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Political participation in Mexico (1988-2009): How and why has it changed?

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to offer a brief exploratory analysis of the causes and consequences of the changes in the patterns of political participation in México over the last 20 years (1988-2009). It focuses along two lines: voting on one hand, and the orientation given by the political parties to political participation on a basic left- right political spectrum. The argument is that over the last 20 years Mexico has experienced more dynamic electoral participation and a division of the voting preferences among three political parties (PRI, PAN and PRD). This change occurred in the sense of a citizen's more risky attitude toward other parties from right to left, different from the traditional PRI preferences. Many factors could explain this shift: a new socio-economic configuration of the country, higher education, urbanization, or new electoral institutions. The task then is to analyse how this has occurred in Mexico.

Introduction

In democratic countries electoral participation (above all, voting) can be characterised as, for the most part, institutionalised, since the core of any democratic political system is the suffrage of free citizens.[†] This kind of political participation is individualistic, although the results are at the aggregate level of large populations. It is also indirect, since citizens only have the possibility of selecting candidates for office; they do not directly participate in making demands on the political system by means of elections. The electoral contest is quite often the only sort of political participation most citizens have.

Every country has a particular pattern of development in terms of political participation, depending on many factors such as historical inheritance, socio-economic development, political development, and international influences. Nevertheless, complex societies evolve in ways that create many possible forms of political participation. In every day life, individuals may combine or participate in any or all of the--or none of them; some citizens prefer to be observers. The case of Mexico is a good example of dramatic changes in terms of political participation over the last 20 years.

In Mexico since late 80s, political participation has undergone significant transformations. After a long period of political control exercised by a highly authoritarian political system,[‡] one that held power over both electoral processes and political parties, Mexico is now a more participatory polity. There has been an

[†] The exception is compulsory voting as is the case of respectable democracies such as Belgium or Australia.

[‡] The Mexican political system has been widely characterised as an authoritarian or hegemonic, mainly because is considered artificially democratic and highly exclusionary. Further and recent analyses are to be found in Serrano, M (1998) *Governing Mexico: Political Parties and Elections*, University of London, Institute of Latin American Studies.

upsurge in multiparty competition through elections in 1988, 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2006, and, thus, one type of political participation, namely voting, has acquired new meaning. There is also a new distribution of voters in a more pluralistic system.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a brief exploratory analysis of the causes and consequences of those changes. I focus along two lines: voting on one hand, and the orientation given by the political parties to political participation on a basic left-right political spectrum.

My argument is that over the last 20 years Mexico has experienced more dynamic electoral participation and a division of the voting preferences among three political parties (PRI, PAN and PRD). This change occurred in the sense of a citizen's more risky attitude toward the political sphere. Many factors could explain this shift: a new socio-economic configuration of the country, higher education, urbanization, or new electoral institutions. Nonetheless, a relevant influence upon this variation is the orientation given by the political parties to electoral expectations. The task then is to analyse how this has occurred in Mexico.

The purpose of this essay is to analyse how political participation has changed in the Mexico from 1988 to 2009. The essay offers a general description of the role of political parties in the building of a democratic electoral system. It attempts to depict the role of the opposition parties in activating citizens' electoral participation. It is organized into two parts. The first is a general review of the change in the Mexican system party based on voting data. The second attempts to depict the political parties' performance in the building of a new electoral behaviour among Mexicans.

Voting in Mexico (1988-2006)

The change in electoral participation in Mexico, between 1988 and 2000, is largely driven by opposition parties: particularly by the left-wing Democratic

Revolutionary Party (PRD), as well as by the right-wing National Action Party (PAN). The decline of the PRI and government control over electoral processes is another key factor, and the work of the, Federal Institute of Elections (IFE) has contributed to encouraging participation.

It can be said that, based on a detailed analysis of voting change, precisely after the electoral reforms carried out during the 90s, the political-electoral spectrum began a process of political liberalisation yielding to the opposition parties' strength that would bring about the removal of the official party (PRI) by the National Action Party (PAN) in the federal election of 2000.

Electoral reforms from 1991 to 1996 (and the more recent one in 2008) were the legal source of the slow but permanent increment in the shift of Mexican political participation. Along the same lines, after several prior attempts by small political parties to participate in elections, three were the recipient of the overwhelming bulk of the people's preferences: the traditional PRI, the right wing PAN and the renewed left wing party PRD.

Mexico has entered a new stage: participation in terms of voting has transformed apathy to a more conscious involvement in politics. Although in global numbers, the average of abstentionism was of 42.27% between 1988 and 2009. (IFE, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009). Therefore is important to notice that there is no significant increment in voting numbers, but in people's preferences for different political parties.

More to the point, the electorate is prone to change views according to structural-historical tendencies as well as conjunctural facts. In other words, there are relevant causes that may affect the type of political participation by individuals. With respect to the former, the move into elections in Mexico is also product of structural changes in the socio-economic configuration of Mexico in the last 30 years, urbanisation and improvements education. Mexico's population has been

transformed. From a highly illiterate and agrarian population, into a more urbanised, educated and organised civil society. This new configuration gave to the common citizen a new perspective of his/her role in the political arena, however effective or weak this one might be.

One observation must be made before a more detailed examination of the role of the political parties in this move is made. First of all, after the electoral reforms, more political parties were available for the electorate to choose within. Thus more choices and a more confident voting scheme have contributed to both, the decision to participate and the decision to vote for opposition. Voting numbers changed dramatically. The PRI abandoned its electoral dominance and became the second electoral force; and for one period (2006-2009) it held third place (See Graph 3). The PAN surged as first political force, winning the last two presidential elections and the majority of deputies and senators in the upper chamber and lower chamber in 2000 and 2006. PRD won and kept the capital, Mexico City, and the majority of seats in the Federal District Assembly (*Asamblea legislativa del Distrito Federal*) in Mexico City, and it was about to win the presidency in 2006, after a extremely contested election.

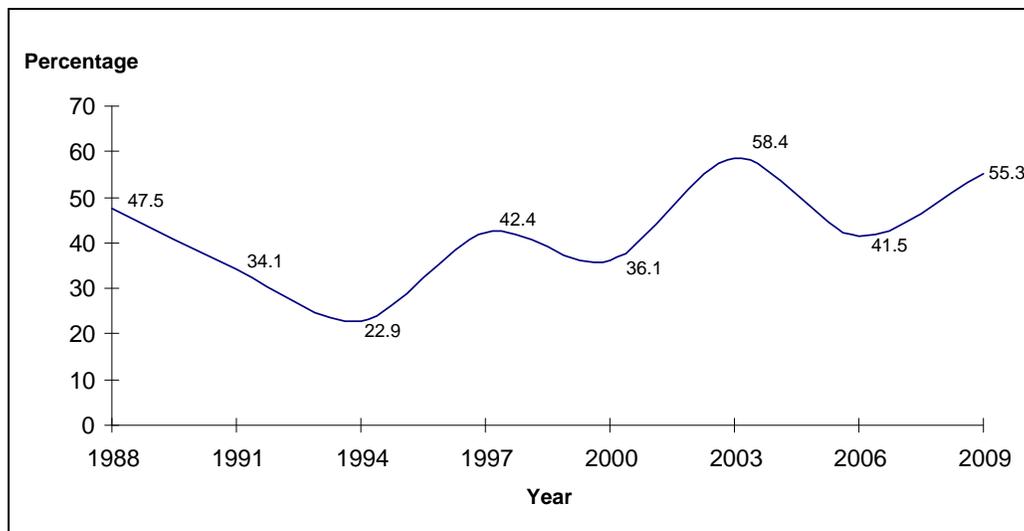
After the 2009 election, PRI headed the executive power in 19 states, Campeche, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Durango, Hidalgo, Estado de Mexico, Nayarit, Nuevo Leon, Oaxaca, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi and Yucatan. It also won the majority in the lower and upper chambers (IFE, 2009).

Whilst PAN does do in 7 states: Aguascalientes, Baja California Norte, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Morelos, Sonora and Tlaxcala. It is at the moment the second political force in the lower and upper chambers.

PRD headed the executive power in only 6 states: Baja California Sur, Chiapas, Federal District, Guerrero, Michoacan and Zacatecas. It is the third political force in Mexico.

The following graph (1) shows an historical view of voting and abstencionism, from 1988 to 2009.

Graph 1
Mexico: Abstencionism
1988-2009



Source: IFE (www.ife.org.mx)

The tendency toward non-political participation is still high. Of course presidential elections turnout results are higher than legislative and local elections. The variation expresses that tendency. We can also note that it was only in 1994 when Mexicans showed up at the ballot box in the greatest numbers: 77.1%, or seven

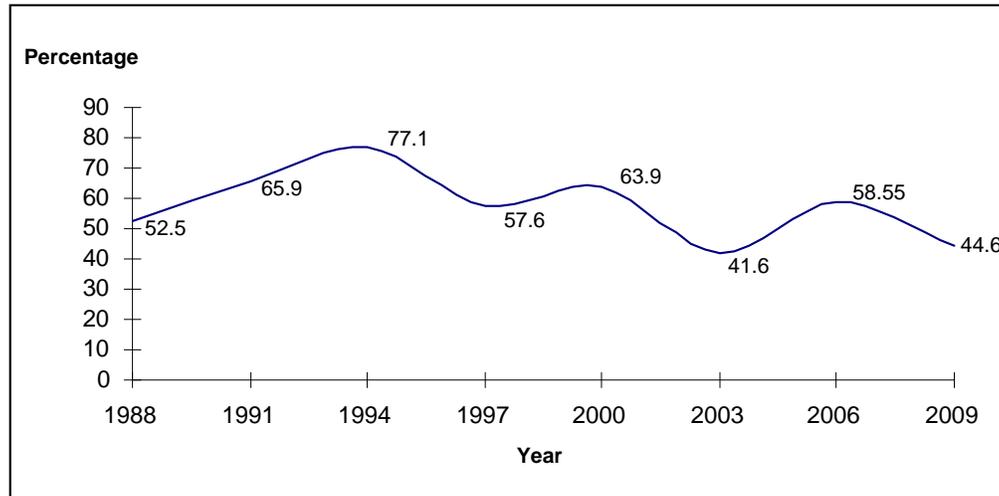
out of 10 people exercised their electoral choice. Latter on, numbers tend to be between 40 and 50 %, which is a rather low voting data for an electoral democracy to be considered.

Graph 2 corroborates this idea. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon was the president elected with the highest turnout numbers-- 77.1%. But since 2000, if we look more carefully at data and political parties that participate, we see that the PRD became a strong political force, as well as PAN; while the PRI faded and fell into the third position. By year 2006, the Mexican political scenario was dominated by three political parties: PAN, PRD and PRI. Small parties just accompanied these three, and struggle to keep its registration in order to participate in elections[§].

[§] Small parties can be considered the ones with no more 5% of voting in regular elections. These have appeared and disappeared quite frequently. See graph 4.

Graph 2

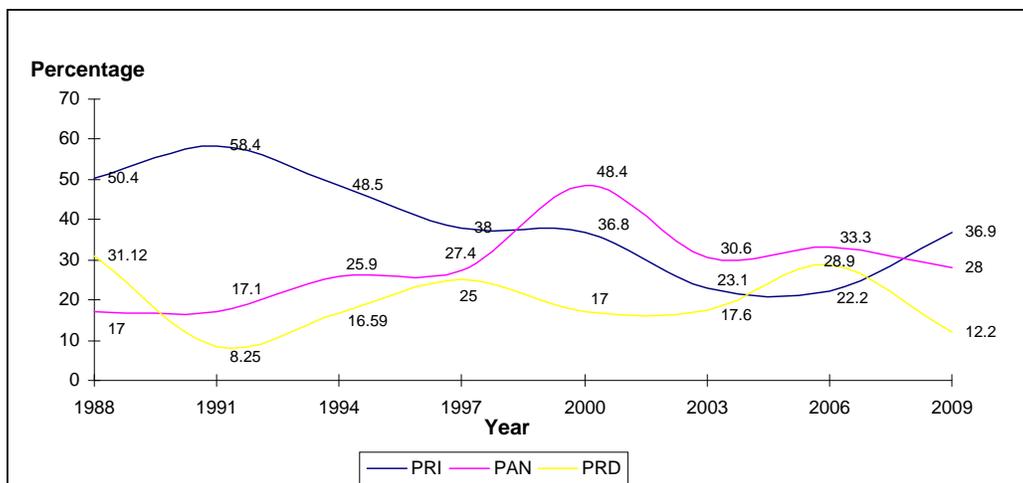
Mexico: Electoral Participation 1988-2009



Source: IFE (www.ife.org.mx)

On the whole, during this period of time, figures have mostly shown the decline of PRI up to 2006 and an increase in 2009. We also observe the expansion of PAN and PRD, as shown in Graph 3, where the blue line represents PRI voting, the pink line represents PAN's voting and the yellow line the PRD voting. Clearly this scheme changed in the 2009 intermediate election, where PRI reached the first position again, after 9 years of PAN dominance.

Graph 3
Mexico: voting for PRI, PRD and PAN
1988-2009



Source: IFE (www.ife.org.mx)

All together political parties in the political scenario affect citizens' perceptions of the political sphere, inviting them to refine or redirect their individual participation. This is the current change in political participation in México: the redirection of votes towards different political parties, not the increase of voting numbers themselves.

Voting for small parties has not been regular, because they have not been the same in the last 20 years. Chart 1 shows which small parties have participated in the 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009 elections. As it can be seen in graph 4 only the PVEM has increased his presence in the electoral scenario since year 2000 and getting 6.7 % of voting cast in 2009. See Graph 4.

Chart 1
Mexico: small political parties
2000-2009

Year	Political Party	acronyms
2000	Partido Verde Ecologista de México	PVEM
	Partido del Trabajo	PT
	Convergencia	*
	Partido Auténtico de la Revolución Mexicana	PARM
	Partido de Centro Democrático	PCD
	Democracia Social	*
	Partido de la Sociedad Nacionalista	PSN
Partido Alianza Social	PAS	

Year	Political Party	acronyms
2003	Partido Verde Ecologista de México	PVEM
	Partido del Trabajo	PT
	Convergencia	*
	Partido de la Sociedad Nacionalista	PSN
	Partido Alianza Social	PAS
	México Posible	*
	Partido Liberal Mexicano	PLM
Fuerza Ciudadana	*	

Year	Political Party	acronyms
2006	Partido Verde Ecologista de México	PVEM
	Partido del Trabajo	PT
	Convergencia	*
	Partido Nueva Alianza	PNA
	Partido Alternativa Socialdemócrata	PASD

Year	Political Party	acronyms
2009	Partido Verde Ecologista de México	PVEM
	Partido del Trabajo	PT
	Convergencia	*
	Partido Nueva Alianza	PNA
	Partido Socialdemócrata	PSD

Source: IFE (<http://www.ife.gob.mx>)

** *Parties with no acronyms.

Small parties have tended to join the big ones in order to obtain seats in the Congress, or to run for municipalities. In some cases, if they do not get enough votes, they simply lose their right to participate (Federal Electoral Code, COFIPE, 1991).

But what could be the possible political parties' weight in this shift? Let us examine the role of the PAN, PRD and PRI on it.

Political parties and electoral behaviour

PAN and political participation

Since mid 80s the Mexican right wing began to renew its historical tradition of support for democratic means of political struggle, namely the electoral political participation.

The political right in Mexico has long been under the leadership of the PAN. This party has followed a different trajectory than the left wing parties. Since it was created in 1939, the PAN's position was to defend the electoral choice as a mean to achieve political goals. With respect to this point Loaeza argued: 'The defense of the vote and peaceful means of political action have been the mainstays of the party's identity (PAN), (Loaeza, 1994:44), all through most of its long history.

During some period of time from 1950s to mid-1970s the party was influenced by the Catholic current, and was constrained by conservative positions toward public policies, particularly in the education field and toward State-Church relationships.^{††} Nonetheless, since conditions for fair and free elections in Mexico were not properly established before 1988, and because of its own 'fragmented, decentralised and porous organizational structure' (Mizrahi, 1998:96), the right wing party only achieved poor electoral gains. It was just in 1989 that PAN had got

^{††} Soledad Loaeza has profoundly studied this position and its political consequences to the party in particular and to the Mexican Political System in general. See Loaeza, S. (1999) *El PAN la larga marcha 1939-1994: Oposicion Leal y Partido de Protesta..*Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Economica.

a state government (Baja California) and this one was the first of many consecutive electoral successes and an increase of supporters and activists within the party.

Indeed by 1999 the PAN was already a second force it ".gained access to the government of six states (Baja California, Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Nuevo Leon and Queretaro) and in more than 250 cities, including important capital states such as Aguascalientes, Puebla, Morelia, Culiacan, Merida, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Oaxaca, Mexicali, Saltillo and Cuernavaca" (Mizrahi, 1999:95). Such a big presence had strengthened PAN's position in electoral arena, mostly widespread in the northern states of Mexico. PAN contributed to the confidence of public's trust in elections. As we saw by 2009 is only present in 8 states, which means a declination as a political party in the electoral spectrum..

The implications of this presence were that the PAN gradually replaced the corporatist vote for the PRI into an individually-oriented personal decision, and that meant that this party favoured voting as a way to channel collective demands. It can be said that the PAN encouraged realignment among voters and within the party system.

In 2000 they won the presidential election, a major fact in Mexican political life: the relevance in power, having Vicente Fox as new leader. The next election will be again for the PAN, with Felipe Calderon as president, the majority of deputies in the lower chamber and the majority of seat at the Upper Chamber (IFE, 2006). However electoral participation dropped down about 5 points, which may reflect peoples' discouragement.

To sum up, PAN's long tradition of supporting electoral means of achieving political goals is very important in the change of political participation that took place over the last 20 years in Mexico. PAN tradition is more likely to defend and encourage electoral participation, rather than other means of political struggle, such as direct

political participation or popular movements. On both of them PAN has not particular presence in Mexico.

PRD and political participation

The contribution of the left wing parties to enhance electoral participation had two key moments: 1988 when leftist parties joined popular movements in the National Democratic Front (FND), with Cuauthemoc Cardenas as candidate for the presidency, against Carlos Salinas of the PRI. The latter won the position in an alleged? fraudulent contest. But in terms of political participation the FDN successfully recruited people to turnout to the polls; given that it was the unique opportunity, in modern Mexican political history that a different political party attempted to challenge PRI dominance.

The second moment was in 2006 presidential election. Since year 2000 leftist parties such as the PRD, PT and Convergence party move forwards a very popular leader Andres Manuel López Obrador in order to run for the position. By year 2005 Lopez Obrador headed the peoples' preferences, according to national surveys at the time.^{‡‡} This upward movement encouraged political participation, mainly among the poor, which are most of the population in Mexico, particularly in the centre of Mexico and its surroundings. López Obrador obtained 35.31% of the voting cast in the 2006 contest, his opponent Felipe Calderon from PAN recorded 35.89% (IFE, 2006). This was a very small difference in the voting cast.

This PRD failure caused to large internal disputes. After year 2006 PRD, despite of being the second political force in the lower and upper chambers began to lose political strength. Not only did they lose partisan's support, but poor political performance accompanied with corruption inside the party contributed to a widespread rejection by much of the electorate that would normally vote for the left.

^{‡‡} Lopez Obrador headed the popularity having 43 points over 10 points of Felipe Calderon, and -1 of Roberto Madrazo in 2006. By year 2006 Lopez Obrador had 31points, Felipe Calderon 12 points and Madrazo -7 points in 2006. National Survey on Housing Parametría 2004-2005. <http://www.parametria.org.mx>

In 2009 around 5% of the people, rather vote for one of the running political parties, chose to vote for for no party at all (that is, they cast invalid votes or *voto en blanco*), as a rejection to the whole party system (IFE, 2009)^{§§}.

After 2009 election PRD has become -as we saw- the third political party in Mexico's electoral scenario, a huge debacle for the left political wing in Mexico. This last one also due to the internal crisis of two main leaderships: Lopez Obrador and Jesus Ortega, and the so called *tribus* (political factions) in the PRD.

PRI and political participation

The PRI also contributed in the change of political participation in Mexico, as a result of its own decline as viable option in contemporary Mexico. The PRI's deterioration as political party has been extensively studied (Magaloni, 1999; Garrido, 1994; Hernandez, 1997). Most scholars have argued about the exhaustiveness of the PRI system due to their gradual de-legitimation among Mexican publics and inside the PRI itself. There is no need to write more about it. What is important to note is that the PRI did not play a passive role on the shifts in voting. Paradoxically the successive frauds and all forms of voter intimidation in the 1970s and 1980s, committed by PRI invalidate not only its own electoral gains but produced in the long run a reversing reaction on publics. During the 1990s the first citizens' appeal was to clean electoral processes. The same appear to happen after Calderon in 2006 onwards; a confrontation between him and Lopez Obrador.

As government, the PRI itself also encouraged electoral participation. Zedillo used to speak of *normalidad democratica*, referring to the existence of other political parties, but with an implicit rejection to mass mobilisation as a mean to achieve political support and recognition. One vote, even thousands of them may challenge the political system, but massive concentrations in the *zocalo* or occupation of Town Councils disrupt the whole political system.

^{§§} [http:// www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx) (preliminary data).

However, after several crisis inside the PRI organization, that made it dropped to the third position in the lower and upper chamber in 2006, it slowly gained relevance in the political struggle, due to two main external facts: the failure of economic management of PAN administration, which has affected National Income and PIB has dropped to -2.69% and the unemployment increased up to 4.89%^{***} (INEGI, 2009), as well as the weakened of the PRD strength in the country.

Besides, the PRI itself has changed some of its authoritarian and corrupt practices and has achieved basic political agreements among the members in the organization. This reorganization is taking place around a new young leader Enrique Peña Nieto, who will possibly be the PRI candidate in 2012, and Ms. Beatriz Paredes as the president of the PRI organization. These are the main reasons why it became the first political force after 2009 election, getting the majority in the Upper and Lower chambers. It also won 5 out of the 6 state elections (Queretaro, Nuevo Leon, Campeche, Colima, San Luis Potosi)^{†††}

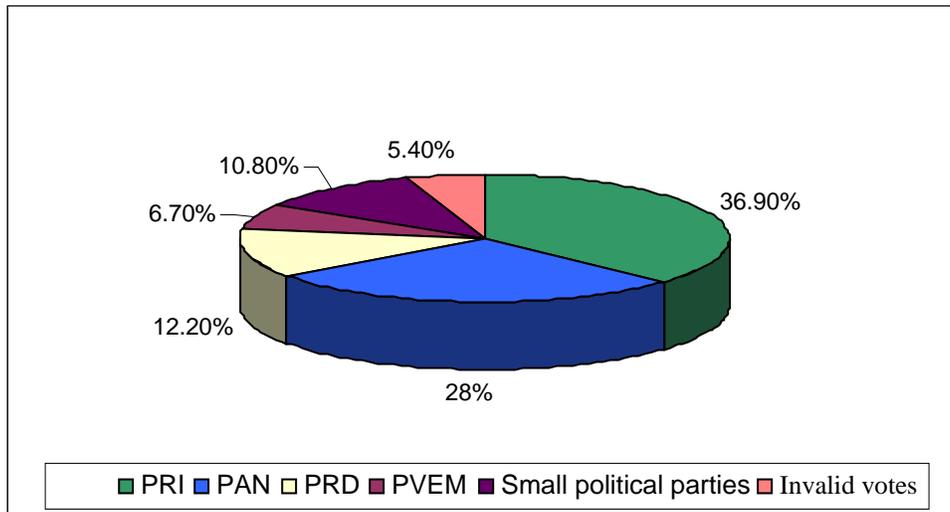
The 2009 turnout records 44.6 % of political participation (IFE, 2009^{†††}) a rather unsatisfactory voting cast. This is a standard porcentaje for a congressional (intermediate) contest, which in Mexico tends to be lower that presidential election (see years 1991, 1997, 2003 in graph 2. In graph 5 it is clear that PRI begins its carrier to the 2012 federal election for president, and that PAN has lost its political strength, after 9 years in the presidency and its first position in the Congress.

^{***} *Este Pais* (2009) Mayo, 2009. No. 218. Data from INEGI, National System of Accounts in Mexico.

^{†††} [http:// www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx) (preliminary data).

^{†††} [http:// www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx) (preliminary data).

Graph 4
Mexico: Distribution of voting
2009 election



Source: IFE (www.ife.org.mx)

PAN owns the second place, and far down PRD dropped to the third position. The Green Ecology Mexican Party (PVEM) is located in the fourth place. The rest of the parties got only very low positions. See graph 5.

Conclusions

The trend in Mexican political participation over the last 20 years was toward increasing electoral participation from 1988 up to 2009. The initial movement has a peak and decline in 1988 when the first relevant shift to electoral political participation was put forward. The second movement began in 1994 presidential turnout where the electoral participation reached a notorious presence, and had a hallmark movement with the relevance in power in 2000.

As Jonathan Fox suggested, the 1988 shift towards electoral participation might be the beginning of a more vibrant associational life in Mexican civil society (Fox, 1997). This essential step toward an effective citizenship political participation might leave behind the entrenched *clientelism* of the past, and will probably be the best democratic outcome of the electoral trend. The last 2009 turnout shows that for almost half of Mexican population to attend the polls every three years and to choose a political party became a usual and useful attitude, and that is a remarkable step forward toward a more democratic system.

It also can be concluded that voting was encouraged by the PAN, the left wing parties, as well as by the PRI and the government itself. The PAN's long tradition for the support of electoral involvement has probably had less impact on Mexican citizens' decision to participate politically, than the actual electoral gains gathered by the party since 1989. However this party encouraged electoral participation among other social sectors (entrepreneurs and middle classes) to channel demands through the electoral arena, in order to protect their particular interests.

The PRI and the government also contributed to change. The decline of corporatist PRI system, as well as the government's rejection (through repression and intolerance) of popular movements promoted a shift toward elections. Altogether, this drove a new tendency in Mexican political participation during the last 20 years, namely a more differentiated pattern of vote casting.

It is particularly important to notice that this electoral shift was also a product of structural advances in fields, such as education, urbanisation, and public services, which in turn favoured electoral participation as well. A Mexico's snapshot of late 1980s compared with Mexico of 2009, will be sufficient argument to prevent changes. More aware citizens will probably transform the alienated political attitudes that prevail in low quality ranked democracies. It is still premature to suggest that Mexican voters are highly sophisticated; at this time the voters have simply lost their risk aversion. Many Mexicans start to have a coherent and

sufficient knowledge about economic issues, which it might render in the evaluation of ruling government policies; although, there is still apathy, and compliance in many population segments. All we can contend is that this new trend doubtless will awake political interest on traditionally indifferent mass publics.

Electoral participation is expected to become more regular in Mexican political life and it might increase to the extent that democratic institutions attend to problems of political representation. Yet, political representation needs further development, because political parties in Mexico are not sufficiently representative to articulate many popular demands, at least judging by the numbers of non-participants.

Lastly, we can say that political participation has a progressive presence in recent democratic polities like Mexico, and publics achieve more confidence in electoral choice. As we saw, Mexico has been installed in this route.

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