

The Mexico Project

Before Democracy: Memories of Mexican Elections

by Kate Doyle | July 17, 2003

With this article, the Americas Program introduces a new series in conjunction with the National Security Archive in Washington, DC. As Mexico Project Director Kate Doyle explains: "The main objective of the project is to challenge the myths of foreign policy—on both sides of the border." To that end, Doyle combs nearly four decades of U.S. and Mexican archives to uncover new evidence and bring to light the hidden histories behind the bilateral relationship. The results, presented in this monthly series, offer the unprecedented opportunity to separate the rhetoric from the reality, and provide a foundation for rebuilding binational diplomacy on the basis of shared interests, transparency, and citizen involvement. The original documentation, as well as previous articles, may be found at www.nsarchive.org/mexico. Your comments are welcome at <americas@irc-online.org>.

Not so long ago, most Mexicans went to their polling places and cast their votes in national, state, and local elections knowing in advance what the outcome would be: the candidates of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) would once again be declared the winners. Whether there was one name on the ballot or many, whether the majority of voters were radical leftists, staunch conservatives, or somewhere in between, the result was a foregone conclusion.

The United States knew this too, and U.S. officials in Washington and in Mexico were kept well informed as to the nature of the PRI political machine and the lengths to which it would go to maintain power. Privately, they did not hesitate to discuss the machinations of the Mexican elite and their effects on the country's political system.

In public they tread more carefully. But if one searches the open historical record in vain for critical statements about Mexican politics by American officials, declassified U.S. documents about past elections in Mexico offer a bracingly honest account of the years of scheming, fraud, sophisticated cooptation, and orchestrated violence that lay behind the hemisphere's most "perfect dictatorship."

The Dark Ages

One of Mexico's darkest political ages was under President Díaz Ordaz, who ruled the country long after the golden age of the PRI—when President Lázaro Cardenas nationalized Mexico's oil and became the champion of the campesinos—but well before the political reforms of the late 1970s that would finally begin to loosen the PRI's monopoly on power.

Secret U.S. assessments about the Mexican government's political legitimacy in those years could be aston-

ishingly bald. In 1967, the CIA's Intelligence Directorate produced a critical review of the Díaz Ordaz regime entitled *Mexico: The Problems of Progress*. Although the agency praised the country's record of "political stability," it questioned the government's unwillingness to address mounting economic and social problems, such as rural poverty. The CIA laid the blame on the ruling party, which, it claimed, had grown too comfortable with the status quo to want to consider change of any kind.

"The PRI has been a highly effective instrument of the small clique that has pre-empted political power while lavishly promoting the trappings of partisan competition. Successful maintenance of a benevolent dictatorship behind a façade of a federal republic responsive to the popular will has depended on an uneducated, backward 'electorate' resigned to unethical practices and political bossism."

In an analysis marked "THIS DOCUMENT MUST NOT BE RELEASED TO FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS," the CIA described a regime unresponsive to Mexico's growing middle class, which was increasingly resentful of old-style politics and had begun to challenge them openly.

"A serious defiance of the *dedazo* practice, whereby Mexico City chooses local and regional PRI candidates, occurred early this year in the state of Sonora. Between February and May the state was in a virtual condition of insurrection, with the citizenry protesting the PRI's choice for the governorship. Federal troops restored calm, and electoral fraud delivered a PRI victory in the 2 July election."

The agency pointed out that Díaz Ordaz had introduced some minor political reforms in an effort to acknowledge increasing popular pressure. "These attempts, however, have created serious strains in the party and have deeply



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antagonized those elements whose power base would be diminished by the reforms envisioned. The reaction makes it clear that the political moment has not arrived when the PRI, as a united organization, can bear a really significant step toward democratization.”

Jalisco 1967

On the ground in Mexico, U.S. embassy and consular officials witnessed the operations of the political machine up close and described what they saw in unequivocal terms. In the state of Jalisco in October 1967, for example, consulate officer R. B. Lane explained how the system worked to choose PRI candidates for state deputies.

In those days, Jalisco was divided into 18 electoral districts; the most important among them constituted the spheres of influence, or “*cacicazgos*” of powerful politicians “who have, through money, time, friendships, dispensation of favors, and in some cases, use of force, created fiefdoms in which they select mayors, city councilmen, state, and sometimes federal deputies.”

“Every effort is made to parcel out placebos to those factions whose support is felt to be essential to the continued good health of the Party. This is apparently done without regard to the wishes of the people whose interests are theoretically furthered and defended by their elected representatives. Consequently, candidates are selected to represent regions of which they are not residents, of which they have no specialized knowledge, and in which they have, in many cases, no particular interest except furthering their personal political careers. The only apparent criterion is that they ‘play ball’ with the Governor and be acceptable to the PRI State Executive Committee.”

The decisions were followed by nominating conventions held in the headquarters of each electoral district. “These meetings were characterized by ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations of enthusiasm for the candidates and ubiquitous placards proclaiming the candidates’ suitability, dedication to the Revolution, honesty, and so forth, though the vast majority of those present had no voice whatsoever in the selection of their standard bearers.”

The same Mr. Lane was even more frank in his assessment, some six months later, of local government in Jalisco, in an airgram that analyzed the political systems of three small Jaliscan municipalities: La Barca, Ocotlán, and Jamay. Lane described how the PRI controlled the nomination of municipal presidents through political favor, choosing “candidates” for their loyalty to the system rather than their adeptness at the job. “The State

Executive Committee of the PRI has, of late, tried to change the image of the local caciques from that of blundering ignoramuses to one more favorable. Nevertheless, most of the (municipal presidents) are not educated beyond the primary school level and a number are actually illiterate. Understandably, they are in constant need of ‘advice’ from Guadalajara.”

In rural communities, it was normally members of the PRI’s agricultural sector who were selected. Such representatives were not, however, peasant farmers, but rather were the large landowners who earned their living from enormous properties farmed by campesinos. “The *Presidentes* selected from the campesino sector are in politics primarily to see to it that the squatters (*paracaidistas*) make no attempts to dispossess them of their lands, or if they try, that the police power will be in friendly hands. In other words, the leaders of the campesino sector are normally wealthy farmers who have a vested interest in the political control of their communities.”

Yucatan 1969

In 1969, voters in the Yucatan went to the polls to elect a new governor. The state had been in political turmoil since 1967, when the opposition National Action Party (PAN) capitalized on growing popular discontent with the PRI to win control of the mayoralty of Merida, the state capital, and two of nine deputy seats. The opposition’s unprecedented victories prompted a backlash from the local PRI apparatus; in September 1968, the American consulate documented instances of the PRI bribing PAN city councilmen to resign in exchange for tens of thousands of pesos.

As the election approached, the PRI’s pressure on the opposition became more overt. Four months before the vote, U.S. officials described an attack by PRI activists against a group of PAN members outside the city of Tekax in southern Yucatan. The attack, according to one consulate source, was deliberately provoked by hard-line PRI members who were increasingly unhappy with the rural successes of traveling PAN delegations. State PRI officials were less anxious about the election; over lunch a few days later, party functionary Luis Peraza told the reporting officer that he considered the entire campaign irrelevant, “since the PRI is going to win the November election in any event. When asked why he was so certain, Peraza smiled and replied, ‘one third of Yucatan’s votes are from Merida, but the other two-thirds are from the countryside—and election results are easier to arrange there.’”

Washington’s perspective on the election was upbeat. The State Department’s intelligence branch viewed the guber-

natorial race as representative of growing disenchantment with the PRI not just in the Yucatan but around the country, increasing the pressure on the party to institute genuine political reforms. Although the department was skeptical about the PAN's chances of winning, it averred that "the myth of the Revolution is wearing a bit thin," and declared that "The day when an opposition party can mount a substantial challenge to the official party at a politically significant level has arrived. ... [O]ver the long run there seems to be no alternative but to face the issue of growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. The Yucatan elections may reveal the PRI's first response to this problem."

And so it did. According to consulate reports, the election took place amidst an onslaught of PRI-orchestrated "fraud, irregularity, and outright theft"; on the day after the vote, the PRI candidate for governor declared himself the victor by 90%. "The non-violence called for by the PRI throughout the campaign up to the last minute," wrote the reporting officer, "clearly meant, as events have shown, 'be docile while we steal the election.' The PAN charge that there was wholesale fraud is also beyond doubt... It has been a sordid spectacle."

Veracruz 1970

Following the presidential elections in July 1970, the U.S. consulate in Veracruz obtained the actual voting statistics for one district from the state's Federal Electoral Commission. In an airgram to Washington entitled, "Ballot Counting—Veracruz Style," the reporting officer compared the real numbers with the "official" ones, concluding that while the declared results gave the PRI candidate Luis Echeverría 94% of the vote in that district, the actual total was about 36%.

According to the U.S. official's source inside the commission, the published results were assigned by the PRI National Committee to the State PRI Committee, "which, in turn, assigned the final vote totals for each of the 14 electoral districts in the State of Veracruz." As an indication of the indifference and disgust of many citizens, "a majority of the 108,931 registered voters in Veracruz's 11th District either abstained from voting or spoiled their ballots. The total not voting or having their votes cancelled was 72% of the eligible electorate." Many of those whose votes were annulled had written "farce" on the bottom of their ballots.

"Review of the vote totals by precincts shows that in several precincts the vote total exceeded the number of registered voters. While officials claim that this is the result of a number of people shifting their residences

since registration, this appears highly doubtful. It is more likely a case of 'ballot-stuffing' by over-eager PRI precinct chairmen or election observers."

"There is no doubt," continued the consulate, "that the PRI won the election in Veracruz's 11th District. However, the PRI's winning margin was less than claimed in the public media. One questions how long the PRI will be able to maintain this hypocrisy and continue to deceive the public..."

How did these kinds of field observations filter up to senior policymakers in Washington? One month after the July 1970 presidential election, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger prepared President Richard Nixon for a farewell visit meeting with Díaz Ordaz in Puerto Vallarta. Briefing his boss on Mexican domestic matters, Kissinger commented on the victory of Luis Echeverría as the country's next president. "Echeverría won almost 86% of the vote and the PRI slate won by a landslide. Although there may have been some irregularities in the election, the results probably are a relatively accurate indication of popular support for the PRI, which will continue its monopoly of power in Mexico."

Legitimacy vs. Stability

It is not surprising that American officials—however much they knew about the inner workings of the Mexico's political machine—were publicly and consistently supportive of the government. After all, throughout the cold war at least, the bottom line for U.S. interests in Mexico was national security and stability, not democracy. As one secret briefing paper written for Secretary of State Kissinger stated succinctly in 1972, "It is important to our security that there be in Mexico a friendly, cooperative, and politically stable government and that no hostile power have access to the territory of Mexico."

There were other reasons for Washington to be silent on the issue of democracy in Mexico. For one, U.S. officials knew that blunt asseverations about the anti-democratic practices of the government would provoke immediate outrage inside the country, as sensitive as it was to any sign of interference from its powerful neighbor. Indeed, when U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Joseph John Jova rashly spoke his mind at a conference in Washington in 1976—calling Mexico's political system "monarchical"—he was treated to a torrent of indignation and anger within Mexico from government officials and leftist intellectuals alike, according to a *New York Times* article written about the incident.

A more complicated factor may also have been at play—what scholar Jacqueline Mazza called "implicit poli-

cymaking” in her recent book on U.S. attitudes toward Mexican democracy (*Don’t Disturb the Neighbors: The United States and Democracy in Mexico, 1980-95*. New York: Routledge, 2001.) Mazza discovered through interviews with senior American officials and an analysis of the public record that there was what amounted to an unspoken agreement within Washington to avoid public criticism of Mexican political practices altogether. For U.S. purposes, Mexico was a successful regime, so why create trouble by alienating friends?

According to the declassified documents, some U.S. officials recognized that Washington’s silence on the issue could reflect poorly on the United States. Writing in 1969, Ambassador Robert McBride worried that “repeated affirmations of excellent relations between our two countries, our known preoccupation with problems of security, and the disposition of many Mexicans to believe that our only other foreign policy concern is the protection of U.S. investments, lead some persons currently in opposition or dissent to view the U.S. Government as the chief bulwark of the political status quo in Mexico.”

But in the end, the core legitimacy of the Mexican regime was irrelevant to the United States given the unshakeable political “stability” that it achieved. In its 1972 “Country Analysis and Strategy Paper”—an annual document which examined the issues at stake in the U.S.-Mexican relationship—the American embassy flatly stated that a key objective in Mexico was to “Preserve the stability of the Mexican political system.” According to its own reporting that year, the system to be preserved was one that relied on fraudulent elections, political manipulation, and control of opposition parties at the

federal, state, and local levels, repression of dissent, and indifference and inaction toward fundamental problems such as rural poverty, unemployment, and an alarming population increase.

A historical review of Mexico’s political system makes the inability of the present government to capture the public’s imagination and convince citizens to participate in the July 6th elections all the more disheartening. Nearly 60% of Mexico’s registered voters did not go to the polls on Sunday. This staggering abstentionism—just three years after the triumph of Vicente Fox that heralded the country’s long-awaited democratic transition—reflects not only a disenchantment with the failure of Fox and the PAN to transform Mexican politics on a national level. It is also a sign that the public’s long-standing skepticism about the country’s political system endures.

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