

Contemporary Mexican Politics

Second Edition

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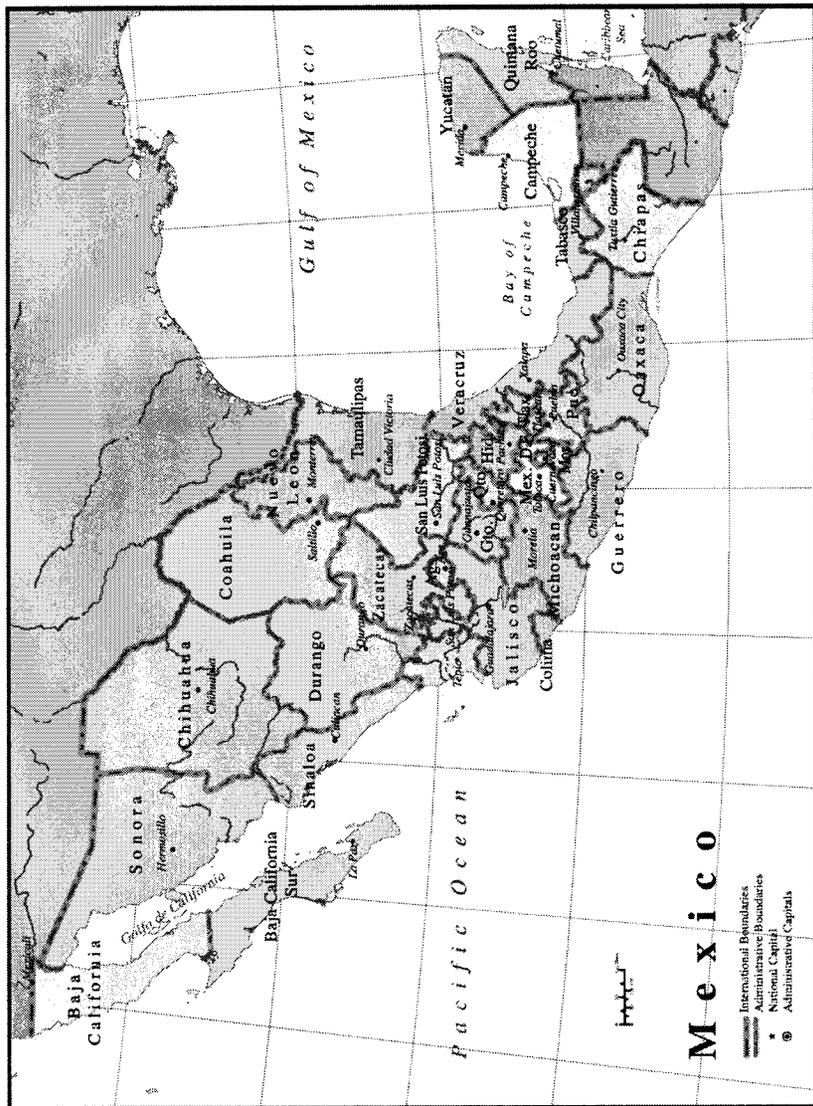
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Introduction

Como México no hay dos. Like Mexico there is no other. Mexico was the birthplace of the several major indigenous civilizations of Mesoamerica and the foundation of Spain's empire in the New World. After launching the first major social revolution of the twentieth century, it produced the world's longest-lasting single-party-dominant political system. Today, Mexico is an emerging democracy, with the twelfth largest economy in the world. No other country has as powerful and direct an impact on the United States as Mexico, whose economic, social, and political influences stretch far across the border. For this reason, not only are Mexico's rich past, present circumstances, and future possibilities of interest to historians and political scientists, they are of great relevance to all students of world politics. Only by studying Mexico in depth is it possible to appreciate its full appeal, complexity, and significance.

Let's start, for example, with Mexico's people and geography. Although the majority of Mexicans are mestizos (of mixed white European and indigenous ancestry), other ethnicities, including Jewish, Middle Eastern, African, and Asian, make up a small but significant portion of the nation's population. As a result, from architecture to food to language, Mexico is a unique amalgamation of various traditions and cultural influences. Mexico's geography and climate are similarly diverse. Roughly 760,000 square miles, or one-fifth the size of the United States, Mexico is the fifteenth largest country in the world and has a varied landscape of peaks, valleys, and plateaus. While Mexico's north is characterized by arid deserts and the lowlands and the rain forests of the southeast experience tropical conditions

without a cold season, the central plateau's latitude and altitude bring it rainy summers and mild winters.

Mexico is also one of the world's most fascinating case studies for comparative political analysis, with features that are relevant to other countries: religious and military conquest and colonialism, class and ethnic divisions, revolutionary struggles and civil wars, corporatist state-society relations, dueling forces of economic nationalism and promarket liberalism, and powerful transnational crime syndicates. Perhaps the most significant consideration for comparative analysis is Mexico's recent democratization and ongoing processes of democratic consolidation. For many years, Mexico was considered to have the "perfect dictatorship," thus described because one political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), ruled single-handedly—often by restricting political competition and participation—while maintaining considerable popular support and an outward appearance of democratic competition.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Mexico began a slow and sometimes painful transition from single-party dominance toward a more open and competitive political system. For many, the proof that democracy had arrived came on July 2, 2000, when opposition candidate Vicente Fox defeated the PRI in a free and fair presidential election. Six years later, Fox's party, the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, or PAN), triumphed a second time when Felipe Calderón Hinojosa defeated his closest challenger by a razor-thin margin. But the PAN has not replaced the PRI as Mexico's "official party." Indeed, no political party has won a majority in Congress since 1997, and the 2012 presidential elections are likely to be competitive. Since its impressive showing in the 2009 midterm elections, the PRI has appeared poised to recapture the presidency in 2012. But in order to win, the party must remain unified and overcome fears that its return to power will set back the clock on Mexican democratic governance.

For now, Mexico's ability to move, in one generation, from a single-party-dominant system to one with vibrant electoral competition is remarkable. Many countries, especially those also struggling with the challenge of economic development, are unable to achieve democratic governance or make it last. One need only look at recent history to understand how elusive and fleeting democracy can be. During the twentieth century, almost every country in Latin America moved from authoritarian rule to a more open political system, only to see dictatorships return (often led by the military) before democracy could really take hold. Although the latter part of the twentieth century brought a slow return to democratic pluralism, many countries continue working to consolidate these gains, and others—like Venezuela and Honduras—have suffered significant setbacks.

Like all things Mexican, the country's path toward more democratic governance has been unique. After a prolonged and uncertain transition, single-party dominance has given way to highly institutionalized electoral competition, newfound political transparency, and substantial checks and balances in government. The key question many observers are asking today is whether Mexico's democracy has matured enough to withstand the onslaught of organized crime, the hardship of global recession, and a possible PRI victory in 2012. Our aim in this book is to provide a thorough discussion of Mexican political development, evaluate the prospects for Mexico's continued democratic consolidation, and underscore its special relationship with the United States. Overall we are optimistic about the future of democracy in Mexico, given important institutional, societal, and economic changes that have occurred in recent years. However, some important challenges and obstacles remain, which we will discuss in detail throughout this book.

The first part of this book provides a historical overview of Mexican political development. After a brief discussion of pre-Columbian society, chapter 1 chronicles the difficult process of modern Mexican state formation, from Spanish colonialism to independence. Chapter 2 examines the course and consequences of the 1910 revolution, from the overthrow of the authoritarian ruler Porfirio Díaz to the emergence of the PRI as Mexico's dominant political party. Chapter 3 explores the "classic" PRI system that facilitated the party's electoral hegemony for more than seventy years. Chapter 4 analyzes the reasons for the PRI's decline and the confluence of factors that contributed to the emergence of democratic competition in Mexico.

The second part of the book examines Mexico's political institutions, culture, and society. On paper, Mexico's presidential system, with a bicameral legislature, multilayered federalism, and elections, appears strikingly similar to that of the United States. Still, while Mexico's postindependence constitutions were significantly influenced by the example of the United States, the two systems function very differently. To help understand why, chapter 5 examines Mexico's government institutions and processes, while chapter 6 explains party and electoral systems. Society is the focus of chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 describes Mexican values and beliefs, attitudes and feelings, and norms and behaviors in relation to politics, while chapter 8 examines the nature and role of Mexican civil society. Together, these four chapters demonstrate how far the Mexican state and society have come since the days of single-party rule.

That said, the future of Mexico's democracy will depend on its ability to address some major domestic and foreign policy challenges, which are the subject of the third and fourth part of this book, respectively. In the third

part, chapters 9 and 10 focus on Mexico's difficulties in achieving macroeconomic stability, sustaining economic growth, reducing poverty, and promoting equity. Unless Mexico successfully overcomes these challenges, it is unlikely that democracy will deepen. Likewise, without the rule of law, the subject of chapter 11, Mexico will find it difficult to consolidate its recent democratic gains. In the final part of the book, chapter 12 examines Mexican foreign policy outlook and its mechanisms for engaging the rest of the world, while chapter 13 explores its close ties with the United States, with particular attention to migration, trade, security, and the countries' shared border.

Part I

MEXICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

4

Mexican Democratization, 1968 to the Present

DEMOCRATIZATION IN MEXICO

In many ways the culmination of social unrest that started brewing in the 1950s, the events of 1968 were also the beginning of a slow transition. Over the next thirty years, Mexico would move away from single-party dominance and toward more open democracy, coalescing in 2000 with the election of the first opposition candidate to the presidency. Yet these changes to the Mexican political system happened so gradually that only in retrospect did they appear to constitute a linear transition away from authoritarianism and toward democracy. In fact, during the decades that the political opening took place, there were many points at which Mexicans and outsiders alike wondered whether the PRI would manage to salvage and further consolidate its hegemony, allowing democracy to elude Mexico indefinitely. We know now that this did not happen: in 1997 the "official" party lost its majority in Congress, and less than ten years later, placed last in a three-way race for the presidency.

How can we explain Mexico's transition from a single-party-dominant system to one that is now highly competitive? How did a firmly entrenched party that was accustomed to winning elections with over 60 percent of the vote for more than half a century lose so much support and power? The purpose of this chapter is to explore these questions. We suggest that the PRI's fall from grace and the subsequent emergence of greater political competition occurred as the result of three interrelated factors: the inability of the government to effectively promote economic redistribution and stability, the PRI's loss of cohesion and legitimacy, and the institutional changes

that created openings for the opposition parties to gain footholds that eventually allowed them to challenge the PRI head on and boost themselves into power. Each of these factors is outlined briefly below as a prelude to a longer discussion of how they combined to erode the PRI's dominance and foster the rise of the opposition. Together these developments led to the creation of the competitive electoral environment in Mexico that persists today.

DECLINING PRI LEGITIMACY

As discussed earlier, the PRI's hegemony was rooted both in its ability to incorporate and coopt a wide range of otherwise disparate interests and in its electoral dominance. However, another critical factor in the party's success was the strong performance of the national economy between 1940 and 1970. The so-called Mexican Miracle was impressive by any standards: for thirty years, the economy grew at an annual rate of more than 6 percent. (See chapter 9.) The political benefits of sustained growth proved immeasurable. In addition to gaining genuine popular support at the polls from "pocketbook" voters, plentiful resources allowed the government to use material benefits and social services to reward the loyalty of its supporters. As the national economic model began to visibly falter in the 1970s, the PRI's performance legitimacy eroded and it became increasingly difficult for the ruling party to use material rewards to sustain its power base.¹ Many began to question the benefit of demonstrating allegiance to the PRI—especially when it had shown itself to be a corrupt organization that undergirded a corrupt system. But it was not just the exhaustion of Mexico's economic miracle that undermined the PRI's position; it was also that the national economic gains produced between 1940 and 1970 were not evenly distributed within society. While the private and industrial sectors did very well, most Mexicans suffered from the side effects of growing inflation, stagnant wages, high unemployment, and inadequate public services. Moreover, between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, the country experienced a cycle of economic booms and devastating busts that created great uncertainty for ordinary Mexicans and eroded public confidence in the political system. By itself, economic instability was not sufficient to produce political change because support for the PRI was rooted in more than a simple exchange of material goods for votes. But the government's inability to deliver economic stability greatly undermined its practice of using patronage to ensure popular support and contributed to the second source of the PRI's decline—its loss of legitimacy.

From the time of its creation and subsequent institutionalization in the first half of the twentieth century, the PRI claimed to embody the principles of Mexico's revolution. These principles, while sometimes vague,

consistently called for inclusion, redistribution, and stability. Mexicans long supported the PRI because it made an effort to create and sustain the revolutionary family. The events of 1968 had made clear that the regime would use force against those who were too critical or sought too much independence. In the aftermath of the 1968 massacre, the government's continued use of force against its detractors in the 1970s, combined with the pervasive and unabashed use of graft, patronage, and abuse of power by government officials at every level, created a deep distrust of the PRI government among some Mexicans. Meanwhile, although the party had always been internally divided, competition among its various factions for control of the organization became more fierce as the strain of losing popular support set in. By the mid-1980s, disputes among factions led to the public airing of differences, accusations, and dirty laundry, and this further tarnished the party's image.

In this context, the PRI enacted a series of institutional reforms that appeared to open the political system. Specifically, from the 1970s through the 1990s, PRI leaders offered three major types of reforms as concessions to members of the opposition: first, increasing the size of the legislature in 1977; second, decentralizing power to state and local governments in the 1980s; and third, creating an independent electoral authority in the early 1990s. While these three reforms were intended to give the Mexican political system a semblance of democratic legitimacy, each one preserved enormous advantages for the ruling party. The introduction of proportional representation in the 1970s led to the creation of a host of "parastatal" parties that often actually received resources from and directly supported the PRI. While national politicians touted the benefits of decentralization, most real power and resources remained centered at the federal level. Moreover, even after important changes to Mexico's electoral laws, the PRI continued to influence electoral outcomes at all levels through a variety of means.

Even so, Mexico's political opening after 1968 was significant. Providing expanded opportunities for political representation—albeit initially more symbolic than real—ultimately gave opposition parties the political experience needed to effectively compete and govern in the future. Increasing the power of states and municipalities was also important in the democratization process because it meant that when opposition parties won contests in sub-national elections, they had greater autonomy and sometimes more resources with which to govern. This helped them establish a track record that helped their candidates run for higher office. Finally, perhaps the most important step in leveling the electoral playing field for the opposition was the creation and subsequent strengthening of an independent electoral authority in the early 1990s. Before the creation of the Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE), it was the minister of the interior, the right-hand man of the president, who oversaw all elections and decided all electoral disputes.

Without independent oversight of elections, the opposition never stood a chance of making meaningful electoral gains. But with a set of independent institutions widely acknowledged to be impartial, Mexico's inchoate democracy made significant strides. The opposition was no longer always reliant on the PRI's goodwill in order to win an election. Instead, parties could focus on the challenges of getting elected and know that victories were almost certain to stand.

Hence, our discussion thus far suggests that the PRI's demise was, in large part, its own doing; without the government's unilateral decisions to reform the system, it might have held on to power indefinitely. However, this captures only part of the story. Although the process of political change in Mexico was in many ways a top-down phenomenon orchestrated by the PRI, the degree of pressure exerted by opposition parties, independent social movements, and other critics of the status quo also greatly influenced the course and pace of democratization. Indeed, such pressure was often the only means of forcing the PRI's hand, since otherwise the ruling party would have obviously preferred to maintain the status quo. These and other issues become much clearer with a more comprehensive account of Mexico's transition to democracy between 1970 and 2000, the subject we will now explore in more detail.

EARLY POLITICAL OPENING (1970–1988)

With the election of Luis Echeverría to the presidency in 1970, almost everyone expected his administration to try to recapture public support by using the PRI's traditional methods of incorporation, cooptation, and coercion.² Indeed, as the minister of the interior under the Díaz Ordaz government, Echeverría had played a determining role in the decision to use force against the demonstrators. In fact, many believed that he, rather than Díaz Ordaz, had orchestrated the government's repressive response to the demonstrations. Yet, upon being selected the party's presidential candidate, Echeverría made a concerted effort to brand himself as a different kind of *priísta*: one who was willing to speak publicly about the failures of past administrations and the shortcomings of the revolution, and one who was genuinely concerned about making life better for the poor. Echeverría was also quick to state that the economic advances of the previous thirty years had come at the expense of the peasantry and working classes. Upon taking office, he announced his intention to address the regime's failings and redeem his party. To that end, he proposed numerous changes that ranged from reforming the legislature to promoting the redistribution of wealth.

The legislative reform enacted in 1973 was ostensibly designed to make it easier for opposition parties to win seats in the Chamber of Deputies

by lowering the minimum threshold for obtaining a party seat. While the reform did create new spaces for the opposition in the legislature, this was something of a double-edged sword. The low threshold for obtaining representation in government had the (not-unintended) effect of encouraging the proliferation of small fringe parties that either presented little threat to the PRI or even colluded directly with the ruling party. Thus, while ostensibly promoting democratic competition, the reform of 1973 had the effect of further fractionalizing and coopting the opposition, rather than creating meaningful alternatives to the PRI.

Echeverría's other reforms included anticorruption measures; significant increases in government spending for education, housing, and other public services; and greater resources for rural development (e.g., expanded credit, subsidized fertilizers, seeds, and irrigation infrastructure). At the same time, he stated in no uncertain terms that the time had come for the wealthy elite to give back to the country. He introduced tax hikes that required the rich to pay more in income taxes than they had in the past, and he set about reducing the availability of tax breaks and government subsidies that significantly lowered the costs of production for industrialists and large agribusinesses. Further, the government tightened restrictions on foreign capital and investment and redistributed more land to agrarian workers. Despite the apparent comprehensiveness of Echeverría's reforms, they produced little real change, in part because many of the reforms did not go deep enough to alter existing power structures or address pervasive administrative shortcomings, and also because elites undermined the president's reforms by removing their capital from the national economy. Halfway through his *sexenio*, Echeverría was forced to curtail many of his programs and to court the favor of the private sector and others in the ruling class.

In part because of the limits of his reforms and also because of global economic trends, by the time Echeverría left office in 1976, Mexico was facing its most serious economic crisis ever. The once-booming Mexican economy suffered from a mushrooming public deficit, rising inflation, a currency devaluation that resulted in the peso's loss of half its value, and stagnant real wages. In the end, Echeverría had failed to recapture public support for the PRI, and Mexico was no better off in 1976 than it had been six years earlier. The vast majority of Mexicans had seen no improvement in their standard of living or any real reform of the political system, and the selection of José López Portillo as Echeverría's successor suggested no radical departure from the past. If anything, the future promised to be more difficult because the new president inherited an economic disaster. Moreover, the PRI faced a serious blow to its legitimacy when López Portillo ran unopposed in the 1976 presidential election. After he won with nearly 100 percent of the vote, Mexico could hardly claim to be a plural polity.

López Portillo immediately set out to address both the economic and political weaknesses of the system. He began by selecting a fiscally conservative cabinet and pledging to drastically reduce government spending on public services, development projects, and wage increases, while at the same time limiting the foreign debt and tightening the money supply to control inflation and avoid overvaluing the peso—in other words, he set out to dismantle much of what Echeverría had put in place. These moves met with the instant approval of many in the private sector, including international investors and lenders such as private banks and the International Monetary Fund. Many at home and abroad lauded him for his pragmatism and sound approach to bringing about economic stability, but few had forgotten the embarrassing circumstances under which López Portillo had assumed the presidency. In the 1976 presidential election, the failure of the most coherently organized opposition party, the PAN, to run a candidate had robbed the PRI of its “loyal” opposition, while all other opposition parties backed the PRI. The absence of any real opposition exposed the regime’s lack of legitimacy as a truly competitive democracy and prompted further electoral reforms.

Specifically, López Portillo introduced the Federal Law of Political Organizations and Electoral Processes (*Ley Federal de Organizaciones Políticas y Procesos Electorales*, LFOPPE) in 1977. The LFOPPE was designed to increase the access of smaller opposition parties by increasing the size of the Chamber of Deputies and making it easier for them to participate in and win elections. Much like the 1973 legislative reform, the LFOPPE facilitated increased participation and representation of the opposition; indeed, in the next few years five new parties obtained official registration. But the reforms also encouraged the formation of many small parties, rather than a unified opposition, and therefore made it highly unlikely that the PRI would ever be seriously threatened. Thus its overall effect was to revive the legitimacy of the Mexican political system, and therefore of the PRI, by making it look like the regime was promoting true electoral competition when in fact it was undermining the opposition.

Despite the largely symbolic nature of the LFOPPE, it placated many in the opposition and redeemed the PRI because it coincided with an impressive economic boom brought about by the discovery of sizable oil deposits in the Gulf of Mexico at the outset of López Portillo’s term. This event, more than any political maneuvers by the government, was responsible for Mexico’s political stability in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The deposits made Mexico the world’s fourth largest oil producer, with an average annual rate of economic growth of more than 8 percent, and the government once again had resources to spare. However, even an economic boom of this magnitude was not enough to put Mexico on solid economic ground or to definitively rescue the PRI. Despite López Portillo’s efforts to avoid the negative effects of

a dramatic and rapid economic growth—runaway inflation, an overvalued currency, and in this case, overreliance on oil as a source of revenue—Mexico quickly suffered from all of the above and, for all practical purposes, squandered its incredible good fortune. Although revenue increased significantly once the production and export of oil was ramped up, so too did government spending. The government invested heavily in the petroleum industry and other high-priced industrial development projects, and spent millions on basic food imports. Amazingly enough, oil revenue, which reached \$6 billion in 1980—up from \$500 million in 1976—was insufficient to cover the government’s spending, and López Portillo began to expand the money supply and borrow from abroad to pay debts.

By early 1982, the internal and external pressures for devaluation were strong enough to force the government’s hand, and the peso lost 30 percent of its value. This meant not only that Mexicans’ purchasing power declined substantially—the rate of inflation had increased to a whopping 100 percent—but also that Mexico’s foreign debt nearly doubled, to \$80 billion. As if this were not enough, in April, international oil prices dropped sharply, bringing Mexico less than half the amount of government revenue originally predicted for that year. This confluence of events created an untenable situation, and by the end of the summer Mexico declared that it would be unable to meet its foreign debt obligation: it was, in essence, bankrupt. Mexican economic growth, an enviable 8 percent in 1981, fell to zero by 1982. In order to prevent mass capital flight and further destabilization, the López Portillo administration nationalized all domestically owned banks—a move that went over well with the poor and working classes but sent shockwaves through the private sector.

Thus, with the country on the verge of economic collapse, the end of the López Portillo *sexenio* looked remarkably like the end of that of his predecessor. The PRI had been further discredited by rampant and unabashed corruption and its dismal failure to manage a plentiful endowment of the most valuable resource a country could hope to possess. In this context, López Portillo selected Miguel de la Madrid, his minister of budget and planning, as his successor. De la Madrid was viewed as a “technocrat”—a U.S.-trained bureaucrat with sophisticated technical skills in economic administration—who was committed to reducing state involvement in the economy to facilitate growth. This approach harkened back to the liberal principles of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and the so-called classical school of economic theory. International lenders were willing to renegotiate the terms of Mexico’s outstanding \$80 billion in debt only if it reduced its fiscal deficit and embraced a neoliberal, free-market approach. Therefore de la Madrid filled his cabinet with technocrats like him, especially young professionals trained at U.S. institutions, and together they initiated a new era of economic reform in Mexico.

De la Madrid's policies focused on stabilization and structural reorientation of the economy. Economic restructuring included the dismantling of trade protectionism for domestic production, and an opening to international trade through Mexico's entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986. At the same time, the de la Madrid administration made drastic reductions in public expenditures in all areas, from public works to education and from government subsidies for domestic industries to price controls on essential food items. His government also sought to increase its revenue by raising existing taxes and introducing a 15 percent value-added tax (VAT) on the sale of most items, as well as price hikes on utilities and public transportation. In addition, his government began working to tighten the money supply in order to rein in inflation and increase investor confidence. De la Madrid initially stated that it would take at least three years of fiscal austerity to put Mexico back on track. The reality was far worse. The government could not get a firm handle on inflation or produce meaningful economic growth until the end of the decade, with the help of the Economic Solidarity Pact (*Pacto de Solidaridad Económica*, PSE). This pact bound its signatories—labor, agricultural workers, and business—to respect even tighter monetary policy, trade liberalization, and fixed wages and prices, a clear precursor to the economic approach that followed in the next administration.

De la Madrid's economic reforms were accompanied by a three-pronged strategy to bring about political change, or at least the appearance of change. The first part of this strategy was to call for a zero-tolerance policy toward corruption at all levels of government. This move served an important political purpose but did virtually nothing to clean up the system. In the words of Judith Adler Hellman,

Responding in this way to the public mood of frustration at the economic humiliation Mexico was suffering, de la Madrid concentrated on the malfeasance of the previous administration as a means to personalize and focus the anger of Mexicans on a relatively limited target. . . . But no systematic investigations of "unexplained wealth" were actually undertaken. To no one's great surprise, even the most highly visible offenders from the López Portillo regime went free. However, the campaign served a short-term purpose of deflecting attention from the more profound questions that needed to be publicly addressed in this period of crisis.³

De la Madrid also tried to alleviate the political pressures brought about by the economic crisis by promoting decentralization, or greater power sharing among the federal, state, and local (municipal) levels of government. While the main thrust of this reform aimed to clarify the responsibilities of the three levels and, somewhat ironically, made life more difficult

for local governments, it also introduced proportional representation to municipal elections.⁴ As a result, it paved the way for the opposition to gain entry into, and hence valuable hands-on experience from, governing at the local level.

The third part of de la Madrid's effort to promote political change was a constitutional amendment in 1986 that once again increased the size of the Chamber of Deputies by 100 proportional representation seats. On the surface, the addition of the new seats was supposed to create more space for the opposition. However, in reality the reform protected the PRI from the gains made by the opposition since the last round of reforms because changes to the seat allocation formula gave the PRI access to the proportional representation seats for the first time, and another law guaranteed the party with the highest vote a majority in the Chamber, even if it won less than 51 percent of the national vote.⁵ The latter law, commonly known as the "governability clause," meant that the PRI need only obtain a plurality in order to control the lower house of the legislature. Many in the opposition welcomed the addition of new seats to the national legislature, but they took issue with the governability clause since it virtually guaranteed that the PRI would have an absolute majority in the legislature even if other parties collectively held a majority of the votes. Given a growing number of recognized opposition victories at the state and local level, such a prospect did not seem entirely out of the question in the near future. Hence, although the political reforms enacted by the de la Madrid administration were more far reaching than any that had come before, they failed to significantly enhance the PRI's legitimacy.

Meanwhile, people in all sectors of society felt the impact of persistent inflation, stagnant wages, high rates of unemployment, and the general difficulties of making ends meet. Unfortunately, this scenario was nothing new. But the crisis of the 1980s was deeper and more lasting than any experienced in the past and took a higher toll on society. Although de la Madrid's neoliberal economic program may have met with the approval of the private sector and the international financial community, it imposed great costs on ordinary Mexicans. This, together with the government's incompetent response to the massive earthquakes that hit Mexico City in September 1985 (see textbox 4.1), led many Mexicans to organize groups that openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the ruling party. What was different this time around was that in the next presidential election, voters for the first time had a meaningful choice to make: should they vote for the PRI and invite more of the same, or support Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of Mexico's most-revered post-revolutionary hero, in his quest to destroy the monolith? Not surprisingly, many opted for the latter, and the 1988 presidential election posed the most serious threat to the PRI's dominance that it had faced to date.

Textbox 4.1. 1985 EARTHQUAKES

On the morning of September 19, 1985, a massive earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale shook Mexico City. The next day, just as the dust was settling, a second temblor, this one measuring 7.5, struck in virtually the same location. Together, these earthquakes destroyed or damaged thousands of buildings, killed or injured hundreds of thousands of citizens, and caused several billion dollars' worth of damage to a country that was already in the throes of economic crisis. There is little doubt that the Mexico City earthquakes exacerbated Mexico's already desperate economic circumstances. Less predictable was the political fallout that occurred as a result of the natural disaster.

Much like the criticisms leveled against the U.S. government for its lackluster response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Mexican and international observers alike were horrified at the inadequacy of the city's infrastructure and at the national government's mishandling of the tragedy. Many of those trained and employed by the government to respond in such disasters, such as the police and army, stood by and watched as ordinary citizens set about digging survivors out of the rubble. Rather than provide effective leadership, President de la Madrid appeared aloof, and he inexplicably rejected all offers of foreign assistance. Public outcry against this attempt at nationalism led de la Madrid to eventually admit international rescue teams, aid, and equipment. But once it arrived much of this help was undermined by the Mexican government's insistence on control over all rescue efforts and by its looking the other way when police and army personnel began to sell donated supplies on the black market rather than distributing them to people in need.

For all of the hardship that the earthquakes brought the inhabitants of Mexico City, the disaster had a silver lining. The government's ineptness forced ordinary citizens to take matters into their own hands and coordinate their own rescue efforts. The success of these efforts became the foundation for further collective action to demand health care, housing, and other basic needs for survivors. Thus the earthquakes served as a catalyst for organized popular mobilization that pressured the government to address public demands for services and accountability. These grassroots social movements were one of the many factors that gradually led to greater support of opposition political parties and the decline of the PRI.

Source: Judith Adler Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988).

SALINAS AND THE RISE OF THE OPPOSITION (1988–1994)

Perhaps the greatest irony of the powerful opposition movement that the PRI faced in the late 1980s was that it came from within the party itself. The ascent of technocrats to powerful positions in the PRI in the late 1970s and early 1980s fundamentally altered the ideological orientation and leadership of the ruling party. These young, U.S.-trained economists brought with them a belief that free-market policies were the key to stabilizing and restructuring the economy in order to produce sustained growth. Given the economic crises of the times and pressure by international governments and lending institutions to use this approach, the technocrats were considered perfectly suited for cabinet level and bureaucratic positions within the López Portillo and de la Madrid governments.⁶ Once in positions of power, the technocrats sought to remake the party in their own image, pushing aside members who had long since proven their loyalty but held more traditional views about the ideological orientation of the PRI. The subsequent rift between the *técnicos* and *políticos* proved to be extremely bitter and damaging to the party.

When de la Madrid began the process of selecting his successor, it quickly became clear that no old-style *político* stood a chance of being chosen. Indeed, the final choice of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, a tried-and-true technocrat, made it undeniable that the party would continue to pursue a market-oriented approach. This prompted several high-ranking members of the PRI who were ideologically committed to the principles of redistributive justice and other revolutionary myths, to break with the party and launch a bid for the presidency. Their preferred candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, evoked memories of his father, President Lázaro Cárdenas, whose policies in the 1930s were widely revered for their faithful embodiment of Mexico's revolutionary principles. Once Cárdenas announced his intention to run for president, he was eagerly supported by a number of small leftist parties who formed a coalition, the National Democratic Front (Frente Democrático Nacional, FDN), and together nominated him as their presidential candidate. Cárdenas's candidacy tapped into a wellspring of popular discontent with the PRI. Among the most important sources of electoral support were the myriad civic organizations that had sprung up in the 1980s, especially in the aftermath of the earthquakes, and people who simply wanted to punish the PRI. With such widespread popular support for this new leftist movement, the PRI's leadership evidently decided that it could not leave the outcome of the election to fate. On election night, the computerized vote tabulation system mysteriously crashed when Cárdenas appeared to have a 2 to 1 lead in voting. When the system came back on line, the PRI's Salinas de Gortari had mysteriously captured the lead. The official results of

the election showed that Salinas won with 51 percent of the vote, a decisive victory but a far cry from the 60-plus percent of the vote obtained by all of his predecessors. Both opposition candidates participating in the election, Cárdenas for the FDN and Manuel Clouthier for the PAN, claimed that the PRI had used electoral fraud to win. Their claims appeared to be substantiated by the fact that more than seventeen hundred precincts reported Salinas receiving 100 percent of the vote—a highly unlikely outcome. Years later, President de la Madrid admitted in his 2004 autobiography that the election was fraudulent and that the PRI declared victory as a preemptive measure before even confirming the final count.⁷

At the time, despite a widespread belief that the election had been stolen, the pro-Cárdenas opposition had few avenues to contest the official outcome because of the PRI's influence on the Federal Electoral Commission, and because—as we discuss below—the PRI and the PAN voted together in Congress to certify the results of the election. While Carlos Salinas was able to take office, he had to both work quickly to deal with detractors inside his own party and also contend with the popular perception that he was an illegitimate president. To deal with members of rival PRI factions, Salinas offered both carrots and sticks. While he won over some dissenters with cabinet positions and bureaucratic posts, others were forced from positions of power; indeed, during his term, more state governors “resigned” from their posts prematurely than under any other president since 1940.

Salinas also introduced an ambitious set of economic and political reforms. In the late 1980s this project appeared to have few chances for success. However, Salinas's charisma and political acumen allowed him to implement reforms that had a huge impact on Mexico and earned him great national and international prestige, for a time. Specifically, Salinas continued the country's neoliberal reform project—keeping tight control on government spending; restoring investor confidence by reprivatizing the banks and government-run industries; renegotiating the foreign debt; and permanently reducing barriers to trade with its most important trading partner, the United States, through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Salinas promised a robust, diverse, market-driven economy that would eventually place Mexico among the most illustrious first world of countries. In the meantime, the president acknowledged that these reforms would disproportionately harm the poor, particularly people in the countryside, who were most likely to be displaced by structural changes in the economy. In order to soften the transition for the country's most marginalized communities, Salinas also introduced the National Solidarity Program (Programa Nacional de Solidaridad, PRONASOL), a government-funded program designed to help communities find ways to meet their most pressing public service and infrastructure needs.⁸ The Solidarity program helped some of the poorest people in Mexican society, but it never went far enough

or reached all of those in need. It nevertheless did do something to promote economic well-being, and it served the very important political purpose of demonstrating the commitment of the government, and therefore the PRI, to addressing poverty.⁹

Recognizing that the opposition and the Mexican people were unlikely to tolerate a repeat of the 1988 election in the future, Salinas also introduced some significant reforms to the political system. In 1990, the Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures (Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales, COFIPE) was implemented and created a new voter registry with tamper-proof identification cards, and two new and independent electoral institutions, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and the Federal Electoral Tribunal (Tribunal Federal Electoral, TRIFE). Also included in the COFIPE was a revision of the governability clause introduced in 1986, in which the party with the most votes in single-member districts (SMD) for the Chamber of Deputies (and a minimum of 35 percent of the total) was automatically awarded a majority of seats in the legislature.

While the opposition was widely in favor of the creation of the independent electoral bodies, it saw the governability clause for what it was: a clear attempt to preserve the position of the PRI, since no other party could, at the time, hope to win more single-member districts. Therefore many within the opposition refused to support the COFIPE, particularly those affiliated with the newly created Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD), which grew out of the FDN in 1989. Yet the reforms were approved by the legislature, but not because the PRI unilaterally amended the constitution as it had in the past; it did not have the necessary two-thirds majority to do this. Rather, somewhat surprisingly, Salinas found a willing partner in the PAN. Despite its long-standing criticism of and antipathy toward the PRI, many observers believe that the PAN entered into *concertación* or a surreptitious pact with the PRI during the early 1990s. While PAN leaders vigorously denied that they secretly colluded with the PRI, such a pact could have helped the PAN obtain important political concessions, such as the electoral reforms and electoral victories that it achieved during Salinas's presidency. In the final analysis, the PAN was largely in favor of Salinas's neoliberal economic reforms, was leery of Mexico's new opposition on the left, and felt that even with the governability clause, the creation of the IFE was a meaningful step in the right direction. Pact or not, the PAN had many reasons to support the PRI's agenda, and it did so.

Meanwhile, amid a growing number of postelectoral disputes, Salinas introduced a second round of reforms in 1993 to increase opposition representation and lessen the PRI's institutional advantages.¹⁰ These reforms doubled the size of the Senate to 128 seats and guaranteed the opposition a minimum of 25 percent of the seats, a significant number but one that

would not threaten the PRI's two-thirds majority. Second, the contentious governability clause was amended so that no party could hold more than 60 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, thereby depriving any party of the ability to unilaterally amend the constitution. Third, the IFE was given the role of certifying legislative electoral results, a task that had previously fallen to the legislature itself. The impact of these reforms on Mexico's democratization is discussed in more depth in chapter 6.

By late 1993 it appeared that Carlos Salinas had done the impossible: he had placed Mexico on solid economic ground and on the verge of beginning a new era of free trade with the United States and Canada, while at the same time doing something to address the dire need of his country's most disadvantaged citizens. He had also mended fences with detractors within his party and reestablished the PRI's hegemony, and he had worked with the opposition to implement some significant political reforms. Indeed, Salinas's successes were so impressive that Mexicans openly speculated about the possibility of amending the constitution to allow him to serve a second term of office, and many in the international community revered Mexico as a model for other developing countries to emulate. However, as quickly as Salinas had won the hearts of Mexicans and foreign observers alike, on January 1, 1994, he began a precipitous slide that eleven months later left him one of the most reviled politicians in Mexican history.

Salinas's undoing began with an uprising instigated by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) on New Year's Day. This uprising, which we discuss in more detail in chapter 8, was planned to coincide with the first day that NAFTA went into effect, in order to demonstrate that Salinas's reforms had done nothing to meaningfully address the plight of Mexico's downtrodden indigenous communities or to construct an inclusive democracy. While the leaders of the EZLN had worked for many years under a Marxist ideology, the decline of communism led the rebels to rebrand their movement as a struggle against PRI authoritarianism, the discriminatory nature of Mexican society, and the inequities of the global economy.

While the Salinas government struggled to find the right response to the Zapatistas, it suffered another blow with the assassination of Salinas's chosen successor, Luis Donaldo Colosio.¹¹ Because Colosio's assassination took place at the height of his campaign, Salinas found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to name a successor from a tiny pool of eligible candidates. Mexican electoral laws require candidates to resign from their government posts six months prior to an election, making Salinas's closest allies and cabinet members ineligible to run for president. The man Salinas chose to replace Colosio was Ernesto Zedillo, who had stepped down from his post as education minister to help run the presidential campaign. Zedillo was a Yale-educated technocrat, and he appeared to be a stiff,

unimaginative bureaucrat poorly suited to excel in public office, much less the presidency.¹²

Salinas's popularity and his historical legacy were further tarnished after Zedillo took office. Having propped up the peso with high interest bonds throughout 1994, by the end of his term Salinas had exhausted Mexico's currency reserves, contributing to a severe economic crisis. This was partly a political decision, since devaluing the currency prior to the July elections would have certainly hurt the PRI at the polls. Yet, Salinas could have devalued the currency soon after Zedillo's victory, thereby allowing plenty of time to repair the damage before leaving office and giving Zedillo an opportunity to start his term with a clean slate. Zedillo's team reportedly urged Salinas to follow this course, but he did not. By the time Zedillo took office in December, the situation had become so untenable that the new administration had to devalue the currency just eighteen days after the new president took office. As a result of this massive devaluation, Mexicans who held their savings in the national currency lost nearly half of their wealth at the same time that they saw consumer prices and personal debt rise exponentially. While this turn of events was devastating, for many Mexicans it was somehow not as bad as finding out that the Salinas administration had fully anticipated the impending economic crisis and had knowingly allowed it to worsen rather than addressing the situation.

FROM HEGEMONY TO POWER SHARING (1994–2000)

Like Salinas, Ernesto Zedillo was expected to be a weak, ineffective leader. And while it took some time to dispel rumors that he would not finish his term of office, eventually Zedillo managed to salvage his personal image by shepherding meaningful political reform and deepening the country's economic stability. Thanks largely to the creation of the IFE, the 1994 elections were widely regarded as the freest and fairest to date in Mexico. Seeking to build on this foundation—and to the dismay of many within his party—Zedillo set out to deepen Mexico's transition away from single-party dominance and toward democracy. Building on the reforms of the Salinas administration, in 1996 he introduced legislation that prevented any party from enjoying extreme overrepresentation in the Chamber of Deputies and ensured that half of the Senate seats would go to the second-place party in each election. Furthermore, under Zedillo the IFE became a truly independent body, governed by nonpartisan citizen councilors rather than by the minister of the interior, and assumed full authority over electoral matters. Political parties were guaranteed by law more equal access to public funds and media exposure, and at the same time were increasingly required to

account for the amounts and sources of their campaign contributions as well as their campaign spending. The cumulative effect of the political reforms implemented between 1990 and 1996 was to gradually erode the PRI's electoral dominance.

The PRI's decline became painfully and undeniably clear in the aftermath of the 1997 midterm elections, when it lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time in its existence. This development, while profoundly bruising to the PRI, proved to be instrumental in promoting Mexico's transition toward democracy because it introduced, for the first time, a system of checks and balances and forced the executive to negotiate with the legislature even for relatively minor concessions. Of similar importance were Zedillo's efforts to strengthen the judiciary, with reforms in 1994 that increased the power and independence of the judiciary.

Of all of the reforms that Ernesto Zedillo deepened or introduced, perhaps the most significant of these for the PRI was his apparent refusal to designate his successor. Under enormous pressure to continue the PRI tradition of handpicking the next candidate, Zedillo instead chose to downplay his influence and, in so doing, forced the party to adopt new internal rules for candidate selection. The importance of this move should not be underestimated, because it weakened the traditional power of the president and brought greater internal democratization to the PRI—an element sorely lacking before the late 1990s. The president's ability to choose his successor was one of the most important elements of presidential power in Mexico because it guaranteed that he could single-handedly award the highest prize for party and personal loyalty. Zedillo's decision to break with this practice may have stemmed from the fact that he represented no particular faction of the party—all had equally disdained and even challenged him during his *sexenio*—and he therefore did not feel compelled to remain true to the party's traditional practices. Moreover, given his weakness within his own party, it is possible that his chosen candidate would have faced open challenges from the losing factions with potentially devastating consequences for the party.

Whatever the reasons for Zedillo's decision, in the end it benefited the PRI by forcing it to adopt an internal primary process that modernized the party and probably made it more competitive.¹³ Nevertheless, in the short term, the PRI's primary produced a bitter and damaging internal brawl as each of the four main aspirants sought to win the party's nomination. In their attempts to curry popular favor, the contenders slung mud and threw punches, accusing one another of everything from violating internal party rules to participating in the party's use of electoral fraud and corruption. In the end, Francisco Labastida, a technocrat said to be Zedillo's unstated choice, won a decisive victory, but at the personal expense of his challengers, and perhaps more importantly, at the cost of the PRI's credibility and legitimacy.¹⁴ There

is little doubt that the bruising primary campaign contributed to the PRI's loss of the presidency in 2000, culminating a long and gradual electoral decline for the ruling party (see figure 4.1).

Equally important in the PRI's defeat in 2000 was the growing strength of the opposition, in particular the PAN. While the PRD and its third-time presidential candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, still had significant popular support in the capital, the organization's internal dynamics and infighting had prevented it from becoming a well-consolidated, disciplined political party. Although he was undisputedly among the party's most important leaders, Cárdenas was a controversial candidate in 2000 within the PRD. Many felt that after his poor showing in 1994, winning just 17 percent of the vote, and his mediocre performance as the mayor of Mexico City, the party needed a more dynamic candidate to appeal to voters. Moreover, the party's internal squabbles, public airing of dirty laundry, and perceived ambivalence toward democracy alienated voters who were otherwise sympathetic to its left-of-center ideology. In retrospect, a stronger candidate with more popular appeal and a more coherent party organization with a proven track record were absolutely necessary to counter the challenge put forth by,

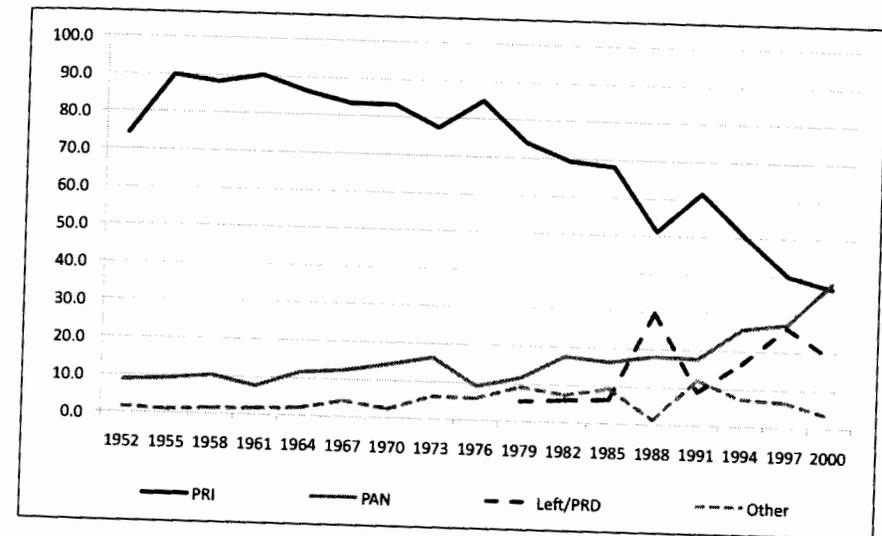


Figure 4.1. Mexican Federal Elections, 1952–2000

Source: 1961 and 1988 figures: Silvia Gómez Tagle, *La frágil democracia Mexicana: partidos políticos y elecciones* (Mexico City: García y Valadés Editors, 1993). 1964–1985 figures: Juan Molinar Horcasitas, "The 1985 Federal Elections in Mexico: The Product of a System," in *Electoral Patterns and Perspectives in Mexico*, Monograph Series, 20, ed. Arturo Alvarado (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1987). Figures from 1991–1997 derived from Carlos Sirvent, "Las elecciones de 1997: el voto por la alternancia," in *Estudios Políticos*, cuarta época, no. 16 (September–December 1997), 67–89. 2003 and 2006 data obtained from IFE.

on the one hand, the incumbent party with a long, if tainted, legacy and copious resources, and on the other, the PAN, with its upstart candidate, reputation for honesty and transparency, and vast campaign war chest.

To many observers of Mexico, Vicente Fox and the PAN seemed to come out of nowhere to win the presidency in 2000, when in fact Fox's victory represented the culmination of the PAN's growing electoral success throughout the 1990s. Its success in 2000 was determined by several factors, including the party's ability to capitalize on its many subnational electoral victories and solid reputation and parlay these into greater national support.¹⁵ Yet equally important was the party's choice of candidate. In some senses, Vicente Fox was an unlikely and unexpected candidate: although he had a proven track record as a federal deputy and governor of the state of Guanajuato, he was not a member of the party leadership. Indeed, he was thought by many within the PAN to be too pragmatic and not fully committed to the party's principles or statutes. Nevertheless, thanks to his image as a businessman who was not afraid to speak bluntly, and thanks to a well-organized political action committee that amassed a small fortune in campaign contributions and began a groundswell of popular support, Fox emerged as the PAN's best chance for defeating the PRI, and even skeptics in the party became obliged to support his candidacy. Although most predictions favored the PRI, Fox's sophisticated campaign convinced voters that Labastida was no different from the party he represented—authoritarian, corrupt, and retrograde. At the same time, Fox presented himself as the best option for meaningful change by discrediting Labastida's claims of representing a new PRI and overshadowing Cárdenas's attempts to present himself as the champion of Mexican nationalism and a credible source of change. In the end, 42 percent of voters felt that Fox was their best hope for defeating the PRI and moving the country forward, and Mexico entered the twenty-first century with its first opposition president in more than seven decades.

VICENTE FOX AND THE CHALLENGES OF POLITICAL CHANGE

During his campaign, Fox promised change for Mexico through wide-ranging reforms that included an overhaul of the tax system, modernizing and privatizing the energy sector, and labor reform. Fox also promised to create a million jobs a year, produce 7 percent annual GDP growth, resolve the lingering conflict in Chiapas, reduce crime and corruption, and deliver an immigration accord with the United States. However, he ultimately faced significant challenges resulting from his governing style, divisions within his own party, and a divided Congress. Indeed, over the course of his term, Mexico's economy

muddled through with an average of about 3 percent growth, and key sectors (such as *maquiladora* production) suffered major hits from overseas competition. He was unable to gain party support for some of his major policy priorities, most notably a fiscal reform package that sought to substantially increase tax revenue by extending the national VAT to include previously exempt items such as food, medicine, school tuition, and public transportation.¹⁶ Despite Fox's leadership on new legislation for indigenous rights, the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas refused to lay down their arms, and the arrest of several major drug traffickers, ongoing problems of crime and rising drug violence left many Mexicans feeling even less safe than at the start of his administration. Meanwhile, Fox's efforts to negotiate an immigration accord with the United States faltered in the face of newfound concerns about illegal immigration and terrorism following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Critics charged that, while he may have been an excellent candidate to win the presidency, once in office Fox lacked the political skills to achieve his goals.

The highly polarized political climate that prevailed during Fox's term was by far the greatest obstacle to his policy agenda. Fox faced a divided legislature controlled by two opposition parties—the PRI and the PRD—that were in a very strong position to recapture the presidency at the end of his term. In this context, members of the opposition were unlikely to give Fox much quarter, since voter dissatisfaction with his government could translate into support for their parties. Indeed, despite the PAN's slogan during the 2003 midterm elections—"Take the brakes off change"—voters increased their support for the opposition, especially the PRD (which nearly doubled its seats in the Chamber of Deputies from fifty in 2000 to ninety-seven in 2003). Hence the 2003 midterm elections secured Fox's status as a lame duck president and ensured that major changes would not be forthcoming over the remainder of his administration.

That said, Fox's six years in office were hardly a complete failure. On the contrary, his administration can claim credit for some important successes, chief among them economic stability. While the Mexican economy did not grow at nearly the rate promised by Fox, it did grow, and equally important, strict fiscal discipline led to a balanced budget and a significant decrease in inflation, from over 16 percent in 1999 to roughly 4 percent in 2006, remarkable accomplishments given the depth of the 1994 peso crisis and the instability of the Mexican economy in recent decades.

The Fox administration had other notable successes, including passage of the Federal Law for Transparency and Access to Public Government Information, akin to freedom of information laws in the United States and elsewhere. This law and the Federal Institute for Access to Public Information (Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información Pública, IFAI) that it created provide access to a wide array of government documents, greatly promoting

transparency and accountability in Mexico.¹⁷ Also important was the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination, a law that strengthened existing legislation and made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of "ethnic or national origin, sex, age, disability, social or economic condition, health, pregnancy, language, religion, opinions, sexual preference, or marital status." Moreover, thanks to shifting legislative coalitions among different political parties under Fox, the Mexican Congress actually passed more legislation during Fox's term than had been achieved in decades. Still, Fox's ultimate legacy will be debated for many years to come and will no doubt be shaped by the challenges faced by subsequent administrations in deepening and consolidating Mexico's democracy.

THE CALDERÓN ADMINISTRATION AND BEYOND

The 2006 presidential election proved extremely controversial, as discussed in greater detail in chapter 6, since the result was a virtual tie between PAN candidate Felipe Calderón and PRD candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Ultimately, Calderón was declared the winner by the slimmest of margins, 0.5 percent of the vote, or roughly a quarter of a million votes, and was heavily criticized by López Obrador and his supporters, who alleged electoral fraud and bias in the postelectoral legal decisions. The 2006 election revealed that Mexico was divided between those in the north and central western parts of the country, who largely supported Calderón, and those in the south and central east, who supported López Obrador. Furthermore, the country was almost evenly split between those who favored the existing economic model that called for promoting free-market reforms and those who favored a model that allowed the government to play a more active role in the distribution of resources. These divisions, together with the PAN's tiny margin of victory and López Obrador's postelectoral disputes, weakened Calderón's mandate. López Obrador claimed that the election had been stolen and that, much like Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1988, he was the legitimate president. Together with the National Democratic Convention (Convención Nacional Democrática, CND), he formed a "parallel government" to monitor the actions of the "spurious government" and orchestrate meaningful reforms. López Obrador sought to stay in the public eye and eventually displace Felipe Calderón, his alleged usurper. Thereafter, López Obrador refused to meet with Calderón, and for several months his supporters held demonstrations to protest what they saw as an illegitimate takeover of the presidency.¹⁸

Calderón thus took office amid severe social unrest and serious questions about his legitimacy. In recognition of the millions of poor and marginalized citizens that López Obrador represented, Calderón initially asserted that his

administration would help address Mexico's economic inequalities and promote better employment opportunities for all Mexicans. As he had claimed during his presidential campaign, Calderón aspired to be Mexico's "jobs" president, with a strong focus on social and economic development. Calderón also pushed forward important reforms to Mexico's pension system, taxation, electoral regulations, and the judicial sector. In the first few years of his presidency, Calderón's popularity grew significantly and the scars of the 2006 presidential election were seemingly forgotten.

Even so, Calderón will most likely be remembered for his controversial policies to combat drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime, which became the primary focus of his administration. At the outset of his term, Calderón requested an immediate 24 percent increase in the national security budget, and he promptly deployed tens of thousands of federal forces to the states most impacted by drug trafficking-related violence. Arguably, these measures reflected the fact that Calderón came to the presidency at a time of trouble and uncertainty. Even as he took office in December 2006, the southern state of Oaxaca continued to simmer with unrest after a midsummer teachers' strike erupted into violence, and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) had returned to a state of "red alert" in reaction to a violent police crackdown on flower vendors in the city of Texcoco, outside Mexico City.

However, internecine violence among drug-trafficking organizations in states along Mexico's Pacific coast and northern border regions quickly became Calderón's primary focus. By the end of 2010, his fourth year in office, more than thirty-four thousand people had died as a result of this violence, including hundreds of police, military personnel, government officials, and ordinary citizens caught in the crossfire. As discussed in chapter 13, Calderón's efforts were welcomed and praised by presidents George Bush and Barack Obama, both of whom supported his administration through a massive security assistance package known as the Mérida Initiative. Given the toll of violence that resulted from the war on drugs, by the end of Calderón's term, many Mexicans began to question whether they were better off than at the beginning. Moreover, a majority of Mexicans also grew to believe that their government was outmatched by the narco-traffickers. Drug traffickers enjoyed at least some complicity, support, and even sympathy from certain segments of society, and in some areas of the country locals have held public demonstrations protesting the government.¹⁹

As the end of Calderón's term approached, many Mexicans felt that their country was headed in the wrong direction. In July 2009, Calderón suffered a major political defeat as the PRI gained ground in elections for the federal legislature, and in state and local governments around the country. Despite this major defeat, Calderón proceeded to unveil sweeping reform proposals

that—if passed—would dramatically transform Mexico's system of democratic governance. Upon announcing the reforms, Calderón indicated that "our democracy is still far from being able to express and represent clearly the voice and desire of the people in legislative and public policy decisions." His proposals included the following ten major political reforms:

1. Consecutive reelection of mayors and city council members, with a proposed limit of twelve years in one post, to promote greater responsiveness to voters and to facilitate long-term planning in public administration.
2. Consecutive reelection of federal legislators with term limits set at twelve years, to increase responsiveness to their districts and the acquisition of legislative knowledge on issues important to their constituents.
3. Reduction of the number of seats in the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate, to promote greater efficiency in legislative work and better use of public funds.
4. Increased proportion of votes required for political parties to conserve their national registration and public financing, assuring that there is sufficient popular support to justify their existence.
5. Legislative initiative process, so that citizens can participate directly in proposing laws before the Congress.
6. Permission for candidates to run independently of political parties, to offer citizens a wider array of choices in elections.
7. A second round of voting for the president in highly competitive races, to promote coalition building and ensure strong electoral support for the president.
8. A constitutional provision allowing the Supreme Court to propose legislative initiatives, to strengthen the role of the judiciary and provide more direct juridical guidance to legislators.
9. Special presidential legislative initiatives and constitutional amendments (up to two per legislative session) that would take effect unless rejected by Congress before the end of the session (constitutional amendments would be submitted to a citizen referendum).
10. Possibility of segmented congressional and executive approval of the federal budget, so that disagreements over certain sections of the budget do not delay the approval of sections that are approved by all parties.

While the Calderón administration managed to obtain fifty-five reforms to the Mexican constitution during his first three years in office, the president was already widely perceived as a lame duck by the time the reform package was announced in December 2009. In the wake of the PAN's losses

in the midterm elections earlier that year, except for some minor proposals (such as independent candidates), this sweeping reform initiative was unviable, and critics viewed it as an intentional political distraction by the administration.²⁰

Meanwhile, with the PRI resurgent in the state and midterm elections, many pundits began to predict the return of Mexico's former ruling party in the presidential election of 2012. Indeed, presuming that the PRI was able to maintain internal unity for its presidential candidate—a task that proved elusive in both 2000 and 2006—numerous public opinion polls signaled strong support for the presidential candidacy of Enrique Peña Nieto, the young and dashing PRI governor of the state of Mexico. Even so, electoral uncertainty is a new and prominent feature of contemporary Mexican politics, so—unlike elections of the past—any effort to predict the final results of Mexico's presidential election prior to July 2, 2012, would constitute pure speculation.

CONCLUSION

Mexico's transition away from the single-party dominance of the PRI happened gradually over several decades. New students of Mexican politics are sure to ask why, given the PRI's loss of legitimacy in almost every area, the transition did not happen faster or earlier. With the help of hindsight, it is possible to say that the pace and even the character of Mexico's transition were determined largely by timing and sequence of events. That is, had the contributing factors—economic crisis, loss of legitimacy, and institutional openings—happened all at once, we might have expected the PRI to lose power more quickly and definitively. But obviously this could not have happened, because each event was a consequence of another. The PRI's loss of legitimacy stemmed in no small part from its failure as an economic manager and agent of redistribution, as well as its exclusionary and corrupt tendencies. The loss of legitimacy in turn made it increasingly difficult for the PRI to use its traditional practices (e.g., cooptation and electoral fraud) to perpetuate its power, and forced the administrations of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to create the openings that gradually leveled the playing field and made it possible for the opposition to gain entry into the political system. Meanwhile, the pace of the transition was determined by the regime's periodic runs of good luck (the discovery of vast oil deposits in the mid-1970s) and its understandable reluctance to dismantle the authoritarian institutions that preserved its dominance. Only when faced with serious challenges to its power did it enact the reforms that cumulatively brought greater democracy to Mexico. In some ways the erratic and moderate pace of the transition may have benefited the opposition by providing it time

to gain the electoral and governing experience that was essential to its successes in the mid-1990s.

One question we are left with is whether Mexico's transition has proceeded far enough and penetrated deeply enough to establish the country as a definitive democracy. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the country has the foundation for a solid democracy: for example, it has some of the strongest electoral institutions in the world, the separation and balance of powers has been considerably strengthened in the past fifteen years, and Mexican voters believe they have a meaningful role to play in the electoral and political processes. However, there also remain vestiges of the past and formidable obstacles that suggest that Mexico's transition is not complete: the lines of representation and accountability between legislators and their constituents are something between fuzzy and nonexistent, the rule of law remains weak, and vast socioeconomic disparities undermine the equality purportedly offered by the Mexican constitution. Another looming question is whether a PRI victory in the 2012 presidential election would effectively reverse Mexico's many gains of the past thirty years. Finally, because Mexico's 2012 elections coincide with the U.S. presidential race—a phenomenon that happens every twelve years—the future of U.S.-Mexico relations is also very likely to be significantly shaped by the outcome in both countries. In the coming chapters, we explore these questions in greater depth, with an emphasis on the political institutions, processes, and interests that shape Mexico's political situation today.

Part II

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY