilization effort which could have diminished the negative correlation between PAN vote and participation.

## **TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

However, whatever the underlying causes of the 1973 anomaly, the 1976 race, including as it did the PAN's abstention from the presidential race,<sup>35</sup> saw the return of the old patterns, even a strengthening of them (compare the correlation coefficients for 1970 and 1976 in Table 1). Moreover, the 1976 race included the most notorious incident of the challenge of abstentionism, a

---

<sup>35</sup>In 1976, internal conflicts kept the PAN from presenting a presidential candidate. As a result, José López Portillo ran an uncontested race. Political cartoonists pictured López Portillo racing against abstentionism.

challenge which helped to provoke an electoral reform in 1977. In 1975-76 the Mexican political system experienced heightened political crisis, a crisis widely perceived as a crisis by political elites and political observers. Apparently, the Mexican electorate shared that perception. Potential voters of various social categories more clearly lined up on the side of the party of non-voters or one of the registered parties. The correlation coefficients for 1976 shown in Table 1 are all significant. This contrasts strongly with earlier elections in which not voting was not so closely identified with particular social groups. Moreover, the correspondence in sign between the correlation coefficients for participation (Table 1) and voting for PRI<sup>36</sup> in 1976 suggests that in 1976 voters saw clearly that to vote for the opposition or to not vote at all were both ways of voting against the regime and the PRI. Because the PAN did not present candidates in several federal deputy races nor for president, many voters simply chose to stay home. Table 2 shows that this heightened social group identification with the party of non-voters happened across most social categories of voters regardless of whether or not the PAN presented a deputy candidate in their district, but this tendency to abstain was more intense in districts where the PAN presented no candidates. This confirms a conclusion which can be drawn from Table 1, namely that the strong correlation between not voting and voting for PAN in 1976 clearly shows that only the PRI was mobilizing voters; the rest of the party system was failing to do so.

### **PARTICIPATION IN THE WAKE OF ELECTORAL REFORM, 1979-1985**

Jesús Reyes Heróles, incoming Secretary of *Gobernación* in 1976, a former president of the PRI and a prominent Mexican liberal, feared the advent of a Mexico racked by barbarity and anarchy, a Mexico in which violent forms of political participation would replace the more pacific

---

<sup>36</sup>Joseph L. Klesner, "Electoral Reform in an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Mexico," Ph.D. dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988, p. 257.

electoral arena. He and other elites had become alarmed by a high incidence (by post-revolutionary Mexican standards) of violent protest in the early 1970s directed against the regime. They worried that increasing abstentionism indicated the growth of a mass of alienated Mexicans available for mobilization into anti-system violence by the left. They sought to redirect the efforts of the potential leaders of those masses by drawing them into the electoral process. Thus, Reyes Heróles initiated a process of political reform in 1977 which altered the electoral system in important ways as the potential leaders of the revolutionary left willingly joined the electoral game, with but modest success before 1988.<sup>37</sup>

The electoral reform measures were designed to confront the perceived challenge of abstentionism in three ways. First, by encouraging new parties to enter the electoral arena, the electoral reform was intended to draw in those who had not been participating because of their dissatisfaction with the choices on the ballot. This measure was primarily directed at those on the left. Its underlying goal was to encourage the left, both leaders and supporters, to abandon non-electoral modes of participation. By extension, the broadening of the party system would hopefully re-legitimize the electoral system with those dissatisfied with their electoral choices, drawing the alienated back into electoral participation.

Second, the reform program included measures which would make poll-watching less dangerous for the opposition and more effective in guaranteeing honest vote counts. Reyes Heróles probably hoped that this would weaken and expose to national attention many of the *caciques* who he would have just as soon excluded from the revolutionary party. From the perspective of the rational

---

<sup>37</sup>Kevin Middlebrook, "Political Liberalization in an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Mexico," in *Elections and Democratization in Latin America, 1980-85* (LaJolla: Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, and Institute of the Americas, University of California at San Diego, 1986); Klesner, "Electoral Reform in an Authoritarian Regime."

voter contemplating electoral participation, though, these measures were intended to improve the possibility of opposition victory and thus lead the voter to upgrade the value of his individual act of voting. Closer races caused by a cleaner electoral process would lead to a more positive evaluation of voting by the individual voter, thus greater rates of participation, especially among those who really had a choice to participate or abstain, those in the cities.

Third, the legislation associated with the electoral reform included an order to the Federal Electoral Commission and the National Registry of Voters to investigate the accuracy of voter registration lists and to carry out a drive to purify them and to register the unregistered. Voter registration drives can be basic efforts to politicize the unpoliticized and to remind those already registered of their duty to vote.

Overall, the intended effects of the electoral reform for participation were, on one hand, to relegitimize the regime and especially the act of voting by having the López Portillo government engage in a very public promise to respect the integrity of the electoral process. The drive to purify the voter registration lists helped to keep this effort in the spotlight after the reforms were implemented. On the other hand, the reform program included measures which would modify the electoral process and the party system to change the voters' calculations of the value of voting, especially among those voters most able to exercise a choice between voting and abstaining. These latter voters, especially among the urban middle class and those of the urban masses not incorporated into the PRI through the PRI's Labor Sector, were those thought to be most alienated and most available for recruitment into more unorthodox modes of participation.

The initial test of this electoral reform came in 1979's deputy elections. The results were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, as Figure 1 makes plain, participation rates plummeted in 1979, dropping below 50 percent of registered voters and to 42 percent of the potential electorate. This

seemed to be a decisive repudiation of the intent of the reform's makers and occasioned a good deal of criticism in the Mexican press.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, some of the stronger social bases of the party of non-voters seemed to have been broken in 1979. With the exception of the measures of traditional culture (indigenous languages spoken), practically no variable showed any significant correlation with electoral participation in 1979 (see Table 1). When compared to the correlations for the 1976 election, this appears to be a drastic change. In 1976, measures of modernization (higher levels of urbanization and education, larger shares of the workforce in manufacturing) were relatively strongly and negatively correlated with participation. In 1979, that relationship no longer held.

In the 1982 and 1985 deputy elections, the apparent lack of social bases for the party of non-voters again surfaced. Even the strong and positive relationship between indigenous language speakers and participation declined in strength. Moreover, the previously significant relationship between voting for the PRI and turnout declined somewhat in strength in the 1979 elections and seemed to disappear in the 1982 elections. In 1976, the correlations between (1) abstaining and voting for the opposition and (2) voting and voting for the PRI were highly significant. In 1979, abstaining and PAN voting were still correlated, although more weakly correlated, but voting and voting for the PRI had declined in strength and statistical significance. In 1982, no significant relationship between the direction of the vote and participation remained, although a weak relationship seems to have reemerged for 1985. How can these new relationships (or lack of relationship) be explained?

In their 1980 survey of workers Charles L. Davis and Kenneth M. Coleman found some socioeconomic and educational correlates of abstention:

---

<sup>38</sup>See, e.g., *Proceso*, nos. 142 (23 July 1979), 144 (6 August 1979), and 147 (27 August 1979).

we might suggest an emerging portrait of the Mexican working-class abstainer: an individual who is (a) slightly *more* educated than other workers, (b) younger than other workers, (c) slightly less likely to be a union member, (d) psychologically somewhat *more* involved in politics, but (e) less likely to believe him/herself capable of influencing Mexican political elites, and (f) inclined to the belief that Mexican elites are not easily influenced.

Moreover, their strongest conclusion was that those who were satisfied with the Mexican political system and who believed that the state was responsive voted while those dissatisfied did not. That is, legitimacy (or diffuse support) and voting go hand in hand.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the main inference to be drawn from the combination of survey and aggregate data analysis is that diffuse support (the grant of legitimacy) was a strong determinant of participation, but there is no strong correlation between diffuse support and the socioeconomic sources of it in Mexico in the late 1970s and 1980s. Whereas in the crisis atmosphere of 1976, there did seem to be a relationship between certain socioeconomic characteristics (urbanization, industrialization, education) and abstention, a relationship mirroring that between the same socioeconomic characteristics and voting for the opposition (especially the PAN), after 1976 and probably because of the introduction of new channelers of participation (the parties on the left), that relationship diminished and nearly disappeared.

Two more specific explanations can be put forth, one applicable to all three post-1977 elections prior to 1988, the other particular to the 1982 election. First, as Rafael Segovia has forcefully argued, the provisions of the new electoral law led to a deflation of previously inflated figures for participation. That is, in 1979 (and subsequently), the reported election figures more closely conformed to the actual behavior of the electorate. A purification of voting lists so that the number of registered voters was now less than the number of potential voters contributed to this

---

<sup>39</sup>"Who Abstains? The Situational Meaning of Nonvoting," *Social Science Quarterly*, 64, 4 (1983), p. 770. The latter point is supported by Mitchell A. Seligson's 1979 survey evidence. "On the Measurement of Diffuse Support: Some Evidence from Mexico," *Social Indicators Research*, 12, 1 (1983), pp. 1-24.



result as did more careful observation of the electoral process by the opposition parties.<sup>40</sup> These factors explain both the decline in participation in 1979 (since many fewer votes were fraudulently registered) and the decline in the salience of the social bases of voting and abstaining (since the previously inflated relationship in the countryside was at least partially undermined).

Some Mexicans, such as Segovia, argued that the decline in participation could be evaluated in a positive light because it indicated a respect for the electoral process and for the political possibility for Mexicans to choose to abstain if they so desired.<sup>41</sup> Those worried about unchanneled potential participants, however, thought differently. Those replacing Reyes Heróles's team at *Gobernación* when he resigned in 1979 were extremely concerned to improve electoral participation for the 1982 presidential campaign.<sup>42</sup> Their effort was two-pronged. First, the National Registry of Voters was charged in 1980 with completely renovating the voter registration lists in a campaign known as the *Programa Padrón Electoral* (Electoral Registry Program). Such a voter registration campaign, we may suppose, would likely raise citizen consciousness of the right and duty to vote. The second prong of the government's get-out-the-vote effort involved both the Federal Electoral Commission and the PRI in a massive media campaign to encourage voting. This included both attention to the various individual presidential candidates, especially the PRI's Miguel de la Madrid, and emphasis on voting itself.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>"Las elecciones federales de 1979," *Foro Internacional*, 20, 3 (1980), pp. 397-399. The number of formal complaints lodged by the opposition grew as a result of the electoral reforms. See Silvia Gómez Tagle, "Democracy and Power in Mexico: The Meaning of Conflict in the 1979, 1982, and 1985 Federal Elections," in *Mexican Politics in Transition*, ed. by Judith Gentleman (Boulder: Westview, 1987).

<sup>41</sup>"Las elecciones federales de 1979," pp. 397-398.

<sup>42</sup>Interviews, 10 May 1984, 21 May 1984.

<sup>43</sup>Middlebrook, "Political Liberalization in an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Mexico," pp. 96-97. Interview, 21 May 1984.

The result was an overwhelming increase in participation (see Figure 1) in the 1982 election. That significantly increased rate of participation, though, did not hold for the 1985 deputy races. Indeed, the post-1977 electoral process seemed to be moving to an accentuated dropoff in turnout between presidential-year elections and all off-year elections, including federal deputy races.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps even a hegemonic party system cannot produce the intensity of interest in off-year elections which will lead to the high levels of electoral participation it prefers. The presidential race, since it includes a long campaign that reaches to all parts of the nation and thus draws intense media coverage, may simply be more efficacious for producing voter interest and participation.

So, the experiences of 1979, 1982, and 1985, when combined with previous examples, seemed to indicate the emergence of a trend: participation would be much higher in presidential elections than in off-year elections. I interpret this to mean that while a majority of Mexicans of all social strata could be mobilized into electoral channels during presidential races, they were not kept there consistently by the institutions of mobilization, the party system and especially the PRI. So long as the potential voters' minds could be focused on the electoral contest, participation would follow, especially if they were encouraged (or herded) to vote by the PRI. However, even the more competitive post-1977 environment and the heightened awareness of the importance of politics during the economic crisis of the 1980s did not insure that voters would be sufficiently motivated. The continued domination of the important elected positions by PRI members probably caused many to downgrade the value of their individual vote: if the PRI was going win anyway, now by a 60 percent to 40 percent margin instead of the previous 80 to 20, how important could a single

---

<sup>44</sup>One of those most closely involved in the voter registration drive told me in 1984 not to expect these rates of participation to continue into the 1985 race because he believed that the plebiscitary nature of Mexican presidential elections brought out a larger number of voters. The implication is that electoral participation will always be lower in non-presidential races. Interview, 21 May 1984.

voter's ballot be? This probably was particularly salient when the voter was asked to choose among candidates for elected posts which mattered very little in policy making. Thus, absent a strong effort at mobilization by the PRI or the government, presidential races could be expected to produce greater participation than did other contests because in a presidential election *the* important policy maker was to be chosen. At the same time, the 1977 electoral reforms instituted some measures which slightly diminished the cost of *not* voting. For all these reasons, many rational voters probably chose to abstain, especially in off-year elections.

### **THE ARRIVAL OF COMPETITION AND MORE ELECTORAL REFORM: 1988-94**

Into this pattern of electoral politics stepped Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1988, and Mexican politics will clearly never be the same. Carlos Salinas defeated Cárdenas in a fraud-ridden election in which the Federal Election Commission's computer was announced to have “crashed” and nearly half of the ballots were never released for inspection. The announced results, however, showed Cárdenas pushing well ahead of the PAN's Manuel Clouthier to seize second in the presidential race, thereby putting the PRI on notice that it faced a serious challenger and threatening to marginalize the PAN. Party competition was stimulated as never before as Cárdenas helped to found the PRD, Salinas sought to reinvigorate the PRI, and the PAN learned to exploit the intense and often violent conflict between the PRI and the PRD to position itself as the responsible opposition. Because the 1988 results were so doubted, strong demands for further electoral reforms rose from across the political spectrum, electoral reforms that would have clear consequences for electoral participation and its role in the Mexican political system.

One reaction to the fraud-tainted official results of the 1988 election might be to completely discard them as useless for analytical purposes. However, by hook or by crook the PRI and the government did manufacture a majority for Carlos Salinas. How did they do so? In particular,

where did they find votes, or to which territories did they ascribe them anyway? Table 3 indicates that the traditional capacity of the party system to turn out voters at a higher rate in districts more heavily populated by illiterates reappeared in 1988. Interestingly, though, turnout was also positively correlated with a measure of urbanization that uses a 50,000 population threshold for urbanization. A possible explanation for this seeming anomaly is the following: the PRI captured the votes of those who traditionally cannot vote against it, especially illiterates, and the vote was, as usual, exaggerated in some rural settings as the PRI sought to maximize its vote total, but at the same time the PRI and the government could not disqualify the votes of urban voters after the fact because of the scrutiny of the press and the public in big cities. Settings other than these may have produced lower turnout if the PRI could not produce a "vote of the herds" and perhaps even had to engage in *post facto* discarding of opposition votes to keep its margin of victory. That some elimination of votes took place seems intuitively correct given that reported turnout in 1988 was low (see Figure 1) despite the highly contested character of the campaign itself.

### **TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE**

Turnout was also positively correlated with the PRI vote in 1988, again not out of line with traditional results, and turnout was again inversely correlated with PAN vote. To give a clearer sense of the interaction of these variables, Table 4 presents a multiple regression model that includes literacy, urbanization, and party vote percentages as independent variables.<sup>45</sup> The results reported in Table 4 indicate that, controlling for literacy and urbanization, turnout is positively associated with PRI voting and quite negatively associated with PAN voting. This suggests that alienation (expressed by abstentionism) and opposition (expressed by PAN voting) were concentrated in the

---

<sup>45</sup>I entered the party vote percentages into the model one at a time because adding more than one tends to produce severe multicollinearity in the model.

same districts.

The Salinas *sexenio* was marked by much greater electoral contestation, which came in state-level and municipal elections as well as the mid-term congressional elections. Smarting from the experience of 1988, both major parties of opposition made electoral reform a priority. While the Salinas administration, blessed by a bare majority in the Chamber of Deputies in its first three years, made retaining a PRI majority in the Chamber through a governability clause its major goal in negotiations for reform, the oppositions focused on the transparency of the electoral process, intending thereby to limit the capacity of the PRI and the government to perpetrate fraud and to level the playing field on which all parties played. On the former complaint, the opposition parties made more progress than on the latter, and of the two, transparency has the greatest consequence for participation.

Despite the advances of the 1977 electoral reforms, aspects of the electoral process remained suspect: the accuracy of the electoral register (where many opposition supporters found their names absent when they appeared to vote), the capacity of the PRI to stuff the ballot box, the fairness of the vote count itself remained issues because the Federal Electoral Institute continued to be dominated by the PRI and its allies. Throughout the Salinas term, the opposition kept pressing the government to enact reforms that would create a truly independent electoral authority and contribute to a fairer and cleaner electoral process. Reforms were made as late as June 1994 for the August 1994 elections. Progress was made in the following areas: a completely new voter registration list was created and each voter received a new voter registration card with his or her picture on it that was supposedly tamper-proof, both domestic and international observers were granted greater access to the electoral process, the autonomy of the Federal Electoral Institute was increased, the vote counting procedure was made simpler and voting results were to be issued for

28

even the precinct level, and stiffer penalties were created for those caught in acts of electoral fraud.<sup>46</sup>

As a result, the electoral process is cleaner and more subject to observation than was true in the mid 1980s when the PRI stole many elections in northern Mexico as it responded to the pressures of the PAN's surge there. At the same time, in southern Mexico, especially in rural localities where the opposition has no presence and the national media do not enter, where the PRD forms the PRI's major opposition, these measures do not in themselves ensure clean elections.

In the realm of contestation, Salinas sought to "modernize" the PRI. One aspect of modernization involved creating a more democratic image for the party. The more democratic PRI would use internal primaries to select its candidates for office and it would recognize its losses when they occurred. Moreover, it would replace its sectoral organization and the bloc affiliation associated with the sectors with individual affiliation and geographical organization, similar to the organization of parties in the U.S. These efforts failed for the most part. Internal primaries were used sparingly; they tended to exacerbate divisions already existing in state and local party organizations and the president was unwilling to completely give up the opportunities for distributing patronage offered by the more traditional presidential designation of PRI nominees. Opposition victories in state and local elections were recognized, but selectively, and often despite local PRI unwillingness to admit its defeats. Salinas had to use presidential power to get PRI candidates to resign after they claimed victory in gubernatorial races marked by electoral fraud. And, threatened by the demonstrated strength of the left in 1988, Salinas permitted the PRI to use fraud and intimidation against the PRD even while encouraging the PRI to recognize PAN victories.

Another, more successful aspect of PRI modernization involved the introduction of more

---

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the electoral reforms of the Salinas term, see The Carter Center, *Elections in Mexico*, 3rd Report (Atlanta: The Carter Center of Emory University, 1 August 1994).

sophisticated campaigning tools: computers, polls, and better organization of the campaign. Under the leadership of Luis Donaldo Colosio (later assassinated during his presidential campaign in 1994), a massive effort was unveiled in 1989 to create a network of get-out-the-vote promoters coordinated by the PRI's state organizations with connections down to the most intimate level of Mexican society. The plan targeted the 115 most important cities in the country. The plan also used a system of national surveys which were designed to allow the PRI organization to tailor its candidacies and the campaigns of its nominees to meet the demands of the particular districts. While the PRI has always been able to mount a far larger and more richly funded campaign than its opposition, this was an unprecedented effort to reclaim the grassroots. Of course, such a massive effort could have been undertaken only with the support of government resources. But whether the PRI played fair in this effort or not, it produced results in 1991 as the PRI's vote share in the federal deputy races increased to 61 percent from the 50 percent to which it had fallen in 1988. Electoral participation was up too, from 1988's 50 percent total to 66 percent.

Taking place in the aftermath of the electoral reforms and the efforts to improve the PRI's electoral performance described above, the 1991 and 1994 elections produced the highest voter turnouts in memory for midterm and presidential elections, respectively (see Figure 1). This, rather than the low official figures for electoral participation in the 1988 election, is what we would expect in a society in the midst of change from hegemonic party rule. Furthermore, the 1990s have brought dramatic change in the social bases of voter turnout. This can be seen very clearly in Tables 3 and 4. Comparing Tables 3 and 1 will indicate that the social bases of participation have completely reversed. Instead of the counterintuitive social bases of high turnout described in the first section of this paper, in 1994 high turnout was associated with the measures of socioeconomic modernization we have come to expect in competitive democracies. Turnout was higher in more

30

urban districts, districts with higher scores on educational variables, and districts with fewer economically active residents in agriculture and more in manufacturing. The multiple regression model displayed in Table 4 has robust explanatory power and the sign of the literacy variable changed direction. Moreover, in an outcome hard to explain other than by a cleaner vote count, the PAN percentage of the vote has become positively associated with turnout while the PRI percentage has become negatively associated with electoral participation. That the PRD vote share is also negatively associated with turnout (in 1994) reinforces the fraud-related explanation because the PRI and the government continued to perpetrate electoral fraud in those states and districts in which the PRD posed a strong opposition to the PRI. That result is clear whether one considers the simple zero-order correlation coefficient for the PRD vote (Table 3) or the PRD variable in the multiple regression model which controls for the other explanatory variables (Table 4).

#### **TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE**

To what extent can these surprising statistics on electoral turnout in the 1990s be explained by changes in the electoral process, and to what degree might they be due to the increasing contestation in the electoral arena? Table 5 adds one piece of additional evidence. It shows that as districts become more competitive, participation rates rise except where the PRD is the principal opposition in a two-party race. This suggests that perhaps contestation now shapes turnout in the majority of electoral districts in Mexico, *where the PRI is willing to play fair*, that is, where it does not face the PRD. The rancor between the PRI and the PRD, led by many former PRI activists and integrating in many places former PRI supporters, both individual and group, has become extremely harsh. As this evidence indicates, that rancor can be felt even in the official electoral participation rates.

The latter comments suggest, however, that contestation may play a less significant role in



producing the higher rates of participation in the 1990s than the implementation of electoral rules that inhibit the exercise of fraud, even where selectively applied primarily against the PRD. To try to sort out the separate effects of electoral competition and electoral reform, I created an piecewise multiple regression model which pools the results of the 1979-1994 federal elections.<sup>47</sup> Each of the independent variables used in the earlier models for each individual election (Table 4) were divided into two, one of which takes on the values of the independent variable for the elections of 1979, 1982, 1985, and 1988 and the value zero for 1991 and 1994; the other takes on the value zero for the elections of 1979, 1982, 1985, and 1988 and the value of the independent variable for the elections of 1991 and 1994. If the electoral reforms implemented before the elections of 1991 and 1994 had any effect on turnout, the regression coefficients of each pair of variables should differ significantly. In a variation on this model, I include two variables measuring competitiveness. One is the ratio of PAN votes to PRI votes, the other is the ratio of votes of the largest party of the independent left (the PRD and its predecessors) to PRI votes. These variables serve a function similar to that of the PRI, PAN, and PRD shares of the vote in the model reported in Table 4, but avoid the possibility of endogeneity in the model.<sup>48</sup> The piecewise model also includes dichotomous variables for each election except the first (1979); the coefficients of those variables can be interpreted as the adjustment of the intercept term (the constant) necessary for each election.<sup>49</sup>

#### **TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE**

---

<sup>47</sup> Here I follow Juan Molinar and Jeffrey Weldon, "Elecciones de 1988 en México: crisis de autoritarismo," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 52, 4 (October-December 1990): 229-262.

<sup>48</sup> Endogeneity may result because the numerator of the dependent variable (participation rate) and the denominator of one independent variable (PRI, PAN, or PRD share) are the same—i.e., total votes. Recognizing this possibility, I have included the model reported in Table 4 nonetheless for its heuristic value and the ease of interpreting its regression coefficients.

<sup>49</sup> By incorporating these dichotomous variables, I am also indicating that I do not assume that the same error

The results of this model (Table 6) indicate that the changes in the electoral process in the 1990s have very powerful effects on participation. In particular, up through 1988 participation was inversely related to literacy, in the ways described earlier for participation in a hegemonic party system characterized by pervasive *caciquismo*. In the 1990s, however, higher literacy rates are strongly associated with higher participation rates, as expected in fair and competitive democratic elections. Very significantly, adding measures of competitiveness to the simple model produce no increase in total explanatory power (compare the  $R^2$  terms for each variation of the model), and of those competitiveness variables, only PAN competitiveness in the 1991 and 1994 elections is statistically significant (i.e., a tighter contest between the PAN and the PRI produces a higher turnout). Again, we expect this in fair and competitive elections. *The most important conclusion to draw from Table 6 is that changes in the electoral process—greater transparency in voting and vote counting and perhaps a more competitive electoral arena nationally—explain variance in voter participation better than the district-level competitiveness of the parties.* This emphasizes the centrality of electoral reform for the transformation of electoral participation patterns in the transition process from hegemonic party systems to more competitive party systems.

## CONCLUSIONS

With the 1994 elections, Mexico may have emerged from a long history under a hegemonic party system. Early results in the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) indicate a continuation of the increased contestation of the Salinas term (1988-1994). PAN members now sit in four governors' seats and govern the majority of large municipalities. The PRD continues to protest a gubernatorial election it claims was stolen from it, in part by illegally massive PRI use of government financial resources, in Tabasco. This increasing contestation, especially if progress

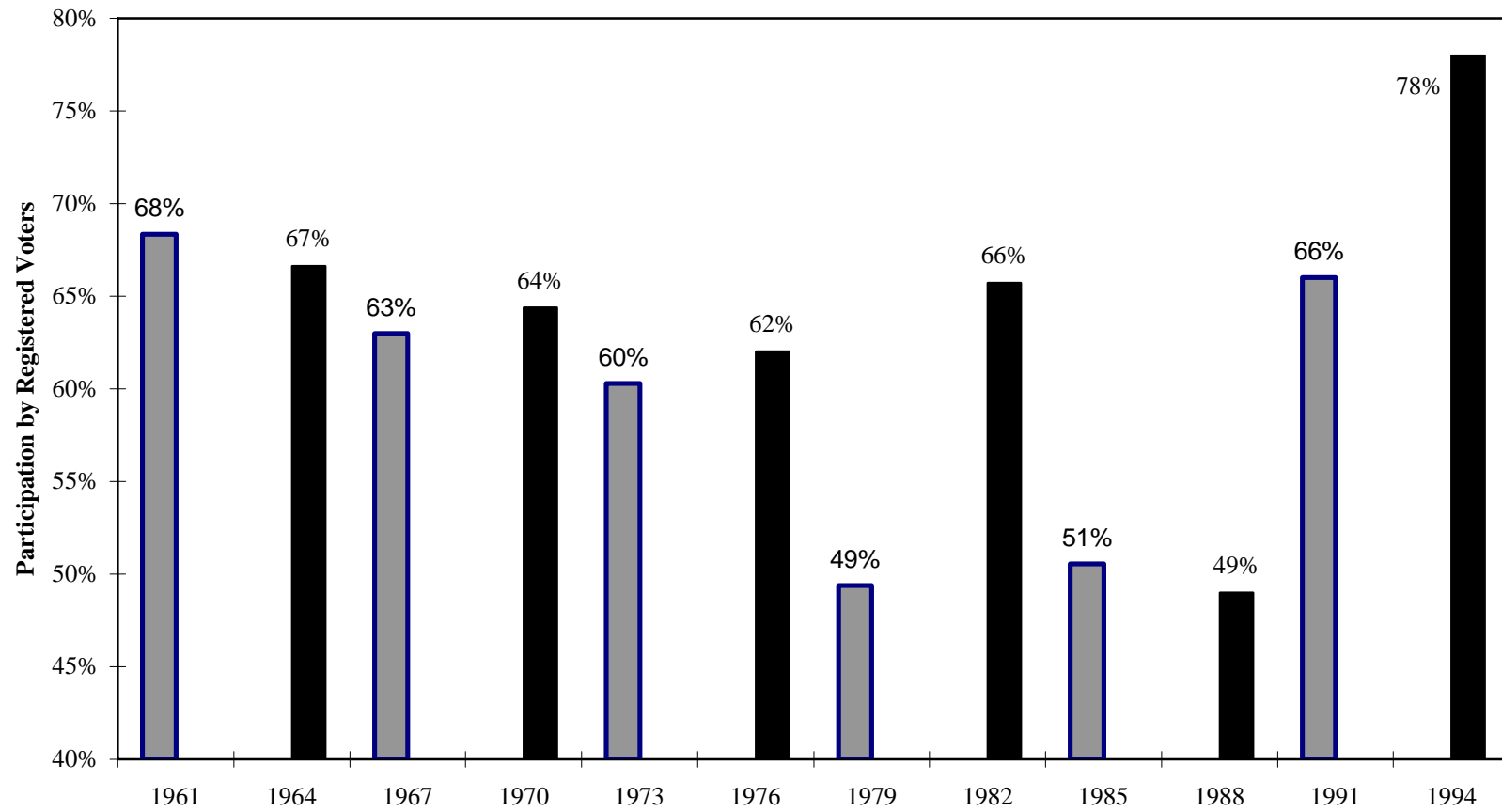
---

process applies for the model for all six elections.

continues to be made in respect for the sanctity of the voting and vote counting processes, should create incentives for Mexicans to continue to turn out on election day in the numbers they have recently shown.

The enigmas of electoral participation in hegemonic party systems, that turnout is higher in the areas most backward by the usual measures of socioeconomic modernization and that it is higher where contestation is least felt, can be explained by the capacities of such systems to shape voter calculations of cost and benefit so that *not voting* is very threatening. *Caciquismo* can thus shape the voter's calculus, especially where the legal recourse of the opposition is limited and where the opposition's political power is weak, as it was throughout most of Mexico until the past decade or so. But when the opposition develops the power to effectively demand that the electoral rules be changed to inhibit the practices of electoral machines, progress can be made on removing these enigmas. The process of transition from hegemonic party rule in Mexico has not been smooth, but progress there is. As contestation rises, voters become more confident that their votes can count and that they might actually be counted, especially when the opposition is able to parlay its growing strength into electoral reforms that improve the transparency of the electoral process. Then such voters can turn out on election day to cast votes that contribute to democratic choices and to democracy itself.

**Figure 1**  
**Mexican Electoral Participation**



**Table 1**

Correlations Between Electoral Participation by Potential Voters and Selected Structural Variables, 1967-1985

	<i>1967</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1973</i>	<i>1976</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1982</i>	<i>1985</i>
Urbanization (>5,000)	-.14**	-.11*	.10	-.25***	.03	-.09*	-.08*
Urbanization (>20,000)	-.09	-.07	-.01	-.28***	.03	-.08*	-.08*
% Speaking No Spanish	.24***	.27***	.20***	.28***	.21***	.16***	.17***
Literacy	-.16**	-.24***	-.10*	-.30***	-.21***	-.13***	-.09*
Post-Primary Education	.07	.04	.17***	-.27***	-.05	-.13***	-.10**
% EAP in Agriculture	.10*	.16**	-.15**	.45***	.09*	.06	.05
% EAP Manufacturing	-.08	-.11*	.21***	-.42***	-.07	.04	.03
PRI Vote	.22***	.16**	-.11*	.35***	.08	.05	.14***
PAN Vote	-.18***	-.14**	.18***	-.28***	-.15***	-.08*	-.18***

\*\*\*significant at .01 level \*\*significant at .05 level \*significant at .10 level

Participation defined as valid votes divided by population aged 21 and older (1967), aged 18 and older (1970-85).

N = 184 to 290 federal electoral districts (some districts missing due to missing data).

**Table 2**

Correlations Between Electoral Participation and Socioeconomic Variables, Controlling for PAN Participation, 1976

	<i>All Districts</i>	<i>PAN Contested</i>	<i>No PAN</i>
Urbanization (>2,500)	-.25	-.13	-.50
Urbanization (>20,000)	-.28	-.17	-.53
% EAP in Primary Sector	.53	.51	.56
% EAP in Secondary Sector	-.36	-.29	-.54
% EAP in Tertiary Sector	-.56	-.59	-.47
N=	186	129	57

Zero-order Pearson's correlation coefficients. All coefficients significant at the .05 level.

**Table 3**

Correlations Between Electoral Participation by Registered Voters  
and Selected Structural Variables, 1979-1994

	1979	1982	1985	1988	1994
Urbanization (>5,000)	.04	.01	-.05	-.04	.56**
Urbanization (>20,000)	.04	.03	-.04	.12*	.31**
Literacy	-.15**	-.02	-.07	-.12*	.54**
Post-Primary Education	-.02	.12*	.03	-.04	.48**
% EAP in Agriculture	.01	-.12*	-.02	.07	-.58**
% EAP Manufacturing	.12*	.26**	.17**	.00	.48**
PRI Vote	.09	-.07	.13*	.13*	-.43**
PAN Vote	-.15**	.01	-.24**	-.13*	.55**
Left/FDN/PRD Vote	.03	.21**	.14**	-.04	-.28**

\*\*significant at .01 level \*significant at .05 level

Participation defined as valid votes divided by registered electorate (*padrón* for 1979-1988; *lista nominal* for 1994).

N = 300 federal electoral districts.

**Table 4**

## Determinants of Electoral Participation

## A Multiple Regression Model

	1988	1988	1988	1991	1991	1991	1994	1994	1994
Constant	.43***	.48***	.55***	.44***	.23***	.22***	.58***	.51***	.48***
Literacy	-.12	-.12	-.19**	.50***	.55***	.56***	.29***	.21***	.32***
Urbanization	.17***	.18***	.14**	-.02	.04	.04	.03	.04*	.05**
PRI Vote	.08*	--	--	-.19***	--	--	-.16***	--	--
PAN Vote	--	-.14**	--	--	-.01	--	--	.20***	--
FDN/PRD Vote	--	--	-.02	--	--	.09	--	--	-.07**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.06	.04	.40	.36	.37	.39	.42	.37
F	6.98	7.31	5.29	64.00	55.50	56.40	63.87	72.99	59.89

\*\*\*significant at .001 level \*\*significant at .01 level \*significant at .05 level

Dependent variable = electoral participation of registered voters in the presidential election (defined as *padrón* for 1988 and 1991; *lista nominal* for 1994).

N = 300 federal electoral districts.



**Table 5**

Electoral Participation and District Competitiveness, 1994

	<i>Participation Rate</i>
Strong Hegemony	72%
Weak Hegemony	72%
Bipartism/PRD as second party	70%
Bipartism/PAN as second party	81%
Multipartism	79%
Opposition Victories	83%
National Average	77%

Participation rate = votes as a percentage of the legally eligible electorate (i.e., the *lista nominal*, those eligible who are both registered and in possession of a voting credential).

District competitiveness as defined in Leopoldo Gómez and John Bailey, "La transición política y los dilemas del PRI," *Foro International*, 31, 1 (July-September 1990), p. 69. The competitiveness figures for 1994 were calculated by the author.

**Table 6**

## Determinants of Electoral Participation

A Piecewise Pooled Cross-Sectional Time-Series Multiple Regression Model

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Simple Model</i>	<i>Model with Contestation</i>
Constant	.52***	.52***
Urbanization 1979-88	.03***	.04***
Literacy 1979-88	-.07***	-.07***
Urbanization 1991-94	.05	.03
Literacy 1991-94	.44***	.40***
PAN Competitiveness 1979-88	--	-.02
Left Competitiveness 1979-88	--	.01
PAN Competitiveness 1991-94	--	.04*
PRD Competitiveness 1991-94	--	.03
1982 Election	.19***	.19***
1985 Election	.19***	.20***
1988 Election	.02	.01
1991 Election	-.19***	-.16***
1994 Election	-.15***	-.14**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.55	.55
F	229.83	160.34

N=1740 (290 districts, 6 elections; districts from Oaxaca not included).