

Mexico at Midterm: Democracy and Divided Government

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Abstract

With its third national election since the watershed political reforms of 1996, Mexico has successfully consolidated a democratic regime. As the first half of Vicente Fox's administration has demonstrated, however, certain features of this system seriously impede effective governance. Chief among these features is the combination of presidential rule with a three-party system. Most of the institutional reforms currently under consideration, such as the reelection of federal deputies, are unlikely to solve the problems this system generates. In this challenging institutional context, more is demanded of Mexican political leaders than they have so far been able to deliver.

Author bio

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Mexico at Midterm: Democracy and Divided Government

On July 6, 2003, Mexico celebrated its third national election since the watershed political reforms of 1996. The results for that country's new democracy were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the balloting confirmed Mexico's transition to a highly competitive political system characterized by free, fair, regular, and inclusive elections. On the other hand, the midterm results highlighted certain structural deficiencies of Mexican democracy – most notably, the problems that attend multiparty presidential rule. This institutional combination, which is unlikely to change, does not pose an immediate threat to democratic stability. But it does make policy-making more cumbersome, and managing the affairs of state in Mexico will require especially skillful political leadership.

That leadership has so far been deficient. Although the reformist administration of Vicente Fox has made progress on certain issues, it has also missed crucial opportunities. Meanwhile, resistance from unreconstructed elements of the old ruling party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI), the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and sometimes even Fox's own National Action Party (PAN) has complicated the president's task. Unless Mexico's three main partisan blocs can work effectively with each other and with the executive branch in a challenging institutional context, progress on crucial policy areas – including democratic deepening – will remain stalled.

This article first describes disappointment with the Fox administration and discusses its causes. Although some of these causes can be traced to mistakes by the Fox administration or obstructionism by opposition parties, many of Mexico's political problems have structural roots.

The midterm elections of 2003 altered little about the way Mexico's new political system operates, and the 2006 presidential elections are unlikely to produce radical changes. The most likely prospect is that Mexico will muddle through its next several years – remaining essentially democratic, but unable to carry out major political or social reforms.

Decepción and desencanto

When discussing the first three years of Fox's presidency with academics, bankers, businessmen, civic activists, journalists, legislators, and even government officials, the word most frequently heard is *decepción* (disappointment). Among the political cognoscenti – including many who supported Fox's candidacy – the tone of commentary about the President varies from philosophical to furious. Although these sentiments have not yet translated into *desencanto* (disenchantment) with Mexico's new democracy in general, they may ultimately affect perceptions of that system's efficacy.

At the mass level, the situation is less stark but similar. The president's approval ratings dropped fairly steadily during the first year of his administration, from approximately 70% shortly after he took office to 47% in March 2002. (Figure 1 shows overall approval ratings for Fox, as well as ratings of his honesty and economic management.) Presidential approval since then has fluctuated around 60%, driven primarily by enduring perceptions of the president's honesty.² Because these ratings substantially exceed Fox's share of the 2000 vote (42.5%), it would be wrong to regard the president as an unpopular failure. But the fact that president's standing in the mass public is no better than that of Carlos Salinas or Ernesto Zedillo at the same point in their terms certainly suggests grounds for *decepción*.

Some disappointment with Fox may have been inevitable. Hopes were high for the first presidential candidate to defeat the PRI, among both political elites and ordinary citizens. In addition, impressions of Fox's performance at the mass level have suffered from the sluggish state of Mexico's economy: approval of the president's economic stewardship has never exceeded 50%. Because anemic economic growth is largely a product of recession in the U.S., Fox may be paying an unfair price. Recent polls, however, have begun to reflect disillusionment with other aspects of Fox's administration. In particular, his administration's failure to move vigorously against corruption and other abuses committed under the old regime has become a source of frustration among political elites and ordinary Mexicans.

To its credit, the Fox administration has made some progress on these issues. The administration succeeded in passing a Transparency Law (akin to the U.S. Freedom of Information Act) that should substantially facilitate independent journalism and civic scrutiny of the policy-making process. Some progress has also been made in restructuring and purging Mexico's old, corruption-wracked police force, the Mexican Federal Judicial Police (or "Federales"). These reforms may be followed in 2004 by an extension of the vote to some 10 million Mexicans living abroad – probably the only serious remaining deficiency in the Mexico's electoral regime – and other institutional tweaking.³ Finally, whatever the administration's shortcomings, Fox's defeat of the PRI is still widely regarded as a crucial turning point in Mexico's political history. Precious few analysts argue that any of Fox's rivals for the presidency in 2000 would have done a better job than he has in deepening Mexican democracy.

Nevertheless, critics of the administration's "go-slow" approach have a point. So far not a single individual has yet gone to jail in connection with Mexico's bank bailout package, in which bad loans – many of dubious legality – were socialized to Mexican taxpayers to the tune

of one-quarter of gross domestic product. And even some of the most scandalous cases of fraud and corruption, such as that of fugitive banker Carlos Cabal Peniche and former Mexico City regent Oscar Espinosa Villareal, have yet to result in a successful prosecution.⁴ In some respects, exemplary punishment during the first half of Fox's term even lags behind that of former PRI presidents, who were not always so scrupulous in observing due process when they turned on malefactors from their predecessors' administrations.

Beyond particularly egregious cases of corruption, there remains the broader issue of dealing with abuses committed under the old regime. Unlike Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Poland, South Korea, South Africa, and many other new democracies, Mexico has not moved in a comprehensive or coordinated way to deal with its past. Although Fox named a special prosecutor to investigate past abuses and ordered the release of important classified documents, Mexico has held no truth commissions, passed no lustration laws, and conducted no human rights trials.⁵ In fact, the special prosecutor's office has recently complained of inadequate support from the administration. Meanwhile, holdovers from PRI administrations continue to occupy mid-level positions at various ministries. Although few of these individuals have been linked to serious abuses, some are associated with the sort of sweetheart deals that characterized Mexican public administration under the PRI.

Lack of vigorous, comprehensive examination of the past seems especially inexplicable in the Mexican case. Unlike many other new democracies, Mexico faces no serious prospect of resistance from a powerful military establishment that could threaten the new regime. Moreover, popular sentiment after Fox's victory strongly favored punishment of past offenders. Finally, the current administration could do more to seek out and punish corruption at the middle and lower levels of the federal bureaucracy on its own, without any need for congressional approval.

At this point, it is probably too late for the administration to reverse course. Although subsequent presidents may take up the challenge, Mexico's first indisputably democratic administration clearly missed an opportunity to move forcefully against holdovers from the old regime.

A “do-nothing Congress”?

Related to lack of progress on political reform is disappointment with the administration's set-backs on more mundane matters of policy. As with democratic deepening, the Fox administration can point to certain tangible accomplishments: reform of the health care and pension systems, the passage of a progressive anti-discrimination law, the preservation of successful anti-poverty programs from the previous administration, congressional acceptance of the president's budget, and the maintenance of macroeconomic discipline. These successes are likely to be followed by further restructuring of the pension system (extending the new system to public employees and allowing greater mobility between pension accounts), modest tax increases, and perhaps certain labor and energy sector reforms sought by the business community.

Nevertheless, halfway through Fox's term, policy failures outnumber successes. Notable reversals include the president's failure to definitively resolve the Chiapas conflict (a problem that candidate Fox promised to solve in “fifteen minutes”);⁶ his inability to sell a much-needed tax increase to a skeptical Congress and public; and the lack of any systemic overhaul of Mexico's education system (despite substantial increases in spending). The private sector also remains frustrated by lack of progress on reform of the energy sector and of Mexico's relatively rigid labor laws. Meanwhile, Fox's much touted “Puebla-Panama” project, designed to extend

growth to Mexico's impoverished south, has largely fallen by victim to competing presidential priorities, economic downturn, fiscal stringency, and the lack of hoped-for funding from abroad.

One oft-cited reason for these failures has been the administration's maladroit handling of opposition parties in Congress. In fact, the Fox administration has sometimes even seemed ill-equipped to negotiate effectively with the parliamentary leadership of the PAN. Even senior officials in the Fox administration name the failure to lay the proper groundwork in Congress as their principal regret since 2000.

To be fair, Fox's original plan was quite different. After his election, he offered the PRD three cabinet posts in return for their cooperation with his administration. (Reports put the three posts as Social Development, Comptroller, and possibly Environment.) Such an arrangement – essentially an extension of the pan-opposition alliance in the legislature from 1997 to 2000 – would have immensely facilitated thorough investigation of the past and the passage of needed policies. PRD leaders can argue that a few Cabinet posts in Fox's "neoliberal" administration hardly constituted a legitimate basis for formal collaboration. But Fox supporters can also plausibly claim that their initial plans for a true transitional government were frustrated by the PRD's recalcitrance and political gamesmanship.

Somewhat less defensible was Fox's handling of the PRI, whose leaders had little political incentive to see Fox succeed. Senior administration officials stress the difficulty of attempting to prosecute key figures in the old regime while at the same time attempting to negotiate their followers in the legislature. Other observers argue that a fractious PRI, reeling from its defeat in 2000, could never have been counted on to deliver its votes in the legislature. In any case, whatever deals the Fox administration cut with PRI bosses paid precious few

dividends: Fox got neither serious investigation of the past nor systematic cooperation from the PRI in Congress.

Whatever the blame that opposition parties deserve, political observers attribute lack of progress at least in part to naiveté on the part of the Fox administration. According to this now-familiar lament, Fox was an effective campaigner but an ineffective president. In other words, his businessman's approach to public administration that failed to take into account the fact that running the country would require real political negotiation. One classic example was Fox's decision to name a respected environmentalist as Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, rather than give the post to his alliance partner, the Green Party (PVEM).⁷ The Greens' support for presidential initiatives in Congress lagged, and the PVEM ultimately formed an electoral alliance with the PRI in 2003. Other widely cited symptoms include the lack of policy coordination within the executive branch and the president's hands-off, sometimes capricious management style. For instance, the administration initially promoted a massive airport project for Mexico City, only to scrub the idea with little explanation shortly thereafter. One prominent academic – once sympathetic to the President – even went so far as to characterize Fox as a small-time businessman inadequate to the task of governing Mexico.

Such criticisms are unduly harsh, but they contain an element of truth. Despite announced shifts in administration strategy since the 2003 election, it is not clear how much has really changed. For instance, many analysts were expecting to see a major Cabinet reshuffling in the wake of the PAN's loss, rather than simply the replacement of the Energy and Environment Ministers announced in September. A number of other senior officials who are clearly past their "sell-by" dates remain dutifully at their posts. And the President himself provoked no small

measure of puzzlement just after the elections when he suggested that the PAN's loss of seats in the legislature was of little concern or import to him.

The 2003 elections: *Plus ça change...*

Administration officials were clearly hoping that the 2003 midterm elections would give them a majority in the lower house of Congress, thereby strengthening their hand in parliamentary negotiations. In fact, the opposite happened. Mexico's 2003 contest constituted something of a negative referendum the incumbent administration, costing the PAN more than fifty seats in the lower house and further impeding cooperation between legislative and executive branches. Because the PAN lacked a majority before the elections, the situation may not get much worse; however, it is unlikely to get better.

In terms of longer term voting trends, the elections altered little. Table 1 compares the results of the 2003 balloting to those of the other two elections held under Mexico's reformed electoral system: the 1997 midterms, which cost the PRI control over the lower house of Congress, and the 2000 generals, which cost it the presidency. For each election, Table 1 reports both votes and seats.

Ascertaining each party's vote share of the vote in all three contests is complicated by the fact that different parties formed alliances in 2000 and 2003. For instance, the opportunistic PVEM ran its own ticket in 1997, joined forces with Vicente Fox's PAN in 2000, and made an alliance with the PRI in 2003. Meanwhile, several smaller leftist parties that joined with the PRD in 2000 ran separate slates in 2003. Representation in Congress for each partner in these alliances was divided according to prearranged formulae devised by the parties themselves and did not necessarily reflect popular appeal. Consequently, it is not immediately obvious how

much of an alliance's vote should be attributed to each partner. Without some kind of imputation, however, it is impossible to separate out changes in voting patterns that reflect alliances from true shifts in partisan support.

With these difficulties in mind, Table 1 divides valid votes cast for registered parties in party-list ballots into five blocs: (1) PRI, (2) PAN, (3) Left, (4) PVEM, and (5) Other. The "Left" bloc includes all votes cast for the PRD and four smaller leftist parties, regardless of whether those parties were in formal alliance with the PRD in any given year; it does not include votes for the three minor parties in 2000, which collectively received close to 4% of the vote.⁸ The PRI/PVEM alliance vote in 2003 was divided between the PRI and the PVEM based on each party's share of the vote in non-alliance contests. The PVEM vote in 2000 represents the average of its vote shares in 1997 and 2003; this figure was subtracted from the PAN/PVEM vote to yield a PAN vote share for 2000.

[Table 1 about here]

The results in the first five rows of Table 1 suggest that 2003 represented a noticeable but modest setback for the PAN. Although Fox's party lost an opportunity to convert its 2000 gains into a far-reaching and permanent realignment, it still did better than it had in 1997 (and much better than it had before then). The electoral results thus echo other conclusions about the first half of the Fox administration: a period of missed opportunities, perhaps, but hardly disastrous.

The verdict for the PRI in 2003 is mixed. On the positive side, the balloting demonstrates that Mexico's old ruling party has successfully made the transition to a fully competitive electoral environment. In the wake of its defeat in 2000, some observers had argued that the PRI

was destined to splinter or even disintegrate. Instead of collapsing, the PRI has held together and even remained the country's largest party.

Beyond confirming its survival, however, voting patterns in 2003 did not particularly benefit the PRI. Table 1 suggests that dealignment from the old ruling party appears to be continuing, albeit at a modest pace: the party's vote share relative to its rivals slid from approximately 39% in 1997 to 38% in 2000 to 36% in 2003. Although the PRI won the governorship of Nuevo León, a PAN stronghold, in 2003,⁹ the striking weakness of the PAN's gubernatorial candidate makes it difficult to draw many national-level conclusions from that race. Rather, the main lesson seems to be that bipartisan competition between the PRI and the PAN will continue to characterize most northern states, with candidate selection being an important arbiter of victory.

The main beneficiary of the 2003 elections was clearly the Left, which rebounded from 19% in 2000.¹⁰ The PRD also swept Mexico City, thanks largely to the striking popularity of governor Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Assuming that the PRD can form electoral alliances with ideologically compatible smaller parties in 2006, it will easily have a large enough mass base for a serious presidential bid. Again, the lesson here is that none of Mexico's three main factions is likely to disappear.

What the relatively modest aggregate-level shifts in Table 1 do not reveal is the fluidity of the Mexican electorate at the level of individual voters. Only about two-thirds of Mexicans actually report having a partisan affiliation, and only about a quarter of Mexicans consider themselves "strong" supporters of any party.¹¹ These figures reflect broad-based dealignment from the PRI over the last two decades, followed by some measure of "reattachment" to the PAN and the PRD. Because detachment from the PRI has outpaced reattachment to the other parties,

large chunks of the Mexican electorate remains available for recruitment over the course of an election campaign. Such potential fluidity only increases the Left's chances in 2006, assuming that currently uncommitted voters can be motivated to vote.

This brings us to the only truly depressing statistic in Table 1: turnout. Mexicans cast ten million fewer ballots in 2003 than they did three years before, despite an appreciable increase in the potential voting population. All told, well over half of eligible voters declined to make use of an electoral system that had cost them billions of dollars to create. In many ways, this drop constitutes a much more damning indictment of the Fox administration's record than does the partisan composition of the vote. Unlike his candidacy in 2000, Fox's performance in office since then has failed to galvanize the population. Many eligible voters who support the president simply did not see it as worth their while to participate.

At one level, this drop in turnout can be interpreted as an indictment of Mexican democracy. Generalized disengagement from politics in the absence of a national crisis is a venerable Mexican tradition, and low turnout may be a symptom of Mexicans' lapsing back into a less participatory mode.¹² On the other hand, the same turnout data could also be interpreted as welcoming Mexico into the ranks of consolidated democratic regimes. Participation rates in 2003 were not particularly low for a midterm election in a well-established, media-oriented electoral system. Indeed, some scholars had anticipated a modest drop in turnout following the decay of the PRI's clientelistic machine and the transitional elections of 1997 and 2000.¹³ Again, the main conclusion seems to be one of missed opportunities rather than impending catastrophe.

Democracy *a la mexicana*

With three highly competitive elections in a row, Mexico has clearly crossed the threshold to what political scientists call “electoral democracy”.¹⁴ Indeed, Mexico possesses an electoral regime worthy of emulation by many established democracies – most notably, the United States. Fraud has been essentially eliminated; campaigns are largely publicly funded; ballots and vote-counting procedures for national elections are standardized across the country; and votes translate into offices in an equitable and eminently reasonable fashion. (The one failing of this system, lack of voting rights for expatriates, may be rectified before 2006.)

Perhaps most importantly, Mexico’s Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and Federal Electoral Tribunal (TRIFE) effectively function as a fourth branch of government designed to ensure the integrity of the electoral process. For instance, the PRI was recently fined approximately \$90 million for campaign violations in 2000 (a scandal known as “Pemexgate”). In November 2003, the PRI and the PAN voted a new set of IFE councilors, excluding those proposed by the PRD. Although the process raised questions about the autonomy of electoral authorities, the most likely outcome is an IFE that remains independent but is more reticent about investigating campaign finance violations. In short, the principal mechanism of ensuring political representation and accountability in a democratic system – elections – is well established. Mexico thus deserves its Freedom House rating of 2, on par with Botswana, Croatia, the Dominican Republic, Mongolia, Romania, Samoa, South Korea, and Taiwan.

The question is whether it deserves any more than that. According to critics, Mexico’s democratic transition remains manifestly incomplete, with multiple authoritarian enclaves and manifest deficiencies in the rule of law. Corruption remains a serious problem in Mexico’s judiciary and law enforcement establishment; impunity persists; political culture at both the mass

and elite levels reflects seventy-odd years of autocratic rule; civil society is still relatively weak; and broadcast media exhibit the sort of crony capitalist relationships that have long characterized Mexican political economy.¹⁵ From this perspective, it is farcical to speak of democratic consolidation.

On the other hand, Mexico does appear to meet the classic threefold standard for democratic consolidation articulated by Larry Diamond.¹⁶ At the elite level, democratic rules of the game are clearly understood and accepted by all major political actors. Unlike certain nearby countries, no generals stand ready to pounce if elected leaders step out of line, and no politicians surreptitiously knock on the back door of the barracks. Indeed, elite compliance with democratic norms far exceeds these minimal criteria. In a region where presidents often run roughshod over the legislature, Mexico's Congress routinely rejects presidential initiatives. Meanwhile, an independent Supreme Court regularly renders definitive judgments on the constitutionality of laws and settles disputes between different branches of government. Whether from fear of adverse international reactions or from genuine commitment to democratic processes, Mexico's political leaders have clearly accepted democracy.

At the level of political organizations, the same pattern emerges. Throughout the country, large numbers of organized civic groups proselytize and protest without fear of official repression. Meanwhile, despite the existence of localized insurgent groups in the south and resistance to further political reform among some factions of the PRI, no significant party, interest group, movement, or institution seeks to overthrow the system. To the contrary, support for democracy figures prominently in the discourse of all three major parties (even the PRI). Although none of the three major parties can be considered fully democratic internally, their external behavior conforms to democratic expectations.

Finally, democracy appears to have taken root at the mass level. Although most Mexicans feel that more needs to be done to consolidate a fully democratic system, over half believe that they currently reside in a democratic country.¹⁷ A decisive majority of Mexicans also favor democracy over any other form of government.¹⁸ The scope of their endorsement may fall short of Larry Diamond's suggested cut-off of 70%,¹⁹ but mass sentiments certainly suggest substantial support for democratic governance.

The character of policy debates today also supports a more charitable view of Mexican democracy. One obvious example concerns energy policy, destined to be an important item on the policy agenda over the next three years. Although nationalists oppose privatizing electricity, oil, or gas, Mexico will require massive private sector investment in these sectors over the next several years, and some of this investment will presumably have to come from foreigners. At present, however, opening up sectors like petroleum to foreign investment is likely to prove unpopular, and leaders who advocate reform of Mexico's energy sector can expect to pay a political price.²⁰ Popular preferences thus appear to find their expression in public policies, however ill-advised those policies might be.

The same logic also applies to another crucial issue in Mexican political economy: social welfare spending. At present, tax collection rates (i.e., tax revenues as a percentage of gross domestic product) remain extremely low in Mexico. By boosting those rates to something approaching the OECD average, Mexico could fund a range of programs that together would relieve tremendous human misery. Public opinion polls, however, suggest that there is precious little appetite for increasing taxes; the typical Mexican is simply too skeptical of her government to entrust it with more of her hard-earned cash.²¹ Again, it is hard to see the problem as one of too little democracy.

What's really wrong

The real question, then, is not whether Mexico has consolidated a democratic regime. The real question is what sort of democratic regime Mexico has consolidated, and how effectively that regime operates to design and implement sound public policies. Unfortunately, Mexico's constitutional architecture seriously impedes effective governance.

One problem is the structure of Mexican federalism. Federal systems in general tend to be less administratively efficient, but corollary institutions can substantially mitigate or exacerbate this tendency.²² In Mexico, the calendars for national and subnational elections are not synchronized; elections for governor sometimes occur within a few weeks of national elections but on a different date. Not only does this lack of coordination tend to depress turnout, it also maximizes the chances that subnational authorities will represent different parties than federal authorities and that electoral campaigns will address totally different policy issues. The end result is to further impede coherent administration.

Mexican federalism is also characterized by the absence of clear, credible "hard-budget" constraints on state and local governments. Although Mexico's budget constraints are substantially harder than Argentina's or Brazil's, there remains the implicit promise that irresponsible states would be bailed out by the federal government. This situation could encourage irresponsibility at the provincial level, undermining fiscal discipline at the federal level. Limited taxation authority at the subnational level only encourages such irresponsibility, as states and municipalities only learn how to spend block grants from the central government, rather than how to balance spending against increased taxation.

Even more problematic than the structure of Mexican federalism is the combination of a three-plus party system with presidential rule. Such a combination virtually guarantees that presidents will perpetually lack a majority in at least one house of the legislature. The problem of divided government is compounded by the fact that Mexican presidents serve a six-year term. A poor midterm result can thus create a three-year lame duck, who cannot get laws passed in Congress but who cannot realistically be removed. The parallels between Mexico's current system and the one that contributed to the 1973 breakdown of Chilean democracy should not be overstated, but they are hard to completely ignore.

One institutional remedy would be to adopt a parliamentary form of government, a solution advocated by former PRD leader Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. For better or for worse, however, Mexico is wedded to presidentialism; switching to parliamentarism is little more on the political radar screen in Mexico than it would be in the United States. At the same time, none of Mexico's three major partisan blocs is in any danger of evaporating. Multiparty presidential rule, and the divided government it brings, is here to stay.

Given divided government as far as the eye can see, the quality of governance in Mexico will depend even more than in most countries on the coalition-building skills of political leaders. If opposition party elites prove obstructionist or recalcitrant, or if presidents prove unable to deal effectively with Congress, gridlock will prevail. Over time, the legitimacy of the system may deteriorate.

Certain institutional reforms – such as changing the length of legislative and executive terms in office and permitting consecutive reelection – could theoretically encourage executive-legislative cooperation.²³ For instance, legislators and executives who knew that they might be stuck with each other indefinitely could have a stronger incentive to cooperate in passing laws.

Consecutive reelection of legislators could also facilitate the development of legislative policy expertise, allowing Congress to take greater initiative on key issues.

Nevertheless, these corollary reforms can only poke at the fundamental problem; they cannot solve it. In fact, they could have unintended, perverse consequences. Consider the most popular nostrum currently being peddled by constitutional engineers in Mexico: the consecutive reelection of federal deputies. Under Mexico's hybrid system, three hundred deputies are elected from single-member districts and two hundred more are elected under something resembling a party list, proportional representation system. Without the prospect of reelection and with their campaign monies coming primarily from the parties, both types of deputies behave in much the same way: they depend on party leaders for upward mobility, and they exhibit high levels of discipline in the legislature. However, public funding for campaigns may be cut over the next few years, leaving legislators responsible for raising a larger proportion of their own campaign funds. If deputies elected in single-member districts can gain influence by cultivating a constituent base, rather than by doing what party leaders tell them, party leaders will lose their other principal disciplining mechanism.²⁴ Rather than buying legislative support "wholesale" (by appealing only to the leadership of each party), presidents would be compelled to buy it "retail" (by appealing to election-seeking deputies on an individual basis).

Buying support retail poses little challenge for a president with very high approval ratings. At the beginning of his term, for instance, Fox might have been able to pass his program over the heads of party bosses in the PRI and PRD. But for a president with only moderate popular support, buying congressional acquiescence one legislator at a time can prove extremely difficult and costly. If we assume that few chief executives will enjoy a honeymoon rivaling that of Mexico's first successful opposition candidate, we must face the possibility that permitting

legislative reelection could actually increase gridlock. In other words, an already unwieldy system could conceivably become even more so, forcing Mexican democracy to depend even more heavily on the caliber of its leaders.

In the end, the flaws in Mexico's constitutional system will not prove fatal to democracy. But they will prove highly inconvenient. And even the sorts of constitutional reforms currently being considered are unlikely to change this uncomfortable fact.

2006 and beyond

What does the future hold for Mexican democracy? In the wake of the midterm elections, informal campaigning for 2006 has already begun, as has jockeying for support within the main parties. Although it is too soon to predict the outcome of the next presidential race, it is not too soon to speculate about the likely impact of that contest on Mexican politics more broadly.

The obvious choice for the PRD if it seeks to win in 2006 is Mexico City's wildly popular governor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. With approval ratings of over 80% in the Federal District and widespread name recognition from the national re-broadcasting of Mexico City news, López Obrador is now the front-runner in virtually all polls. Assuming that the PRD does not nominate three-time loser Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, López Obrador could well carry the party to victory in 2006; otherwise, it is virtually impossible to envision a leftist victory.²⁵

Even if López Obrador were to capture the nomination and the presidency, it is inconceivable that the PRD could achieve a majority in Congress in 2006. A López Obrador administration would thus face the same obstacles that confronted Fox. The only question is whether he would deal with them any more effectively. Critics condemn López Obrador as

personalizing, vacuous, populist, and even demagogic – criticisms which, if true, would augur poorly for his effectiveness as a minority president. On the other hand, López Obrador's record as an administrator is at least adequate, and his tenure in Mexico City has been marked as much by pragmatism as much as by populism. Perhaps most importantly, López Obrador's democratic credentials are well established, and he is widely regarded as honest. As with Fox, system survivability would not be in doubt during an López Obrador administration, though the effectiveness of the system might be less than ideal.

For the PAN, the choice of presidential candidate is likely to come down to newly appointed Energy Minister Felipe Calderón or Interior Minister Santiago Creel.²⁶ Because any PAN president would almost certainly lack a majority in the legislature, the competence and intentions of these men is an important concern. Fortunately, both Calderón and Creel have played positive roles in Mexico's democratic transition; both are considered honest; and both would likely make good presidents. Calderón's greatest potential weakness is his closer ties to the old guard of the PAN and his less extensive executive branch experience (as head of the government development bank, Banobras). For this reason, his effectiveness as Energy Minister will offer important clues about the likely success and direction of a Calderón presidency. Creel's principal asset is his high public visibility and his reputation as a conciliator during the opposition-led 57th Congress (1997-2000). His principal liability is his record as Interior Minister, which is almost uniformly regarded as ineffectual.

The PRI's nominee will presumably be current party president Roberto Madrazo, who is already exploiting his post as party president to secure his candidacy.²⁷ Madrazo's record as governor of the small, oil-rich state of Tabasco hardly inspires confidence in his democratic credentials; his own 1994 gubernatorial victory over López Obrador was marred by fraud and

massive violations of campaign finance laws. Moreover, the PRI's administration of Tabasco under both Madrazo and his hand-picked successor has been characterized by even greater-than-usual levels of corruption. At the same time, Madrazo is a competent, seasoned politician who would probably find a way to work with opposition forces in the legislature.

The notion of trading probity and democratic credentials for political savvy is hardly appealing. Nevertheless, effective administration of any kind would probably enhance mass support for Mexico's new political system. In addition, the institutional structure of Mexican democracy is sturdy enough to withstand any one individual. Consequently, it is hard to see a potential PRI victory in 2006 as a serious set-back for Mexican democracy.

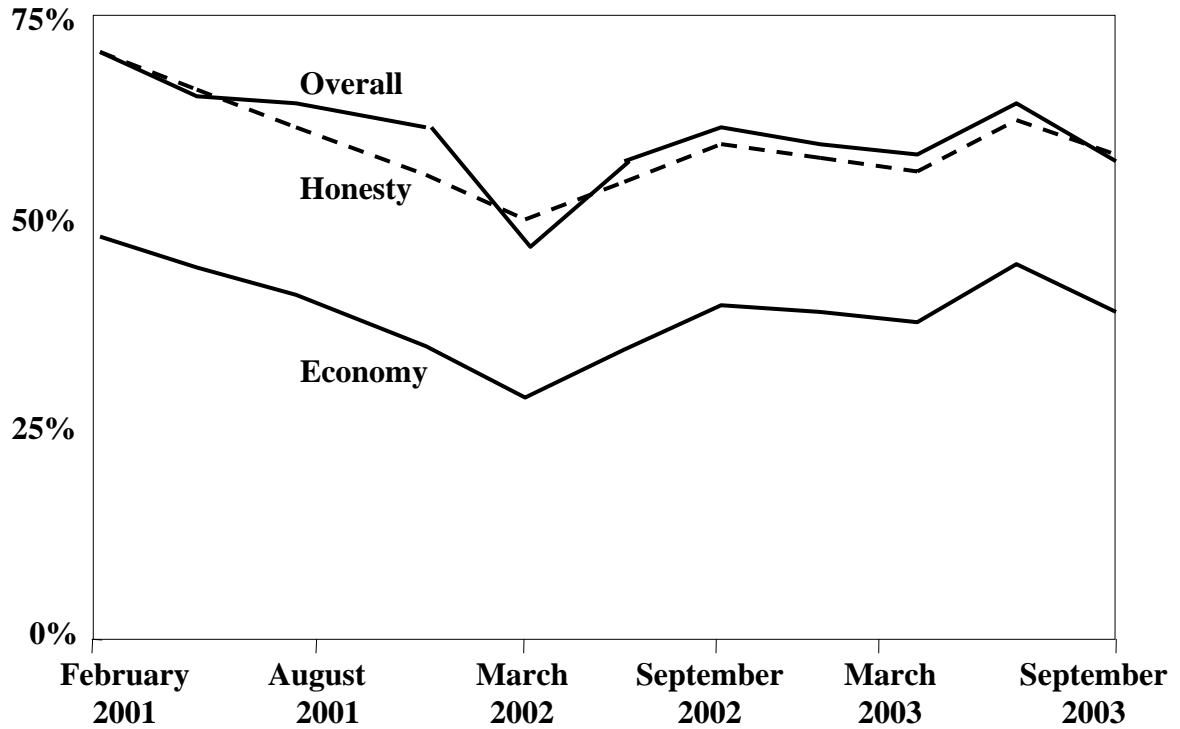
All told, then, Mexican politics after 2006 is likely to look much the same as Mexican politics today. On the positive side, none of the main contenders for the presidency is likely to badly mismanage the country or to sabotage Mexico's democratic institutions. On the negative side, the likely persistence of divided government will complicate policy-making. Given these structural barriers, much will depend upon the ability of elected leaders to cooperate in governing the country. Whether they do depends on how much they have learned from the disappointments of Fox's presidency.

Table 1: Electoral Results

| Party bloc | Votes | | | Seats in Lower House | | |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|----------------------|------|------|
| | 2003 | 2000 | 1997 | 2003 | 2000 | 1997 |
| PRI | 35.6% | 37.8% | 39.1% | 224 | 208 | 239 |
| PAN | 31.9% | 34.0% | 26.6% | 151 | 205 | 121 |
| Left | 24.0% | 19.1% | 28.3% | 106 | 70 | 125 |
| PVEM | 6.7% | 5.2% | 3.8% | 17 | 17 | 15 |
| Others | 1.9% | 3.9% | 2.1% | -- | -- | -- |
| | | | | | | |
| Total votes cast (M) / seats | 27.0 | 37.4 | 30.1 | 498 | 500 | 500 |
| Turnout | 41.7% | 63.7% | 57.7% | n/a | n/a | n/a |

Note: Figures show the results of party-list votes, as a percentage of all valid votes cast for registered candidates. “Left” includes votes for the PRD, PT, Convergencia, PSN and PAS, regardless of whether those parties were in formal alliance with the PRD; it does not include votes for the three minor parties in 2000 (which received almost 4% of the vote). The PRI/PVEM alliance vote in 2003 was divided between the PRI and the PVEM based on each party’s share of the vote in non-alliance contests. The PVEM vote in 2000 represents the average of its vote shares in 1997 and 2003; this figure was subtracted from the Alliance for Change vote to yield a PAN vote share for 2000. Turnout represents all party-list votes, including spoiled ballots and votes for non-registered candidates, divided by the *lista nominal*. Two single-member district seats in the Chamber of Deputies remain unallocated for 2003. Source: Federal Electoral Institute; George W. Grayson, *Beyond the Mid-term Elections: Mexico’s Political Outlook 2003-2006*, Report of the Western Hemisphere Election Study Series (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2003), p. 4.

Figure 1: Approval ratings for Vicente Fox



Source: *Reforma* newspaper.

N.B.: Ratings for honesty and economic management were interpolated for May 2001, December 2001, June 2002, and December 2002.

¹I am grateful to Delal Baer, Susan Burgerman, Larry Diamond, Denise Dresser, Todd Eisenstadt, Federico Estevez, Margarita González Gamio, James McCann, Kevin Middlebrook, Juan Molinar, María de los Angeles Moreno, Vidal Romero, Andrés Rozental, Harold Trinkunas, Keith Yanner, and a number of senior Mexican officials for suggestions on earlier versions of this article. I am also indebted to *Reforma* newspaper, Consulta Mitovsky, and my collaborators on the Mexico 2000 Panel Study for polling data on which several conclusions about Mexican public opinion are based.

²In general, the Fox administration has been free of corruption scandals. Smaller-scale exceptions include: a flurry of criticism over the purchase of expensive linens for Mexico's First Couple early in Fox's term; campaign finance violations by the Amigos de Fox in the 2000 race; the President's initial toleration of legally dubious tactics by the Television Azteca network in a business dispute with another television station; and charges (as yet unproven) of influence peddling related to the government's contested expropriation of 27 indebted sugar refineries in September 2001.

³For a useful inventory of the sorts of reforms being considered, see George W. Grayson, *Beyond the Mid-term Elections: Mexico's Political Outlook 2003-2006*, Report of the Western Hemisphere Election Study Series (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2003), p. 47-8.

⁴In October 2003, the Mexican government finally succeeded in having Cabal extradited from Australia, where he had lived for three years.

⁵In March 2003, Mexican authorities did indict the former head of Mexico's secret police, Luis de la Barra, for his role in the murder of leftists in the 1970s and early 1980s.

⁶Although the Chiapas conflict has not been settled, it has been effectively contained, and it poses little threat to political stability.

⁷Except for its name, Mexico's pro-business PVEM shares little in common with left-environmentalist parties in other countries.

⁸These parties could arguably be considered part of the Left; including some portion of their votes with the Left bloc in 2000 would suggest even greater stability to aggregate vote shares.

⁹The PRI also won three other state house races (Campeche, Colima and Sonora), though the Colima election was subsequently annulled. It lost to the PAN in San Luis Potosí and Querétaro.

¹⁰The magnitude of this rebound appears smaller if some portion of the minor-party vote in 2000 is attributed to the Left, but the direction of change remains the same.

¹¹James A. McCann and Chappell Lawson, "An Electorate Adrift: Attitude Stability and the Quality of Democracy in Mexico," *Latin American Research Review* (forthcoming); Joseph L. Klesner, "The Structure of the Mexican Electorate: Social, Attitudinal, and Partisan Bases of Vicente Fox's Victory," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Chappell Lawson, eds. *Mexico's Pivotal Democratic Election: Candidates, Voters, and the Presidential Race of 2000* (Stanford and La Jolla, California: Stanford University Press and the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies of the University of California at San Diego, 2003).

¹²See Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (*The Civic Culture* Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1963); Joseph L. Klesner, "Political Attitudes, Social Capital, and Political Participation: The United States and Mexico Compared," *Mexican Studies*, 2003, 19 (1): 29-64; Roderic Ai Camp, "Learning Democracy in Mexico and the United States." *Mexican Studies*, 2003, 19 (1): 3-28;

Wayne A. Cornelius, *Mexican Politics in Transition: The Breakdown of a One-Party-Dominant Regime* (La Jolla, California: Center For U.S. Mexican Studies of the University of California at San Diego, 1996), p. 89-98; Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico: The Decline of Authoritarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 77-102; Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in Contemporary Mexico* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002).

¹³Chappell Lawson and Joseph L. Klesner, "Political Reform, Electoral Participation, and the Campaign of 2000," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Chappell Lawson, eds., *Mexico's Pivotal Democratic Election: Candidates, Voters, and the Presidential Race of 2000* (Stanford and La Jolla, California: University of Stanford Press and Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies of the University of California at San Diego: 2003).

¹⁴On "electoral democracy" and its distinction from "liberal democracy", see Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999).

¹⁵See Chappell Lawson, "Mexico's Unfinished Transition: Democratization and Authoritarian Enclaves," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Summer 2000, 16 (2): 267-88. On the broadcast media, see Sallie Hughes and Chappell Lawson, "Propaganda and Crony Capitalism: Partisan Bias in Mexican Television News," *Latin American Research Review*, forthcoming.

¹⁶Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), pp. 64-116.

¹⁷See Roderic Ai Camp, "Citizen Attitudes toward Democracy and Vicente Fox's Victory in 2000," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Chappell Lawson, eds., *Mexico's Pivotal Democratic Election: Candidates, Voters, and the Presidential Race of 2000* (Stanford and La Jolla,

California: University of Stanford Press and Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies of the University of California at San Diego: 2003).

¹⁸According to Latinobarometer polls, approximately 53% of Mexicans find democracy preferable to any other system of government. (*Reforma*, “Latinobarómetro: Miden Democracia,” November 1, 2003, pp. 1, 24A.) Other polls show somewhat higher percentages; see Roderic Ai Camp, “Learning Democracy in Mexico and the United States.” *Mexican Studies*, 2003, 19 (1): 3-28.

¹⁹Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), p. 69.

²⁰See James A. McCann and Chappell Lawson, “An Electorate Adrift: Attitude Stability and the Quality of Democracy in Mexico,” *Latin American Research Review* (forthcoming).

²¹Asked in February 2000 whether they preferred to cut spending on public services, increase taxes, or increase the public debt, 64% of Mexicans favored cutting spending and only 9% favored increasing taxes. (Mexico 2000 Panel Study, First Wave. Data from the study are publicly available at: <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/faculty/C.Lawson.html>.)

²²See Strom Thacker and John Gerring, “Political Institutions and Corruption: The Role of Unitarism and Parliamentarism,” in *British Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

²³Technically, Mexican legislators can be reelected after sitting out a term; in practice, however, the great majority of deputies have never served in that chamber before.

²⁴Ultimately, emphasizing geographically-based representation over party-based representation could encourage the emergence of a two-party system. In practice, however, the existence of mass party loyalties and the geographical base of Mexico’s main parties (with the PRD strong in

some states and the PAN in others) will mean the continuation of a three-party system at the national level.

²⁵Both independents and PRD partisans overwhelmingly prefer López Obrador to Cárdenas. As the party's founder, however, Cárdenas could potentially insist upon and obtain the party's nomination.

²⁶Other potential nominees include First Lady Marta Sahagún de Fox, PAN congressional leader Francisco Barrio, 1994 presidential candidate Diego Fernández de Cevallos, Senator Carlos Medina, and newly appointed Environment Minister (and former governor of Jalisco) Alberto Cárdenas. Despite her high approval ratings, the First Lady has publicly declared that she will not run.

²⁷Other potential contenders include Teachers' Union boss Elba Esther Gordillo, former governor Miguel Alemán Velasco, former parliamentary leader and governor Beatriz Paredes, and several current governors (Tomás Yarrington of Tamaulipas, Arturo Montiel of Mexico state, Manuel Angel Nuñez of Hidalgo, etc.).