CHAPTER 11
Politics in Mexico

Mexico gives us an example of a developing country that has undergone political change and has relatively positive economic forecasts. Most significantly, Mexico was once categorized by political scientists as a “one-party dominant” country because of the institutionalized control by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the party that had controlled virtually all aspects of government for over 70 years. This came to a screeching halt with the election of 2000, when Vicente Fox, a member of the Partido Accion National (PAN) Party claimed a victory. This change caused political scientists to be optimistic about Mexico’s prospect for democracy. Mexico has been able to take control of its economic system in a way that most developing countries have not. It has raised its standard of living for most citizens.

The year 2006 produced another surprising election, but for different reasons than the election of 2000. This time the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), or the leftist party in Mexican politics, challenged the results of the election. Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador had been leading in the polls but Felipe Calderon, a member of the PAN Party, was declared the winner. Obrador vowed to protest and vowed to set up a parallel government in which his supporters would answer to him. Obrador’s supporters and others declared that the election was not held freely and fairly, calling into question Calderon’s ability to hold power legitimately.

CURRENT POLICY CHALLENGES

One of the biggest current challenges for Mexico is simply that it has to play catch-up with its international trading partners and competitors. It must modernize its agricultural sector to allow it to survive competition from countries that have subsidies to make their goods cheaper. Mexico must maintain job growth and renovate its energy sector and must accommodate its aging population. Politically, it must reign in corruption and maintain a fair and transparent election processes. It must also work to resolve the rampant drug violence that threatens much of the country.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Mexican politics has also traditionally been dominated by wealthy landowners who own large estates (haciendas). The Mexican economy has experienced negative and positive swings. Negative turns in the economy have been partially due to a devaluation of the peso, dependency on oil and debt to Western creditors. More recently, however, Mexico’s economy has improved, which is likely due to its ability to renegotiate its debt with the United States and its participation in NAFTA.

Mexico is predominately a Catholic country, and there is a history of conflicts between the church and the state, although the recent constitution provides for separation of church and state and has reduced the power and wealth of the church. Efforts to secularize Mexican government in the past have resulted in armed rebellions.
Revolution and its Aftermath
Prior to the Constitution of 1917, Mexico was ruled primarily by dictators. A civil conflict that erupted in 1910 was led by middle-class people who were disenchanted with Porfirio Diaz, but the peasant farmers and others in the lower classes also participated. Zapata led a movement of peasants who were dedicated to land reform, and Pancho Villa was dedicated to labor reform.

The Constitution of 1917 established the principle of state control over the natural resources, subordination of church to the state, the government’s right to redistribute the land, and rights for labor. It would take two decades, however, before these constitutional promises began to be implemented.

The Cardenas Upheaval
During the presidency of Cardenas (1930-40), peasants and urban workers succeeded in pressing claims for higher wages. The Cardenas government also redistributed large amounts of land, and gave land to small farmers, called ejidos. Cardenas also reshaped the presidency, establishing a six-year term with no possibility of reelection, removing the military from political control, and establishing government-sponsored peasant and labor organizations. This political system proved remarkably durable, and led to a pattern of PRI-dominated politics, as each PRI president handpicked the next. The regime proved to be stable and legitimate internally, but was referred to as the “perfect dictatorship” by outsiders. Questions of stability arose, however, with the student protest that was brutally suppressed in 1968. Under the Cardenas presidency the tradition of sexeno, or one term of six years, was established for the president.

During the presidency of Carlos Salinas (1988-93), Mexico had been experiencing economic problems, and Salinas opened the Mexican economy to foreign trade and privatized nationalized industry in an attempt to modernize. This privatization caused an increase in the gap between the rich and the poor, and eventually there was revolt in Chiapas, Mexico’s most underdeveloped state. Shortly after this, Salinas’ handpicked successor was assassinated, and Salinas then chose Ernesto Zedillo. Zedillo lost the 2000 election to Vicente Fox of the PAN party, ending the PRI’s dominance of Mexican politics.

Political Culture
Most Mexicans are supportive of the political institutions that evolved from the Mexican Revolution and they endorse the democratic principles of the Constitution of 1917. On the other hand, they are critical of government performance in creating jobs, reducing social and economic inequality, and delivering public services. Government officials are viewed as elitist and corrupt. Mexicans evaluate their government based on its distributive ability. Mexicans have been pessimistic about their ability to affect election outcomes, expecting fraud. They are increasingly angry about corruption and the influence of organized crime, funded by drug sales, on politics.
MASS POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

In addition to the family, schools and the Catholic Church are important agents of socialization. All schools must follow a government-approved curriculum and use the same set of free textbooks written by the federal Ministry of Education. These support national political institutions and stress the social and economic progress accomplished under post-revolutionary governments.

The mass media has also been a socialization agent. The PRI uses the media to run advertisements and there were economic penalties for engaging in criticism or investigative reporting. Bribes to media outlets began to carry heavy penalties during the Salinas administration, and criticism of the media is more common today than it once was. However, when comparing Mexico to other democracies, the media is generally more supportive of government than it is critical.

Political Participation
Citizens in Mexico engage in a variety of forms of political participation. Voting, which is obligatory for government service, is common. During the years of PRI dominance it was not uncommon for votes to be purchased in return for handouts of services. There has been an increase in protests and voter turnout in federal elections in recent years. With more contested elections, political scientists expect to see the development of a participatory culture and greater social capital.

Political Structure and Institutions
Mexico was once called a one-party dominant system, but since the election of a PAN presidential candidate, it can no longer be called this. During the massacre of students in 1968, Mexican government was called authoritarian. In sum, classifying the structure of government in Mexico is difficult.

On paper, Mexico’s constitution is setup like a democracy. Mexico’s government is designed as a presidential system with three autonomous branches of government with a system of checks and balances and federalism. In practice however, Mexico’s system is highly centralized. The president has very few restraints on his power and completely dominates the legislative and judicial branches. The majority of those elected to public office were appointees who were named to their positions by higher-ups within the PRI (a system known as camarillas). Reelection to office is prohibited – meaning that there is mass turnover with each election cycle and no experience for members of the legislature to draw on.

Federalism
Mexico is a federal system – there are 31 states and the federal district, each one divided into municipios. The system is classified as political centralism, meaning that there is a concentration of decision-making power at the federal level, although there are elections for local officials. A program of revenue sharing was implemented, known as the
National Solidarity Program, with the goal of shifting decision-making authority over public education and health care to the states.

The Legislative Branch
The federal Congress has two houses: a 128-member upper chamber called the Senate and a 500-member lower house called the Chamber of Deputies. Both employ a mixed-member system in which some of the members are elected by plurality vote in single-member districts, while others are elected by a system of proportional representation of closed party lists. Each party that wins at least 2 percent of the national vote is entitled to its proportional share of the list. The mixed member system has led to a three-party system in which most of the regions now have two-party systems but nationally the vote is split into three main blocks.

The president has the power to veto legislation, which caused a stalemate in the presidency of Vicente Fox. All revenue bills originate in the lower chamber and the Chamber of Deputies has the power over appropriations and budget oversight. The Senate has exclusive power to oversee foreign affairs, which are primarily conducted by the president. The Senate also has the power to remove state governors and depose state legislatures.

The Executive Branch
Power is concentrated in the executive, as indicated by the term presidentialismo. On many issues of national significance, the other branches of government take their cues from the president. The president has traditionally handpicked his successor, though this pattern was broken when Vicente Fox chose not to name one.

Executive-Legislative Relations
It was once true that the president of Mexico presided over a compliant legislature. With the end of PRI dominance, this is no longer true. Vicente Fox had significant difficulties getting many of his programs passed through the legislative branch. Fox’s party only had 41 percent of the seats in the lower chamber.

Recruiting the Political Elite
Mexican political recruitment has tended to be from the middle class, and the political elite has traditionally come from people born and raised in Mexico City. The revolution produced an attitude that was hostile to serving multiple terms, and political leaders are restricted to serving one term. The cabinet if often filled with tecnicos, who spend their entire career in the bureaucracy and are frequently graduates of prestigious colleges. Kinship ties between the elite are becoming increasingly important.

Interest Representation and Political Control
Mexico’s interest groups system has been characterized as corporatist, in which each citizen was expected to relate to the state through a single structure “licensed” by the state to organize and represent themselves (peasants, teachers, etc). In sum, a number of PRI-controlled interest groups dominated politics. This resulted in patron client
networks in which favors were exchanged between citizens and members of the government.

Political Parties
The PRI was established with the goal of reducing political conflict. President Cardenas transformed the party into a mass-based political party that could be used to build popular support for government policies and mobilize participation in elections. He did this by merging the official local state and national organizations of peasants and urban workers that had been created during his presidency. The party became an appendage of the government itself, and enjoyed unlimited access to government funds to finance its campaigns. The president enjoyed a slush fund authorized each year by Congress as part of the federal government budget. Many of these advantages were challenged when the Salinas administration introduced electoral reforms, and the PRI had to adjust from being an official party to being a party out of power.

The PAN was established in reaction to the leftward drift of public policy under Cardenas, in particular his policies in support of socialist public education. Its founders include Catholic intellectuals and the urban middle class, but it also attracts votes from the socially conservative peasants and the urban working class, and is now the party that represents views on the right of the ideological spectrum.

The PRD represents the left of the ideological spectrum with members who believe in moderate socialist political ideas and some who lean toward a communist ideology.

The Shifting of Mexico’s Parties
After the 2006 election, the social basis of support for the parties shifted dramatically. The PRI’s base was once the rural voter, but in 2006 it was the PRD that did the best with rural voters and with poor voters. The PAN retained its support with urban voters and with young voters. Region played the biggest role in determining the outcome of the vote. The PRD was weak in northern and central states but had strong support in Mexico City. The North-South split proved to be the biggest cleavage in Mexican politics.

Government Performance

Promoting Economic Growth and Reducing Poverty
Mexico has experienced impressive economic progress, and some of the credit is given to government policies. Foreign investment and the privatization of national industry has led to massive public investments in infrastructure. This has contributed to a stimulation of the economy, and economic growth with low inflation. Neoliberal economic development describes the idea of allowing free markets and foreign investment. Standard of living for middle-class Mexicans has improved, as a variety of new products became available. On the other hand, there is a “dark side” to the Mexican economy. The poor in Mexico remain desperately poor, with a much lower standard of living than the poor in fully industrialized countries, and the gap between urban and rural lifestyles remains great. Mexico has also suffered from periods of very high inflation. Because of the belief that oil revenues would be a guaranteed source of income, the government
borrowed heavily abroad. When oil prices declined, the government was forced to suspend repayment of the foreign debt. Eventually with cooperation from the U.S., the government of Mexico was able to renegotiate debt terms, but Mexico remains heavily in debt.

**Rule of Law/Mexico's Future**
Mexico lacks the rule of law that one finds in many industrialized democracies. Crime is rampant and justice is frequently not served. The police are corrupt in large part because of low pay. Violent crime affects nearly everyone in the country, and Mexico City's murder rate continues to climb. One effort to restore the rule of law was President Zedillo's reforms to increase the independence of the judiciary. The Supreme Court now has limited judicial review powers. Another effort was President Calderon's efforts to bring narcotic traffickers under control. These efforts have not yet resolved the recent epidemic of crime in Mexico.

**International Environment**

Mexico's economy is greatly intertwined with the United States. Many Mexicans go to the United States both legally and illegally to find jobs, and Mexico is one of the largest trading partners with the United States. In the mid-1990s the peso was devalued, making imports from Mexico extremely cheap in the U.S., and Mexico's trade deficit reach new heights. Many U.S.-based companies saw Mexico as an ideal place for an investment and established multinational corporations (*maquiladoras*) along the U.S.-Mexican border.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) required the lowering of trade barriers between the Mexico, the U.S., and Canada, with mixed results. NAFTA has led to a greater diversity of available products, lifting the standard of living for some. At the same time the gap between the rich and the poor has increased and wages in Mexico have remained low. Mexico remains highly dependent on external economic factors, which are often blamed for the country's problems.

**Political Future**

Political scientists assess the prospect of democracy in Mexico. On the one hand, elections have become as free and fair as elections in industrialized democracies. Economic performance has been mixed. Rule of law is lacking. Therefore, the jury is still out on whether or not Mexico will successfully transition to democracy.

**Multiple-Choice Questions**

1. **Mexico has made all of the following reforms recently EXCEPT**
   (A) land redistribution
   (B) nationalization of industry
   (C) creation of an official trade union
   (D) tax reform
   (E) reforming of the electoral system
2. The party in control for most of Mexico’s history is the
   (A) PRI.
   (B) PRD.
   (C) PAN.
   (D) Labour Party.
   (E) Conservative Party.

3. Which party in Mexico is center left?
   (A) PRI
   (B) PRD
   (C) PAN
   (D) Labour
   (E) Conservative

4. Which party is center right?
   (A) PRI
   (B) PRD
   (C) PAN
   (D) Labour
   (E) Conservative

5. Which of the following is true about the debt crisis in Mexico?
   (A) It has caused Mexico to adopt nationalization policies.
   (B) It has led Mexico to be more dependent on the U.S.
   (C) It is not a significant public policy issue today.
   (D) Debt reduction efforts have been unsuccessful.
   (E) Mexico’s oil reserves allowed it to repay its debts promptly.

6. One way PRI politicians were recruited was from
   (A) gobernacion.
   (B) capitalinos.
   (C) sexeno.
   (D) maquiladoras.
   (E) haciendas.

7. Patron-client relationships describe
   (A) groups seeking satisfaction through personal contacts.
   (B) caciquismo, or local-level boss rule.
   (C) organizations that represent group interests.
   (D) the legal arrangement between lawyers and those they represent in court.
   (E) foreign-owned factories near Mexico’s northern borders.