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POLITICAL REFORM IN MEXICO: SALINAS'S OTHER REVOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari is well-known in the United States for his free market economic reform program and for pushing the Free Trade Area Agreement with the U.S. These will revolutionize Mexico's economy.

Less well-known north of the Rio Grande is the political revolution which he is leading. So far he has championed the successful July 1990 passage in the Mexican Congress of a new national electoral law, known as the Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures (COFIPE). This law has made possible such reforms as the creation of the non-partisan Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) to oversee elections and the multiparty Federal Electoral Tribunal to settle election disputes. Salinas also mandated the creation of a new voter registration list, the issuing of new voting credentials, and multiparty observation of polling stations on election day.¹ More important, future political reforms on his agenda likely could include tighter restrictions on the use of government resources during campaigns, a more thorough and accurate voter registration process, and a quicker count of the voting booth tallies.

Strong Popular Support. Salinas's twin revolutions this summer won a strong vote of confidence in the August 18 mid-term elections. Mexicans voted over 3-to-1 in favor of his party, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). This demonstrated popular support for Salinas's platform of improved relations

¹ See "The Mexican Agenda," 11th Edition, The Office of the President of the Republic of Mexico, April 1991, pp. 69-75.

with the U.S., free trade, free market reform, and anti-drug and anti-corruption efforts.

The PRI's strong showing now could give Salinas the clear mandate that he needs to hasten the pace of economic and political reform in Mexico, possibly even including constitutional changes to increase foreign investment in Mexico's state-dominated economic sectors, and launch badly needed agrarian reform.

Poor Opposition Showing. Mexico's leading opposition parties, the center-conservative National Action Party (PAN) and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), fared poorer than expected in the elections, receiving roughly 18 percent and 8 percent of the vote respectively. The PRI, under the leadership of Salinas and his team of pro-free market reformers, swept the elections with an estimated 61 percent of the total vote. In an August 21 press conference in Mexico City, Salinas called the electoral results "a confirmation that people want the [free market and democratic] changes to continue," and stressed that the PRI is offering the Mexicans tangible reforms and a clear vision of what is in store for their future.²

By all indications, the elections were without a doubt the cleanest in the 62 years that the PRI has governed Mexico. Incidents of ballot box tampering, voter intimidation, and the busing of PRI supporters to polling stations, which were commonplace in past elections, were isolated and restricted mostly to local level races. According to official figures released by the IFE, only one in every 860 polling stations nationwide reported irregularities. This represents less than one percent of all the voting installations in Mexico.³

There is much at stake for the U.S. in Salinas's political reform program. Free and fair elections in Mexico will burnish the allure of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would create the world's largest and most dynamic market.⁴ American opponents of the trade negotiations with Mexico, including protectionists in the U.S. Congress, labor unions, some human rights groups, and some environmental organizations, charge that Mexico's suspect democratic credentials disqualify Mexico from joining in a North American economic alliance. But by August's fair elections, the Salinas government has punctured that argument and removed this potential obstacle to Mexico's inclusion in the free trade pact.

Fostering Economic Prosperity. For Mexico, the NAFTA will help foster sustained economic growth through expanded trade and investment in a North American market comprising 360 million people and \$6 trillion in annual output. This

2 Tim Golden, "Mexican Says Vote Vindicates Change," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1991, p. A7.

3 Information provided by Ambassador Santiago Oñate, Mexico's Permanent Representative to the Organization of American States, at a September 30 meeting in Washington of The Heritage Foundation Mexico Working Group.

4 The NAFTA would remove such barriers to trade as tariffs and quotas and seek a broad liberalization in the commerce of goods, services and investment between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

economic prosperity, in turn, will help sustain Salinas's political reforms and bolster Mexico's political stability. Mexico's political reforms and participation in the NAFTA also will play pivotal roles in advancing George Bush's Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (EAI), which seeks to create a Western Hemisphere free trade zone and a foundation for continued democratic progress throughout the region. Without the active participation of a democratic and pro-free market Mexico, the EAI would have little chance of success.

Political Turning Point. The August 18 elections for all of the 500-seat House of Deputies, half of the 64-member Senate, six of Mexico's 31 governorships, and hundreds of local assembly seats, coming at the mid-point of Salinas's six-year presidential term, were a historic turning point for Mexico. The PRI, which long has dominated Mexican politics, often through vote fraud, intimidation, and government handouts, proved that it could win elections legitimately, though the victory largely was due to Salinas's popularity. Confirming Salinas's popularity, an August 9 pre-election public opinion survey published by the U.S.-based Gallup Organization, Inc., gave Salinas a 80 percent approval rating and revealed that 70 percent of the Mexican people feel that the country is moving in the right direction.⁵

U.S.-Mexico relations have been on the upswing for over three years. One reason is that the Salinas administration is championing free trade, free market reform, and privatization of state-owned industries in the Western Hemisphere. Other reasons for improved U.S.-Mexico ties include the Salinas government's full-scale assault on the international drug trade, improved human rights record, and expanded cooperation with Washington on such border issues as illegal immigration, crime, and the environment. These unprecedented initiatives never would have been possible without a parallel policy of political reform in Mexico.

Tremendous Stake. The U.S. and Bush Administration have a tremendous stake in the success of Salinas. Not only does the U.S. share a 1,933-mile border with Mexico, but Hispanic Americans, 25 million strong, are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. Their population is expected to reach 34.8 million by the year 2000. Moreover, political and economic distress in Mexico could cause an upheaval which, according to some U.S. government estimates, could result in as many as 10 million refugees fleeing northward into the U.S. This would create enormous economic and social problems for American border states.⁶ Under the leadership of both Salinas and Bush, however, two nations that once were distant neighbors have developed over the past three years into economic and political partners. Relations between the two countries are better today than at any point in history.

5 "A Proud Country Advances Economically and Politically," poll results released by The Gallup Organization, Inc., August 9, 1991.

6 See Michael G. Wilson, "The Security Component of U.S.-Mexico Relations," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 688, January 26, 1989, p. 2.

THE 1991 ELECTIONS: A TEST CASE FOR SALINAS

The August 18 mid-term elections were in effect a plebiscite on the first three years of the Salinas administration. In this plebiscite, the Mexican people supported Salinas's economic and political reforms. These elections also were the first large-scale test of Salinas's electoral reform program and could help institutionalize democratic procedures and institutions in Mexico.

Yet the elections still raised questions about the credibility of Mexico's electoral process. Isolated campaign and voting booth irregularities were reported throughout the country, including the use of government funds to promote PRI candidates, ballot box stuffing, and voter list tampering. But by past standards, these incidents were very minor and did not account for the PRI sweep. This is certain because credible independent pre-election polls and exit polls found a strong PRI showing. These polls in fact, predicted that the ruling party would win some 62 percent of the vote—virtually the same share as the official post-election tally. Nevertheless, the electoral irregularities underscored that the Mexican government must continue moving ahead with political reform and must act quickly to punish those guilty of vote fraud.

An Early Test Case. Six weeks before the August 18 nationwide elections, key elections were held in the important industrial and border state of Nuevo Leon. This July 7 balloting was the first major test of Salinas's political reform program. The PRI carried Nuevo Leon by a 2-to-1 margin. Most important, the PRI did this with little or no vote tampering and with no violence. According to Jose Natividad Gonzalez Paras, the President of Nuevo Leon's Electoral Commission, "[election] irregularities were observed in only 0.8 percent of the polling places," and "though there was some criticism, the process has been [applauded] by political parties, business organizations, civic groups, the church, and by citizens in general."⁷

Socrates Rizzo, the PRI's candidate for Nuevo Leon governor and former mayor of the state capital of Monterrey, won the gubernatorial contest with 63 percent of the vote—basically the same percentage of the vote received by the PRI at the national level on August 18. In a better than expected showing, PAN candidate Rogelio Sada Zambrano came in second with 32 percent of the vote, while the PRD's Lucas de la Garza received only 2.7 percent. The PRI also won 25 of 26 state deputy seats and one proportional seat, the PAN won one directly elected seat and 12 through proportional allotment, while the PRD won only one proportional seat. With a 60 percent turnout of those registered, voter participation also was much higher than in previous years.

7 Gonzalez Paras made this statement at a July 22 meeting at the Mexican Embassy in Washington.

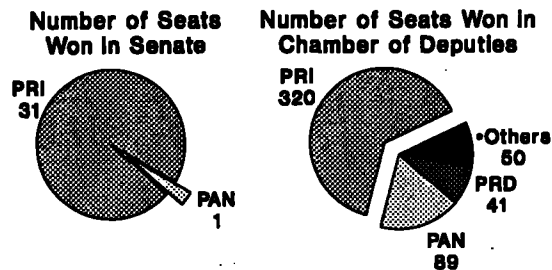
The Mid-Term Elections

At stake in the August 18 elections were half of the Mexican Senate's 64 seats, all 500 seats in the federal House of Deputies, hundreds of state-level assembly seats and the governorships of the states of Campeche, Colima, Guanajuato, Sonora, San Luis Potosi, and Queretero. These were also the first nationwide elections of the Salinas era and the only such election until a new president is chosen in July 1994.

In the mid-term elections, House of Deputies members were elected through both "majority" and "proportional" systems of electoral representation. In a majority vote election, the winner is the candidate that receives the most votes in a specific district or state. In some local, state, and federal elections, however, parties also are awarded additional representatives based on the proportion of the total vote that the party receives. All senators and 300 federal deputies were elected by a majority vote; 200 federal deputies were elected by proportional allotment.⁸ This guarantees that all parties winning at least 1.5 percent of the total vote receive representation in the Mexican Congress.

The August 18 voting was the most closely scrutinized national elections in Mexico's history. In it, the PRI won five of six governorship races, losing only in Guanajuato, 31 of the 32 seats contested for the Senate and 290 of the 300 directly elected Deputy seats. Additionally, the PRI will receive 30 of the 200 proportionally selected Deputy seats, and approximately 80 percent of the local seats for state deputies.

Mexico's Mid-Term Elections: August 18, 1991



PRI: Institutional Revolutionary Party
PAN: National Action Party
PRD: Party of the Democratic Revolution
•Others: Party of the Cardenista Front of National Reconstruction, Popular Socialist Party, Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution

Heritage DataChart

⁸ For more information see Arturo Nunez Jimenez, "El Nuevo Sistema Electoral," Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1991.

The PAN placed second in the polls with about 18 percent of the national vote and won the governor's race in the state of Guanajuato. It also picked up one of the 32 contested Senate seats. This was in the Pacific coast state of Baja California, where the PAN won the governor's seat in 1989. The PAN also won 10 federal deputy seats through direct election. Its second place vote share led Mexico's states to award it 79 seats through proportional allotment. The PRD finished a distant third with some 9 percent of the total vote. It won no directly contested federal seats and 41 through the proportional system.⁹

By winning 320 of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the PRI by itself will not be able to amend the constitution to lay the groundwork for reforms to modernize Mexico's oil industry, open Mexico to greater foreign investment, and to pave the way for the reform of Mexico's communal agricultural system. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds vote in the Mexican Congress. Nevertheless, with over 30 seats slated to go to PRI legislative allies, including the Party of the National Cardenista Reconstruction Front or PFCRN,¹⁰ the PRI almost will surely control the 334 votes it needs to push through amendments. The PRI's ability to challenge outdated constitutional laws, such as provisions that mandate state control over Mexico's agricultural and energy sectors, also should be bolstered by the PAN's likely support for Salinas's future free market reforms.¹¹

Disputes Over Election "Irregularities." Because of the lopsided results in favor of the PRI and allegations of election irregularities, the PAN and the floundering PRD questioned the vote tally in several key elections, most notably in the hotly contested governors' races in the central states of San Luis Potosi and Guanajuato. These were the only two, out of Mexico's 31 states, where the opposition had a realistic chance of defeating the PRI.

In an unprecedented political move in San Luis Potosi, the PAN and the PRD joined forces to back a single candidate, Salvador Nava Martinez, to challenge the PRI's candidate Fausto Zapata Loredo. The final results gave the PRI 61.1 percent of the vote, to the opposition coalition's 31.6 percent. Nava, a 77-year-old political activist, denounced the election as "the biggest and most elaborate fraud ever perpetrated with the help of computer technology."¹² The PRI denied Nava's charges and has challenged him to prove fraud. So far Nava has not been able to do so. With the support of PAN leader Luis H. Alvarez and PRD leader Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, Nava refused to lodge an official complaint with the state

9 For more information see Joe Keenan "The Empire Strikes Back," *El Financiero International*, September 2, 1991, p. 13, and Tim Golden, "In Mexican Politics, the More it Reforms the More it's the Same," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1991, p. E4.

10 The PFCRN is a centrist party, whose ties to PRD leader Cuauhtemoc Cardenas are in name only. While it once supported Cardenas, the PFCRN since has dropped its left-wing platform and now is an ally of the PRI.

11 Keenan, *op. cit.*

12 See Andrea Dabrowski, "Mexican Vote Tally Angers Opposition," *The Washington Post*, August 22, 1991, p. A15.

electoral authorities, as Mexico's electoral law requires, claiming at an August 21 Mexico City press conference that "Behind them is the PRI. We do not trust them."

There had been great concern that the September 26 governor's inauguration in San Luis Potosi would be marred by protests and violence by opposition supporters. Nava stated several times following the August 18 election that he would assume the position as the state's "moral governor" and would challenge Zapata's inauguration through civil disobedience and public rallies. Nevertheless, the ceremony, attended by Salinas, attracted only a few protests and no violence. Most Mexican and U.S. observers, moreover, believe that whatever few isolated voting "irregularities" took place, they were not sufficient to change the outcome of the vote.

Governor-Elect Steps Down. The PRI's Ramon Aguirre won the governorship of Guanajuato with 53 percent of the vote, against 35 percent for his PAN rival Vincente Fox, and 8 percent for Porfirio Munoz Ledo of the PRD. After the election, the PAN complained of vote fraud and unleashed street demonstrations. As a result, Aguirre declared on August 29 that he would not take office. The reason: he wanted to avoid "threats of violence and intolerance" from sweeping the state and turning it into a political battleground.

Although it surrendered the governor's seat, the PRI leadership in Mexico City maintains that their party won the election cleanly, pointing out that independent pre-election polls showed Aguirre leading the governorship race with 53.5 percent of the vote. They stress that the decision for Aguirre to step down was made for the "good of the country and Mexican democracy." Another likely factor in the decision, however, was concern that the PAN's anger over losing the race could lead it to join in a national anti-PRI coalition with the PRD. PAN leaders, in fact, had threatened following August 18 to end the tenuous cooperation that they recently had maintained with the PRI in the Mexican Congress. Some PAN factions had even threatened to boycott Salinas's November 1 State of the Union address to the Mexican Congress, as well as the 1994 presidential elections.

As a result of Aguirre's resignation, the PAN won an important political victory on August 30 when Carlos Medina Plascencia, the PAN mayor of the city of Leon, was named by the state Congress interim governor of Guanajuato. The announcement was met with disbelief by approximately 700 local PRI hardliners who, in defiance of the PRI leadership in Mexico City, occupied the state Congress for 36 hours in an attempt to prevent state deputies from choosing an interim governor. Medina, nevertheless, took office on September 26, claiming that his main objective as governor is to "revive the electoral list and do all that is necessary to guarantee clean and free elections."

PRI Victory Predicted. Because of the PRD's poor showing in the elections and its declining popularity in Mexico, PRD leader Cardenas is trying to question the legitimacy of the entire election process—something that no other party is doing. According to Sergio Sarmiento, a leading newspaper columnist and radio commentator in Mexico City, Cardenas claimed that the elections "were the big-

gest fraud [Mexico] has ever seen." Yet, Sarmiento points out, "a series of pre-electoral opinion surveys, conducted by different polling organizations and sponsored by institutions of all political persuasions, consistently showed the PRI winning nationwide with 60-to-64 percent of the vote. An election day exit poll conducted by a Gallup affiliate on the day of the voting forecast a PRI victory with 62 percent of the ballots." Sarmiento stresses that "It is hard to believe that all of these surveys would have come so close in percentage terms to the results of massively fraudulent elections."¹³

Instances of traditional electoral fraud at the national level, such as ballot box stuffing or stealing and voter intimidation, were few and far between on August 18 according to Sarmiento. Those irregularities that did occur, including the incomplete distribution of voter registration cards, isolated allegations of ballot-box stuffing or stealing, the barring of poll-watchers, the selective closing of polling stations, and the delayed release of the computerized results, nevertheless give ammunition to Salinas's opponents and have prevented the PRI from winning the unquestioned electoral triumph it wanted.

Cooperation Threatened. Most important, the electoral irregularities could threaten to disrupt the reasonably good working relationship that had developed between the PRI and the PAN since Salinas's 1988, election to the Presidency. It is the PAN that has provided the Salinas administration with crucial support in the Mexican Congress on such important legislation as last year's Electoral Reform Act and the bank reprivatization bill.

Internal division and vague campaign platforms are two key reasons why Mexican opposition parties fared poorly in the elections. The top campaign issue championed by the PAN and the PRD was not a policy matter but was whether the electoral process would be free and fair. The PAN, which in past elections promoted free market reform as its number one platform issue, found itself going into the mid-terms with most of its economic policy proposals already co-opted by the PRI. The socialist PRD, meanwhile, which wants strong state control reestablished over the Mexican economy and Mexico to distance itself from the U.S., was no longer viewed as a realistic alternative by the increasingly pro-free market and pro-U.S. Mexican people.

As a result, the Salinas government's successful free market economic program put the PRD and the PAN on the defensive, and left them with nothing other than electoral technicalities for their candidates to discuss. During the campaign, for instance, Cardenas claimed that "The election imposes itself over and above all other issues." This concentration by the opposition on the election itself, rather than on economic and social issues, apparently conceded the issues, and hence the election, to the PRI.¹⁴

13 Sergio Sarmiento, "Mexican Elections: Winner Takes All," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 1991, p.A7.

14 Damian Fraser, "Pivotal Polling," *The Financial Times*, August 15, 1991, p.10.

Despite the isolated complaints of voting irregularities, one clear sign that the mid-term elections were a PRI success was the high voter turnout—estimated at 52.4 percent of all potential voters and 65.4 percent of registered voters. This was the highest election turnout in recent Mexican history. In the 1988 presidential elections only 50 percent of the registered voters turned out. The high August 18 turnout demonstrates not only support for the Salinas revolution and that the PRI ran effective candidates, but also that voter confidence in the Mexican political system is growing.

SALINAS AND THE CHANGING FACE OF MEXICAN POLITICS

The PRI's 62 years in power make it the longest-governing party in the world. After only narrowly winning the 1988 presidential election against the National Democratic Front (FDN) leftist coalition led by Cardenas, Salinas vowed to end one-party rule in Mexico and launch, with the support of the opposition parties, a full-scale electoral reform. It is widely accepted that the PRI had to resort to fraud to obtain the 51 percent of the vote that it needed to win the 1988 elections. The FDN came in second with one-third of the vote.

To compound problems for the PRI, Salinas was viewed as a weak president and was extremely unpopular when he entered office. To enhance his and the PRI's image, he immediately cracked down on unpopular and corrupt party bosses and labor leaders, embarked on a program to modernize Mexico's economy, and called for political reforms. While there is no questioning the success of his economic reform program, allegations of campaign and election manipulation in the mid-term elections may signal that more work needs to be done to bring genuine democracy to Mexico.

Salinas and Political Reform

In his December 1, 1988, inaugural address, Salinas called for a complete revision of the electoral code through a "National Accord for the Expansion of [Mexico's] Democratic Life." This accord, he stated, would seek to "eliminate voting irregularities during elections, modernize and democratize the party system, place strict democratic standards and rules on politicians, and institute sweeping political reform developed through a consensus of Mexico's political parties."

At Salinas's request, Mexico's Federal Electoral Commission formed on January 9, 1989, a Special Commission for Public Hearings on Electoral Reform. This special commission, consisting of the Minister of the Interior, one member of the Chamber of Deputies, one member of the Senate, and one representative from the six leading opposition parties in the Chamber of Deputies, held 12 hearings during the first half of 1989. During these hearings representatives from Mexico's political parties, political analysts, and electoral experts, offered opinions and made recommendations on how to fashion a new electoral process.

These recommendations were reviewed by Mexico's political parties, which then drafted their own proposals for political reform. These proposals subsequently were debated in the House of Deputies, before being incorporated into the Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures (COFIPE).

This new electoral code was approved on July 15, 1990, by 85 percent of the Chamber of Deputies and was accepted by all the major parties except the PRD. Cardenas rejected it, claiming that the new law is "undemocratic" and that the government should be prohibited from playing any role in electoral reform. He stressed that such matters should be left to the parties.

The COFIPE establishes a legal foundation and organizational structure to guarantee the impartial administration and supervision of electoral regulations, creates an impartial body to resolve electoral disputes, enforces legal sanctions for violations of electoral regulations, upholds professional civil service standards in the administration of electoral responsibilities, and expands the public monitoring of election results.¹⁵

The most prominent features of the COFIPE and subsequent electoral reforms are:

◆ ◆ **Creation of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).** The IFE is an impartial, multi-party organization authorized to organize, administer, and validate election procedures and results throughout Mexico. Its other responsibilities include the development of accurate new electoral rolls, the distribution of new electoral credentials, and multiparty monitoring at voting sites. It also is tasked to validate winning candidates, provide immediate official polling results, and guarantee constant access to elections tallies for all political parties. Opposition parties complain, however, that the PRI retains effective control over the institution.

◆ ◆ **Introduction of the Federal Electoral Tribunal.** This Mexico City-based organization mediates all federal electoral disputes and serves as an independent oversight commission with the authority to overrule decisions made by the IFE's General Council. The tribunal is comprised of 21 magistrates nominated by the president and elected by two-thirds of the Chamber of Deputies. Each member is required to have a law degree, at least three years of legal experience, and must not have served in any electoral or party post during the previous six years. The tribunal also has four regional branches to mediate election disputes at the state and local level.

◆ ◆ **Overhauling of the voter list and distribution of new voter registration cards.** The IFE last April 30 completed its four-month drive to develop a new voter registration list for the mid-term elections which was free of the double registrations of PRI supporters and registration of deceased voters that plagued the old list.¹⁶ The new list contains over 39 million voters out of the estimated 45

15 For more information see *The Mexican Agenda*, *op. cit.*

16 See The Heritage Foundation's *Mexico Watch* No. 13, May 1991.

million Mexicans 18 years of age or older. The opposition claims that of the 39 million on the electoral roll, only about 36 million have received their voter cards, which are necessary to vote. Cardenas charges that those without voter cards predominantly are opposition supporters. The PRI denies this, claiming that the incomplete delivery of voter cards was due to the inability to locate individuals and to human error.

◆◆ **Tougher criminal penalties for election fraud.** The COFIPE makes a broad range of electoral misfeasances that formerly were punishable under Mexican civil law punishable by Mexico's criminal law code. Now illegal are the altering of voting booth documents, tampering with final election results, and intimidating voters. Such practices almost never have been prosecuted in past Mexican elections. In addition to stiff criminal penalties, perpetrators of electoral fraud risk the suspension of their right to vote and hold office for one to five years.

◆◆ **Increased use of primaries to select candidates.** Senator Luis Donaldo Colosio, the President of the PRI, stated this June 13, at a meeting in Washington of The Heritage Foundation's Mexico Working Group, that "a key element of Mexican electoral reform is the process of selecting candidates. In the past, candidates, including presidential candidates were hand picked by party leaders. The PRI today is increasingly using democratic primaries to choose candidates for federal office." Democratically chosen candidates will be more popular with the Mexican people and will be more accountable for their actions than those chosen through back room deal making.

◆◆ **Use of exit polls to measure voting trends and results.** The August 18 elections saw the widespread use of exit polls in major urban areas, including Mexico City, Monterrey, Guanajuato, and San Luis Potosi, to measure voting trends and election results. In such polls, voters are approached by interviewers after they have voted and given a questionnaire containing a wide variety of vote-related and demographic questions. This data are immediately processed and released as an early indication of how the vote is likely to proceed. Example: the Gallup Organization on August 19 released data from an exit poll showing the PRI winning 62.7 percent of the vote. Exit polls help to combat and deter voting fraud by offering a benchmark by which to compare the final election tallies.

◆◆ **Democratic polling station procedures.** Voting booth officials now are selected through a lottery of registered voters and are not designated by the government. Each party, moreover, is entitled to place two representatives at each of Mexico's nearly 90,000 voting booths. Additional measures to curb ballot box stuffing and double voting include punching holes in voter registration cards after their use and crossing off names from voting booth lists after an individual votes. The Federal Electoral Institute also has ordered the use of transparent ballot boxes and indelible ink.

The Political Parties

Aside from the ruling PRI, the two most important political parties that participated in the mid-term elections were the center-conservative PAN and the leftist PRD. Seven other smaller parties also ran candidates.¹⁷

The National Action Party (PAN). The PAN, which slipped to third place behind Cardenas's leftist coalition following the 1988 presidential elections, has emerged from this year's mid-term elections as the second strongest party in Mexico. The PAN's re-emergence largely is the result of its important legislative role over the past three years as a strong supporter of Salinas's free market economic reform program. The PAN's support for economic reform is not new. It long has championed such free market economic reforms as the privatization of state-owned industries, free trade, and the deregulation of the Mexican economy, all of which are increasingly popular policies in Mexico.

The PAN received approximately 18 percent of the vote in the mid-term elections, one percentage point higher than it received in the 1988 presidential elections when businessman Manuel Clouthier was its candidate for president. The PAN today is led by Luis H. Alvarez who is a lawyer, a long-time PAN activist, and a former presidential candidate for the PAN. By winning the governorship in the state of Baja California on July 2, 1989, the PAN was the first opposition party in modern Mexican history to control a state government. The PAN has strong ties to Mexican industrialists and the middle class, and has a platform which advocated electoral reform, law and order, individual freedom, nationalism, family values, human rights, and Catholic values. The PAN's main criticism of the Salinas government is that democratic reform is taking a back seat to economic reform.

The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The PRD was created in September 1988 following Cuauhtemoc Cardenas's controversial defeat at the hands of Salinas in the presidential elections two months earlier. Many independent observers believe that the PRI managed to pull off the victory only through widespread fraud. The official results gave Cardenas 31 percent of the vote to Salinas's stunning 51 percent, the lowest ever tallied by a PRI presidential candidate.

Cardenas is the son of former Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas, who served between 1934 and 1940 and expropriated in 1938 the property of U.S. oil companies in Mexico. Cuauhtemoc Cardenas also is a former Governor and Senator from the Pacific coast state of Michoacan and a long-time left-wing political activist. Cardenas ran in the election as the leader of a leftist multi-party coalition,

17 These were the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM), Mexican Democratic Party (PDM), the Mexican Ecology Party (PEM), the Party of the Cardenista Front of National Reconstruction (PFCRN), the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), and the Labor Party (PT). Parties must receive at least 1.5 percent of the votes cast to retain their legal status as political parties.

known as the National Democratic Front (FDN). Following the elections, many of the smaller parties that comprised the FDN defected from the coalition. The only party that remained loyal was the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS), which had evolved from the former Mexican Communist party. PMS supporters ranged from Stalinists to socialists.¹⁸ To avoid the bureaucratic and legal difficulties of creating a new opposition party, Cardenas merely renamed the PMS the PRD. While the PRD quickly emerged as the leading leftist opposition party in Mexico, its radical ideology, which supports strong ties to Cuba, state control over the economy, and trade protectionism, and links to Mexico's communist left have proved a liability in an increasingly conservative Mexico.

The PRD was the PRI's most serious challenger from late 1988 until the mid-term elections. It has only itself to blame for its poor showing at the polls on August 18. Divided between radical leftists and PRI defectors, the PRD lacks the cohesiveness to function effectively as a political party. Moreover, by opposing the current NAFTA talks, calling for a halt to the privatization of state owned industry in Mexico, and targeting the U.S. as Mexico's enemy—all unpopular positions in Mexico—the PRD has isolated itself from the Mexican mainstream. For example, Cardenas during the election campaign said: "The voters will be against a free trade agreement [with the U.S.] and in favor of a Latin America pact of integration." All polls, however, show just the opposite: Well over 50 percent of the Mexican people favor free trade with the U.S.¹⁹

Such unpopular leftist rhetoric, combined with the single-issue election platform of focusing on the technicalities of the electoral process, dismayed voters and almost surely helped relegate the PRD to a distant third place finish.

The Waning Influence of the Mexican Left

By receiving roughly 18 percent of the nationwide vote in the mid-term elections, compared to the PRD's 8 percent, the PAN is now Mexico's leading opposition party. The PRD was the big loser, failing to win any directly-elected federal seats. Its candidates received only 8.2 percent of the votes for the House of Deputies, an estimated 3.9 percent of the votes for the Senate seats, and no governorships. The PAN, which was awarded the interim governorship in Guanajuato, managed to gain 17.7 percent of the vote for the Senate and 18 percent for the House of Deputies. The PAN in fact gained one Senate seat from the Pacific coast state of Baja California, this represents one of only three Senate seats currently in the hands of the opposition.

The power and influence of the Mexican Left peaked soon after the Cardenas-led FDN defeat in the 1988 presidential elections. Following the elections, there were widespread allegations of vote fraud, including ballot box stuffing, double

18 George W. Grayson, "The 1989 Mexican State and Local Elections," CSIS Latin American Election Study Series, June 26, 1989, p. 6.

19 Matt Moffett, "Voters Turn Against the Left in Mexico," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1991, p. A8.

voting by PRI supporters, the manipulation of vote counts, intimidation of opposition supporters, and a suspicious breakdown of the computer system that tallied the votes. Cardenas immediately declared that the PRI had stolen the election, claiming that there had been "a technical coup d'etat." He declared himself the victor, called for street demonstrations, and boycotted the Salinas's inauguration.²⁰

The PRI and Salinas, however, recovered quickly. Salinas swiftly launched his program to reform Mexico's political and electoral system to prevent future disputes and fraud charges. As important, he launched his revolutionary program of economic reforms to revitalize Mexico's economy and bring tangible economic rewards to the Mexican people. As a result, Mexico today is a very different country than it was in 1987, the year before Salinas's election.

Four years ago, Mexico was suffering from severe economic problems. It had a real annual growth rate estimated at only 1.7 percent, an inflation rate of 159 percent, and foreign investment levels declining by 0.3 percent from the previous year.

Steady Growth. This all has changed. Under Salinas, Mexico has grown economically for four straight years. This year economic growth is expected to reach 4.5 percent, inflation is down to a projected 17 percent, and foreign investment is expected to increase by an estimated 15 percent from last year. Salinas's program of free trade and internal free market reforms, in the meantime, is becoming increasingly attractive to the Mexican people. An August 9 Gallup poll, for example, revealed that 62 percent of Mexicans believe that foreign investment is a "very good" idea and that 56 percent think that trade liberalization is "very good" for Mexico.²¹

By opposing Salinas's free-market revolution, the PRD has isolated itself politically and has its lost popular appeal in Mexico. PRD leadership, moreover, has been weakened by the waning attraction of socialist political and economic solutions worldwide. Cardenas's outmoded platform, based on a strong suspicion of the U.S., the reversal of Salinas's privatization program, protection of Mexico's socialist agrarian system, a radical foreign policy backing such communist tyrants as Cuba's Fidel Castro, and the rejection of the U.S.-Mexico free trade area agreement puts the PRD out of step with the goals and ambitions of the Mexican people. Consequently, the August 9 Gallup poll closely mirrored the mid-term election results, showing that only 5 percent of the those polled supported the PRD.

The PRI quickly capitalized on the PRD's dogmatic adherence to discredited socialist and communist principles. Salinas and his team of U.S.-educated free market reformers set the course to turn Mexico from one of the world's most statist economies to one of the most open and dynamic.

²⁰ Fraser, *op. cit.*

²¹ "A Proud Country Advances Economically and Politically," *Epoca* (Mexico City), August 12, 1991, p. 2.

With the help of the PAN, the Salinas administration was able to reverse decades of socialist government intervention in the Mexican economy and launch a broad program of trade liberalization, privatization, and economic deregulation. In fact, by so doing, Mexico has become a model for free market economic reform and free trade, not only in the Americas, but throughout the world. As Salinas clearly understands, these reforms and policies, more than anything else, will be the key to building a lasting and stable democracy in Mexico.

CONCLUSION

The 1991 midterm elections were the cleanest in Mexican history, despite isolated cases of vote fraud, voter intimidation, election list and voter card manipulation, and despite the questionable use of government resources to help the ruling PRI attract votes. In several post-election interviews, Salinas acknowledged "imperfections" in Mexican democracy but stressed that "It is important to recognize that Mexico has already made important progress in its political reform." The elections now may give Salinas the mandate that he needs to continue his free market revolution of free trade, privatization, and possibly even legal reforms designed to spur greater foreign investment in Mexico and allow for the privatization of Mexico's inefficient agricultural system. Through his other bold revolution, designed to open Mexico's political system, moreover, Salinas will help assure that Mexico remains stable and reaps the rewards of his unprecedented free market policies.

There is a great deal at stake for the U.S. in Mexico's democratic progress. To be sure, there is little that Washington can do to encourage greater democracy in Mexico other than provide public support for Salinas's electoral reforms. More directly, Washington can push ahead quickly with the U.S.-Mexico free trade pact. While more political reform has occurred under the Salinas administration than any previous Mexican government, Salinas clearly has chosen to concentrate his attention on the economic agenda, claiming that "If you are at the same time introducing drastic political reform [while making strong economic reform], you may end up with no reform at all."²²

Supporting Democracy. While Washington should want to support democracy in Mexico, largely because democratic nations tend to be more politically stable and internationally peaceful, and Mexico shares the 1,933-mile border with the U.S., Washington also has to be careful not to interfere in Mexico's internal political affairs. Such action could trigger a leftist backlash in Mexico against the U.S. and against Salinas's pro-free market and free trade policies. American interference also might damage a U.S.-Mexican relationship that is better today than at any point in history.

22 Louie Estrada, "Mexico's Ruling PRI at a Crossroads: Will the Party Accept Pluralism or Tighten its Grip?" *The Times of the Americas*, July 24, 1991, p.1.

Chance to Succeed. The U.S. should welcome the political gains that are taking root under the Salinas administration, while encouraging continued movement toward greater political freedom for the Mexican people. Most important, Washington should not allow the pace of political reform in Mexico to interfere with the negotiation of the NAFTA. Only if Mexico gains greater economic prosperity, something free trade is sure to deliver, will Salinas's democratic experiment have a chance to succeed.

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