

MEXICO

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS:



Not too many years ago, many observers considered Mexico to be a model for LDCs (less developed countries) around the world. The "Mexican miracle" described a country with a rapidly increasing GNP in orderly transition from an authoritarian to a democratic government. Then, the economy soured after oil prices plummeted in the early 80s, the peso took a nosedive, and debt mounted during the decade. Ethnic conflict erupted in the mid-90s when the Zapatistas took over the capital of the southern state of Chiapas and refused to be subdued by the Mexican army. On the political front, the leading presidential candidate was assassinated, and top political officials were arrested for bribery, obstructing justice, and drug pedaling. Then under new leadership Mexico surprised the world by recovering some financial viability through paying back emergency money they borrowed from the United States. In 2000, under close scrutiny by western democracies, Mexico held an apparently honest, competitive presidential election, and confirmed the emergence of a competitive electoral system.

This "developing" nation called Mexico is full of apparent contradictions that make its politics sometimes puzzling, but always interesting and dynamic. Mexico is generally described economically as a developing country and politically as a "transitional democracy." In both cases it is at an "in-between" stage when compared with other countries globally.

SOURCES OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL POWER:



Like many other Latin American countries, Mexico's sources of public authority have fluctuated greatly over time. From the time that the Spanish arrived in the early 16th century until independence was won in 1821, Mexico was ruled by a viceroy, or governor put in place by the Spanish king. The rule was centralized and authoritarian, and it allowed virtually no participation by the indigenous people. After Mexican independence, this ruling style continued, and all of Mexico's presidents until the mid-20th century were military generals. The country was highly unstable in the early 20th century, and even though a constitution was put into place, Mexico's president dictated policy until very recent years

LEGITIMACY:

By and large, most Mexican citizens consider their government and its power legitimate. An important source of legitimacy is the Revolution of 1910-1917, and Mexicans deeply admire revolutionary leaders throughout their history, such as Miguel Hidalgo, Benito Juarez, Emilio Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Lazaro Cardenas. Revolutions in general are seen quite positively, and charisma is highly valued as a leadership characteristic.

The revolution was legitimized by the formation of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1929. The constitution that was written during that era created a democratic, three-branch government, but PRI was intended to stabilize political power in the hands of its leaders. PRI, then, served as an important source of government legitimacy until other political parties successfully challenged its monopoly during the late 20th century. After the election of 2000, PRI lost the presidency and one house of Congress, so that today, sources of public authority and political power appear to be changing rapidly.

What is the Mexican national anthem like?

See a copy of the Mexican Constitution of 1917.

HISTORICAL TRADITIONS:

Mexico's historical tradition may be divided into three stages of its political development - colonialism, the chaos of the 19th and early 20th century, and the emphasis on economic development during its recent history. However, some characteristics carry through from one era to the next.

authoritarianism - Both from the colonial structure set up by Spain and from strong-arm tactics by military-political leaders such as Porfirio Diaz, Mexico has a tradition of authoritarian rule. Currently, the president still holds a great deal of political power.

populism - The democratic revolutions of 1810 and 1910 both had significant peasant bases led by charismatic figures that cried out for more rights for ordinary Mexicans, particularly Amerindians. The modern Zapatista movement is a reflection of this historical tradition.



power plays/divisions within the elite - The elites who led dissenters during the Revolutions of 1810 and 1910, the warlords/caudillos of the early 20th century, and the politicos vs. tecnicos of the late 20th century are all examples of competitive splits among the elite.

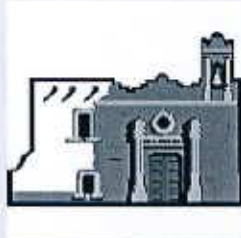


instability and legitimacy issues- Mexico's political history is full of chaos, conflict, bloodshed, and violent resolution to political disagreements. As recently as 1994, a major presidential candidate was assassinated. Even though most Mexicans believe that the government is legitimate, the current regime still tends to lean toward instability.

POLITICAL CULTURE:

Sense of National Identity

Mexicans share a strong sense of national identification based on a common history, as well as a dominant religion and language.



The importance of religion - Until the 1920s, the Catholic Church actively participated in politics, and priests were often leaders of populist movements. During the revolutionary era of the early 20th century, the government developed an anti-cleric position, and today the political influence of the church has declined significantly. However, a large percentage of Mexicans are devout Catholics, and their beliefs strongly influence their political values and actions.

patron-clientism - This system of cliques based on personal connections and charismatic leadership has served as the glue that has held an agrarian Mexico together through practicing "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." The network of camarillas (patron-client networks) extends from the political elites to vote-mobilizing organizations throughout the country. Corruption is one by-product of patron-clientism.

economic dependency - Whether as a Spanish colony or a southern neighbor of the domineering United States, Mexico has almost always been under the shadow of a more powerful country. In recent years Mexico has struggled to gain more economic independence.



Geographical Influences

Mexico is one of the most geographically diverse countries in the world, including high mountains, coastal plains, high plateaus, fertile valleys, rain forest, and desert within an area about three times the size of France.

Some geographical features that have influenced the political development of Mexico are:



Mountains and deserts have made communication and transportation between regions difficult. Rugged terrain also limits areas where productive agriculture is possible. Regionalism, then, is a major characteristic of the political system.

Varied climates - Partly because of the terrain, but also because of its great distance north to south, Mexico has a wide variety of climates - from cold, dry mountains to tropical rain forests.



Natural resources - Mexico has an abundance of oil, silver, and other natural resources, but has always struggled to manage them wisely. These resources undoubtedly have enriched the country (and the United States), but they have not brought general prosperity to the Mexican people.



A long (2000-mile-long) border with the United States means that relationships - including conflicts and migration and dependency issues - between the two countries are inevitable.

Almost 100 million population - Mexico is the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world, and among the ten most populous of all. Population growth has slowed to about 1.8 percent, but population is still increasing rapidly.

Urban population - About 3/4 of the population lives in cities of the interior or along the coasts. Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world, with about 18 million inhabitants. The shift from rural to urban population during the late 20th century disrupted traditional Mexican politics, including the patron-client system



Read more about [Mexican political culture](#).

POLITICAL CHANGE:

Mexican history dates back to its independence in 1821, but many influences on its political system developed much earlier. We will divide our study of these influences into three parts:

- **colonialism**
- **independence until the Revolution of 1910**
- **the 20th century after the revolution.**

COLONIALISM:

From 1519 to 1821 Spain controlled the area that is now Mexico. The Spanish placed their subjects in an elaborate social status hierarchy, with Spanish born in Spain on top and the native Amerindians on the bottom. Colonialism left several enduring influences:



cultural heterogeneity - When the Spanish arrived in 1519, the area was well-populated with natives, many of whom were controlled by the Aztecs. When the conquistador Hernan Cortes captured the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish effectly took control of the entire area. Even though status differences between native and Spanish were clearly drawn, the populations soon mixed, particularly since Spanish soldiers were not allowed to bring their families from Spain to the New World. Today about 60 percent of all Mexicans are mestizo (a blend of the two peoples), but areas far away from Mexico City - particularly to the south - remained primarily Amerindian.

Catholicism - Most Spaniards remained in or near Mexico City after their arrival, but Spanish Catholic priests settled far and wide as they set about converting the population to Christianity. Priests set up missions that became population centers, and despite the differences in status, they often developed great attachments to the people that they led.



economic dependency - The area was controlled by Spain, and served the mother country as a colony, although the territory was so vast that the Spanish never realized the extent of Mexico's natural resources.

Read an account of Cortez' conquest of the Aztecs.

See some of the old Catholic missions that still exist today.

INDEPENDENCE: 1810 – 1911

In 1810 a parish priest named Miguel Hidalgo led a popular rebellion against Spanish rule. After eleven years of turmoil (and Father Hidalgo's death), Spain finally recognized Mexico's independence in 1821. However, stability and order did not follow, with a total of thirty-six presidents serving between 1833 and 1855.

THE NEW COUNTRY

Important influences during this period were:

instability and legitimacy issues - When the Spanish left, they took their hierarchy with them, and reorganizing the government was a difficult task.



rise of the military - The instability invited military control, most famously exercised by Santa Anna, a military general and sometimes president of Mexico.

domination by the United States - The U.S. quickly picked up on the fact that her neighbor to the south was in disarray, and chose to challenge Mexican land claims. By 1855, Mexico had lost half of her territory to the U.S. What is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, and part of Colorado fell under U.S. control after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848.



liberal vs. conservative struggle - The impulses of the 1810 revolution toward democracy came to clash with the military's attempt to establish authoritarianism (as in colonial days). The Constitution of 1857 was set up on democratic principles, and a liberal president, **Benito Juarez**, is one of Mexico's greatest heroes. Conservatism was reflected in the joint French, Spanish, and English takeover of Mexico under Maximilian (1864-1867.) His execution brought Juarez back to power, but brought no peace to Mexico.

"THE PORFIRIATO" (1876-1911)

Porfirio Diaz - one of Juarez's generals - staged a military coup in 1876 and instituted himself as the President of Mexico with a promise that he would not serve more than one term of office. He ignored that pledge and ruled Mexico with an iron hand for 34 years. He brought with him the *cientificos*, a group of young advisors that believed in bringing scientific and economic progress to Mexico. Influences of the "Porfiriato" are

- **stability** - With Diaz came an end to years of chaos, and his dictatorship brought a stable government to Mexico.
- **authoritarianism** - This dictatorship allowed no sharing of political power beyond the small, closed elite.
- **foreign investment and economic growth** - The *cientificos* encouraged entrepreneurship and foreign investment - primarily from the United States - resulting in a growth of business and industry.
- **growing gap between the rich and the poor** - As often happens in developing countries, the introduction of wealth did not insure that all would benefit. Many of the elite became quite wealthy and led lavish life styles, but most people in Mexico remained poor.

Eventually even other elites became increasingly sensitive to the greed of the Porfirians and their own lack of opportunities, and so Diaz' regime ended with a coup from within the elite, sparking the Revolution of 1910.

The Revolution of 1910 marked the end of the "Porfirio" and another round of instability and disorder.

Read about Mexico's war with the United States, and its Revolution of 1910-11.

CHANGE AFTER 1911

THE CHAOS OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY



In 1910 conflict broke out as reformers sought to end the Diaz dictatorship. When Diaz tried to block a presidential election, support for another general, Francisco Madero - a landowner from the northern state of Coahuila - swelled to the point that Diaz was forced to abdicate in 1911. So the Revolution of 1910 began with a movement by other elites to remove Diaz from office. In their success, they set off a period of warlordism and popular uprisings that lasted until 1934.

The influence of this era include:

- **Patron-client system** - In their efforts to unseat Diaz, caudillos - political/military strongmen from different areas of the country - rose to challenge one another for power. Two popular leaders - Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa - emerged to lead peasant armies and establish another dimension to the rebellion. Around each leader a patron-client system emerged that encompassed large numbers of citizens. Many caudillos (including Zapata and Villa) were assassinated, and many followers were violently killed in the competition among the leaders.
- **Constitution of 1917** - Although it represents the end of the revolution, the Constitution did not bring an end to the violence. It set up a democratic government - complete with three branches and competitive elections - but political assassinations continued on into the 1920s.
- **Conflict with the Church** - The Cristeros Rebellion broke out in the 1920s as one of the bloodiest conflicts in Mexican history, with hundreds of thousands of people killed, including many priests. Liberals saw the church as a bastion of conservatism and put laws in place that forbid priests to vote, put federal restrictions on church-affiliated schools, and suspended religious services. Priests around the country led a rebellion against the new rules that contributed greatly to the chaos of the era.
- **The Establishment of the PRI** - Finally, after years of conflict and numerous presidential assassinations, President Calles brought caudillos together for an agreement in 1929. His plan - to bring all caudillos under one big political party - was intended to bring stability through agreement to "pass around" the power from one leader to the next as the presidency changed hands. Each president could only have one six year terms (sexenios), and then must let another leader have his term. Meanwhile, other leaders would be given major positions in the government to establish their influence. This giant umbrella party - PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) - "institutionalized" the revolution by stabilizing conflict between leaders.

THE CARDENAS UPHEAVAL - 1934 - 1940

When Calles' term as president was up, **Lazaro Cardenas** began a remarkable sexenio that both stabilized and radicalized Mexican politics. Cardenas (sometimes called by Americans "the Roosevelt of Mexico") gave voice to the peasant demands from the Revolution of 1910, and through his tremendous charisma, brought about many changes:

Redistribution of land - Land was taken away from big landlords and foreigners and redistributed as ejidos - collective land grants - to be worked by the peasants.

Nationalization of industry - Foreign business owners who had been welcomed since the time of Diaz were kicked out of the country, and much industry was put under the control of the state. For example, PEMEX - a giant government-controlled oil company - was created.

Investments in public works - The government built roads, provided electricity, and created public services that modernized Mexico.

Encouragement of peasant and union organizations - Cardenas welcomed the input of these

groups into his government, and they formed their own camarillas with leaders that represented peasants and workers on the president's cabinet.

Concentration of power in the presidency - Cardenas stabilized the presidency, and when his sexenio was up, he peacefully let go of his power, allowing another caudillo to have the reigns of power.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE TECNICOS AND THE PENDULUM THEORY

Six years after Cardenas left office, Miguel Aleman became president, setting in place the **Pendulum Theory**. Aleman rejected many of Cardenas' socialist reforms and set about on a path of economic development, again encouraging entrepreneurship and foreign investment. He in turn was followed by a president who shifted the emphasis back to Cardenas-style reform, setting off a back-and-forth effect - socialist reform to economic development and back again. As Mexico reached the 1970s the pendulum appeared to stop, and a new generation of **tecnicos** - educated, business-oriented leaders - appeared to take control of the government and the PRI with a moderate, free-market approach to politics.

By the 1950s, Mexico was welcoming foreign investment, and the country's GNP began a spectacular growth that continued until the early 1980s. This "**Mexican Miracle**" - based largely on huge supplies of natural gas and oil - became a model for less developed countries everywhere. With the "oil bust" of the early 1980s, the plummeting price of oil sank the Mexican economy and greatly inflated the value of the peso. Within PRI, the division between the "**politicos**" - the old style caciques who headed camarillas - and the tecnicos began to grow wider.

Read more about [Lazaro Cardenas](#). Read an article that compares him to [Abraham Lincoln](#).

See a [timeline of important 20th century events](#) in Mexican history.

POLITICS AND SOCIETY:

Cleavages that have the most direct impact on the political system are urban v. rural, and north v. south.

Urban v. rural - Mexico's political structure was put into place in the early 20th century – a time when most of the population lived in rural areas. PRI and the patron-client system were intended to control largely illiterate peasants who provided political support in exchange for small favors from the politicos. Today Mexico is more than 75% urban, and the literacy rate is about 90%. Urban voters are less inclined to support PRI, and they have often been receptive to political and economic reform.

North v. south - In many ways, northern Mexico is almost a different country than the area south of Mexico City. The north is very dry and mountainous, but its population is much more prosperous, partly because they benefit from trade with the United States. The north has a substantial middle class with relatively high levels of education. Not surprisingly, they are generally more supportive of a market-based economy. The south is largely subtropical, and its people are generally less influenced by urban areas and the United States. Larger numbers are Amerindian, with less European ethnicity, and their average incomes are lower than those in the north. Although their rural base may influence them to support PRI, some southerners think of the central government as repressive. The southernmost state of Chiapas is the source of the Zapatista Movement, which values the Amerindian heritage and seeks more rights for natives.

CITIZENS AND STATE:

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

THE PATRON-CLIENT SYSTEM

Traditionally, Mexican citizens have participated in their government through the informal and personal mechanisms of the **patron-client system**. Since the formation of the PRI in 1929, the political system has emphasized compromise among contending elites, behind the scenes conflict resolution, and distribution of political rewards to those willing to play by the informal and formal rules of the game.

The **patron-client system** keeps the control in the hands of the government elite, since they have the upper hand in deciding who gets favors and who doesn't. Only in recent years have citizens and elites begun to participate through competitive elections, campaigns, and interest group lobbying.

Patron-clientism has its roots in warlordism and loyalty to the early 19th century caudillos. Each leader had his supporters that he - in return for their loyalty - granted favors to. Each group formed a camarilla, a hierarchical network through which offices and other benefits were exchanged. Still today - or at least until the election of 2000 - within PRI, most positions within the President's cabinet are filled either by supporters or by heads of other camarillas that the President wants to appease. Peasants in a camarilla receive jobs, financial assistance, family advice, and sometimes even food and shelter in exchange for votes for the PRI.

Despite trends toward a modern society, the patron-client system is still very important in determining the nature of political participation. Modernization tends to break up the patron-client system, as networks blur in large population centers, and more formal forms of participation are instituted.

PROTESTS

When citizen demands have gotten out of hand, the government has generally responded by not only accommodating their demands, but by including them in the political process. For example, after the 1968 student protests in Mexico City ended in government troops killing an estimated two hundred people in **Tlatelolco Plaza**, the next president recruited large numbers of student activists into his administration. He also dramatically increased spending on social services, putting many of the young people to work in expanding antipoverty programs in the countryside and in urban slums.



Social conditions in Mexico lie at the heart of the Chiapas rebellion that began in 1994. This poor southern Mexican state sponsored the **Zapatista Uprising**, representing Amerindians that felt disaffected from the more prosperous mestizo populations of cities in the center of the country. The Chiapas rebellion reminded Mexicans that some people lived in appalling conditions with little hope for the future. Indeed, the average length of schooling is still under five years nationwide, and only about half of the eligible students are enrolled in secondary schools.

VOTER BEHAVIOR

Before the political changes of the 1990s, PRI controlled elections on the local, state, and national levels. Voting rates were very high because the patron-client system required political support in exchange for political and economic favors. Election day was generally very festive, with the party rounding up voters and bringing them to the polls. Voting was accompanied by celebrations, with free food and entertainment for those that supported the party. Corruption abounded, and challengers to the system were easily defeated with "tacos," or stuffed ballot boxes.

Despite PRI's control of electoral politics, competing parties have existed since the 1930s, and once they began pulling support away from PRI, some distinct voting patterns emerged. Voter rates have declined in recent elections, but a respectable 61% of those eligible actually voted in the election of 2000.

Some factors that appeared to influence voter behavior in the election of 2000 were:

- **Age** - Younger voters were more likely than older voters to support Vicente Fox's PAN, and older voters were more likely to support PRI. 59% of all voters who were students voted for PAN, in contrast to 19% that voted for PRI.

- **Education** - The higher the amount of education, the more likely voters were to vote for Fox, with about 60% of all voters with college educations voting for Fox. In contrast, only 22% of those with university educations voted for Labastida (the PRI candidate).
- **Region** - Voters for PRI were fairly evenly distributed over the regions of the country, but voters in the north and center-west were more likely to support PAN.

Link to an article that argues that [Mexico's voter registration process](#) could teach the United States a thing or two.

POLITICAL FRAMEWORK AND INSTITUTIONS: Mexico appears to be a country in economic and political transition. As a result, it is difficult to categorize its regime type. For many years its government was highly authoritarian, with the president serving virtually as a dictator for a six year term. Mexico's economy has also been underdeveloped and quite dependent on the economies of stronger nations, particularly that of the United States. However, in recent years Mexico has shown strong signs of economic development, accompanied by public policy supportive of a free market economy. Also, the country's political parties are becoming more competitive, and the dictatorial control of PRI was soundly broken by the elections of 1997 and 2000. Although the political structures themselves remain the same as they were before, significant political and economic reforms have greatly altered the ways that government officials operate.

REGIME TYPE

Traditionally, Mexico has had a corporatist structure - central, authoritarian rule that allows input from interest groups outside of government. Through the camarilla system, leaders of important groups, including business elites, workers, and peasants, actually served in high government offices. Today political and economic reform appear to be leading toward a more democratic structure. Is the modern Mexican government authoritarian or democratic? Is the economy centrally controlled, or does it operate under free market principles? The answers are far from clear, but the direction of the transition is toward democracy and capitalism.

"DEVELOPED," "DEVELOPING," OR "LESS DEVELOPED"?

Categorizing the economic development of countries can be a tricky business, with at least four different ways to measure it:

GNP Per Capita - This figure is an estimate of a country's total economic output divided by its total population, converting to a single currency, usually the U.S. dollar. This measure is often criticized because it does not take into account what goods and service people can actually buy

with their local currencies.

PPP - Purchasing Power Parity - This measure takes into account the actual cost of living in a particular country by figuring what it costs to buy the same bundle of goods in different countries.

HDI - Human Development Index - The United Nations has put together this measure based on a formula that takes into account the three factors of longevity (life expectancy at birth), knowledge (literacy and average years of schooling), and income (according to PPP).

economic dependency - A less developed country is often dependent on developed countries for economic support and trade. Generally speaking, economic trade that is balanced between nations is considered to be good. A country is said to be "developing" when it begins relying less on a stronger country to keep it afloat financially.

No matter which way you figure it, Mexico comes out somewhere in the middle, with some countries more developed and some less. Since these indices in general are moving upward over time for Mexico, it is said to be "developing."

A TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACY

Politically, Mexico is said to be in transition between an authoritarian style government and a democratic one. From this view, democracy is assumed to be a "modern" government type, and authoritarianism more old-fashioned. Governments, then, may be categorized according to the degree of democracy they have. How is democracy measured? Usually by these characteristics:

- **Political accountability** - In a democracy, political leaders are held accountable to the people of a country. The key criterion is usually the existence of regular, free, and fair elections.
- **Political competition** - Political parties must be free to organize, present candidates, and express their ideas. The losing party must allow the winning party to take office - peacefully.
- **Political freedom** - The air to democracy's fire is political freedom - assembly, organization, and political expression, including the right to criticize the government.

Political equality - Signs of democracy include equal access to political participation, equal rights as citizens, and equal weighting of citizens' votes.

Mexico - especially in recent years - has developed some democratic characteristics, but still has many vestiges of its authoritarian past, as we have seen. Another often used standard for considering a country a democracy is the longevity of democratic practices. If a nation shows consistent democratic practices for a period of 40 years or so (a somewhat arbitrary number), then it may be declared a stable democracy. Mexico does not fit this description.

PARTIES:

For most of the 20th century, Mexico was virtually a one-party state. Until 2000 all presidents belonged to the PRI, as were most governors, representatives, senators, and other government officials. Over the past twenty years or so other parties have gained power, so that today competitive elections are a reality, at least in some parts of Mexico.

The three largest parties in Mexico today are:

PRI - The Partido Revolucionario Institucional was in power continuously from 1920 until 2000, when an opposition candidate finally won the presidency. PRI was founded as a coalition of elites who agreed to work out their conflicts through compromise rather than violence. By forming a political party that encompassed all political elites, they could agree to trade favors and pass power around from one cacique to another. The party is characterized by:

- **a corporatist structure** - Interest groups are woven into the structure of the party. The party has the ultimate authority, but other voices are heard by bringing interest groups under the broad umbrella of the party. This structure is not democratic, but it allows more input into the government than do other types of authoritarianism. Particularly since the Cardenas sexenio (1934-1940), peasant and labor organizations have been represented in the party and hold positions of responsibility.
- **patron-client system** - The party traditionally gets its support from rural areas where the patron-client system is still in control. As long as Mexico remained rural-based, PRI had a solid, thorough organization that managed to garner overwhelming support. Until the election of 1988, there was no question that the PRI candidate would be elected president, with 85-90 % victories being normal.

PAN - The National Action Party, or PAN, was founded in 1939, making it one of the oldest opposition parties. It was created to represent business interests opposed to centralization and anti-clericalism (PRI's practice of keeping the church out of politics.) PAN is strongest in the north, where the tradition of resisting direction from Mexico City is the strongest. PAN's platform includes

- regional autonomy
- less government intervention in the economy
- clean and fair elections
- good rapport with the Catholic Church
- support for private and religious education

PAN is usually considered to be PRI's opposition to the right.

PRD - The Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD, is generally thought of as PRI's

opposition on the left. Their presidential candidate in 1988 and 1994 was **Cuauhtemoc Cardenas**, the son of Mexico's most famous and revered president. He was ejected from PRI for demanding reform that emphasized social justice and populism. In 1988 Cardenas won 31.1% of the official vote, and PRD captured 139 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (out of 500). Many observers believe that if the election had been honest, Cardenas actually would have won.

PRD has been plagued by a number of problems that have weakened it since 1988. They have had trouble defining a left of center alternative to the market-oriented policies established by PRI. Their leaders have also been divided on issues, and have sometimes publicly quarreled. The party has been criticized for poor organization, and Cardenas is not generally believed to have the same degree of charisma as did his famous father.

Read more about Mexico's political parties.

ELECTIONS:

Citizens of Mexico directly elect their president, Chamber of Deputy Representatives, and Senators, as well as a host of state and local officials.

Although the parties have overlapping constituencies, typical voter profiles are:

PRI - small town or rural, less educated, older, poorer

PAN - from the north, middle-class professional or business, urban, better educated (at least high school, some college)

PRD - younger, politically active, from the central states, some education, small town or urban

Elections in Mexico today are competitive primarily in urban areas. Under PRI control, elections have typically been fraudulent, with the patron-client system encouraging bribery and favor-swapping. Since 1988, Mexico has been under pressure to have fairer elections. Part of the demands have come from a more urban, educated population, and some have come from international sources as Mexico has become more and more a part of world trade.

The elections of 2000 brought the PAN candidate, Vicente Fox, into the presidency. PAN captured 208 of the 500 deputies in the lower house (Chamber of Deputies), but PRI edged them out with 209 members. 46 of the 128 senators elected were from PAN, as opposed to 60 for PRI. The newly created competitive electoral system has encouraged coalitions to form to the left and right of PRI, and the split in votes may be encouraging gridlock, a phenomenon unknown to Mexico under the old PRI-controlled governments.

Take a closer look at Election Results 2000.

INTEREST GROUPS:

The Mexican government's corporatist structure generally responds pragmatically to the demands of interest groups. As a result, political tensions among major interests have rarely escalated into the kinds of serious conflict that can threaten stability. Where open conflict has occurred, it has generally been met with efforts to find a solution.

In the past 30 years or so, business interests have networked with political leaders to protect the growth of commerce, finance, industry and agriculture. These business elites have become quite wealthy, but they were never incorporated into the PRI. However, political leaders have listened to and responded to their demands. Labor has been similarly accommodated within the system. Wage levels for unionized workers grew fairly consistently between 1940 and 1982, when the economic crisis prompted by lowering oil prices caused wages to drop. The power of union bosses is declining, partly because unions are weaker than in the past, and partly because union members are more independent.

INSTITUTIONS:

Mexico is a **federal republic**, though the state and local governments have little independent power and few resources. Historically, the executive branch with its strong presidency has had all the power, while the legislature and judiciary followed the executive's lead, rubber-stamping executive decisions. Though Mexico is democratic in name, traditionally the country has been authoritarian and corporatist. Since the 1980s, the government and its citizens have made significant changes, so that - more and more - Mexico is practicing democracy.

According to the Constitution of 1917, Mexican political institutions resemble those of the U.S. The three branches of government theoretically check and balance one another, and many public officials - including the president, both houses of the legislature, and governors - are directly elected by the people. In practice, however, the Mexican system is very different from that of the United States. The Mexican constitution is very long and easily amended, and the government can best be described as a strong presidential system.

Does Mexico have real checks and balances now? and even gridlock?

EXECUTIVE:

A remarkable thing happened in the presidential election of 2000. The PRI candidate did not win. Instead, Vicente Fox, candidate for the combined PAN/PRD parties won with almost 43 percent of the vote. He edged out Francisco Labastida, the PRI candidate, who garnered not quite 36 percent. This election has far-reaching implications, since the structure of the government is built around the certainty that the PRI candidate will win. This election may mark the end of patron-clientism and the beginning of a true democratic state.

Since the formation of PRI, policy making in Mexico had centered on the presidency. The president - through the patron-client system - was virtually a dictator for his **sexenio**, a non-renewable six year term. The incumbent always selected his successor, appointed officials to all positions of power in the government and PRI, and named PRI candidates for governors, senators, deputies, and local officials. Until the mid 1970s, Mexican presidents were considered above criticism, and people revered them as symbols of national progress and well being. Despite recent changes, the Mexican president remains very powerful.

As head of PRI, the president managed a huge patronage system and controlled a rubber stamp Congress. The president almost always was a member of the preceding president's cabinet.

Now, Vicente Fox holds the power of the presidency, but must manage a new Mexico without the supporting patron-client system of PRI behind him. Can he do it? Will he be able to establish new connections or alter the old ones. Does he reflect the emergence of a truly democratic and modern Mexico? Only time will tell.

Read about the [Mexican President's cabinet](#) (in Spanish).

BUREACRACY:

Almost 1 1/2 million people work in the federal bureaucracy, most of them in Mexico City. More government employees staff the schools, state-owned industries, and semi-autonomous agencies of the government, and hundreds of thousands of bureaucrats fill positions in state, and local governments.

Officials are generally paid very little, but those at high and middle levels have a great deal of power. Under PRI control, all were tied to the patron-client system and often accepted bribes and used insider information to promote private business deals.

THE LEGISLATURE:

The Mexican legislature is bicameral, with a 500-member **Chamber of Deputies** and a 128-member **Senate**. All legislators are directly elected - 300 deputies from single-member districts, 200 by proportional representation, and 4 senators from each of 31 states and the federal district (Mexico City). Although legislative procedures look very similar to those of the United States, until the 1980s the legislature remained under the president's strict control.

PRI's grip on the legislature slipped earlier than it did on the presidency. The growing strength of opposition parties, combined with legislation that provided for greater representation of minority parties (proportional representation) in congress, led to the election of 240 opposition deputies that year. After that, presidential programs were no longer rubber stamped, but were open to real debate for the first time. President Salinas' reform programs, then, were slowed down, and for the first time, the Mexican government experienced some gridlock. In 1997 PRI lost a majority in the Chamber of Deputies when 261 deputies were elected from opposition parties. The election of 2000 gave PRI a bare plurality – but far from a majority - in both houses.

As a competitive multiparty system begins to emerge, the Mexican congress has become a more important forum for various points of view. PRI candidates are facing more competitive elections in many locales, and the number of "safe seats" is declining. The legislature has challenged Fox on a number of occasions, but whether or not a true system of checks and balances is developing is still unclear.

Visit the official web site of the [Chamber of Deputies](#)

THE JUDICIARY: A strong judicial branch is essential if a country is to be ruled by law, not by the whim of a dictator. Mexico does not yet have an independent judiciary, nor does it have a system of judicial review. Even though the Constitution of 1917 is still in effect, it is easily amended and does not have the same level of legitimacy as does the U.S. Constitution.

Mexico has both federal and state courts, but because most laws are federal, state courts have played a subordinate role. If states continue to become more independent from the central government, the state courts almost certainly will come to play a larger role.

The Supreme Court is the highest federal court, and on paper it has judicial review, but in reality, it almost never overrules an important government action or policy. Historically, then, the courts have been controlled by the executive branch, most specifically the president. As in the United States, judges are officially appointed for life. In practice, judges resign at the beginning of each sexenio, allowing the incoming president to place his loyalists on the bench as well as in the state houses, bureaucratic offices, and party headquarters.

But change is in the wind. The administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) tried to strengthen the courts by emphasizing the rule of law. Increasing interest in human rights issues by citizens' groups and the media has added pressure to the courts to play a stronger role in protecting basic freedoms. Citizens and the government are increasingly resorting to the courts as a primary weapon against corruption, drugs, and police abuse. President Zedillo often refused to interfere with the courts' judgments, and Vicente Fox has vowed to work for an independent judiciary.

MILITARY:

Military generals dominated Mexican politics throughout the 19th century and into the early 20th century. The military presided over the chaos, violence, and bloodshed of the era following the Revolution of 1910, and it was the competitiveness of their generals that caused PRI to dramatically cut back their political power. Although all presidents of Mexico were generals until the 1940s, they still acted to separate the military from politics. Even critics of PRI admit that gaining government control of the military is one of the party's most important accomplishments. Over the past fifty years, the military has been turned into a relatively disciplined force with a professional officer corps.

Much credit for de-politicizing the military belongs to Plutarco Calles and Lazaro Cardenas, who introduced the idea of rotating the generals' regional commands. By moving generals from one part of the country to another, the government kept them from building regional bases of power. And true to the old patron-client system, presidents traded favors with military officers - such as business opportunities - so that generals could enjoy economic, if not political power.

The tendency to dole out favors to the military almost certainly has led to the existence of strong ties between military officers and the drug trade. In recent years, the military has been heavily involved in efforts to combat drug trafficking, and rumors abound about deals struck between military officials and drug barons. Such

fears were confirmed when General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, the head of the anti-drug task force, was arrested in February 1997 on accusations of protecting a drug lord.

POLICIES AND ISSUES:

Mexican government and politics has changed dramatically since the 1980s. Today Mexico has taken serious steps toward becoming a democracy, and the economy has shown signs of improvement since the collapse of 1982. The country is trying to move from being a regionally vulnerable area to a globally reliable one. Still, stubborn problems remain. PRI has been entangled with the government so long that creating branches that operate independently is a huge task. The gap between the rich and poor is still wide in Mexico, despite the growth of the middle class in the north. And Fox faces a big challenge in shaping Mexico's relationship with the United States. How does Mexico retain the benefits of trade and cooperation with its neighbor to the north, and yet steer its own independent course?

Read an article that describes many issues: [Murder, Money, and Mexico.](#)

ECONOMY:

Mexico's economic development has had a significant impact on social conditions in the country. Overall, the standard of living has improved greatly since the 1940s. Rates of infant mortality, literacy, and life expectancy have steadily improved. Health and education services have expanded, despite severe cutbacks after the economic crisis of 1982.

"The Mexican Miracle"

Between 1940 and 1960 Mexico's economy grew as a whole by more than 6 percent a year. Industrial production rose even faster, averaging nearly 9 percent for most of the 1960s. Agriculture's share of total production dropped from 25 percent to 11 percent, while that of manufacturing rose from 25 percent to 34 percent. All this growth occurred without much of the inflation that has plagued many other Latin American economies.

Problems

- **A growing gap between the rich and the poor was a major consequence of the rapid economic growth** - Relatively little attention was paid to the issues of equality and social justice that had led to the revolutions in the first place. Social services programs were limited at best. From 1940 to 1980 Mexico's income distribution was among the most

unequal in all the LDCs, with the bottom 40 percent of the population never earning more than 11 percent of total wages.

- **Rapid and unplanned urbanization accompanied the growth** - The Federal District, Guadalajara, and other major cities became urban nightmares, with millions of people living in huge shantytowns with no electricity, running water, or sewers. Poor highway planning and no mass transit meant that traffic congestion was among the worst in the world. Pollution from cars and factories make Mexico City's air so dirty that it is unsafe to breathe.

The Crisis

In its effort to industrialize, the Mexican government borrowed heavily against expectations that oil prices would remain high forever. Much of the rapid growth was based on the oil business, especially since Mexico's production became increasing just as that of OPEC countries was decreasing during the early 1970s. When the price of oil plummeted in 1982, so did Mexico's economy. By 1987, Mexico's debt was over \$107 billion, making it one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world. The debt represented 70 percent of Mexico's entire GNP.

Reform

President Miguel de la Madrid began his sexenio in 1982 with all of these economic problems before him. He began a dramatic reform program that reflected the values of the new tecnico leaders. This program continued through the presidencies of Salinas and Zedillo, and it has brought about one of the most dramatic economic turnarounds in modern history.

- **Sharp cuts in government spending** - According to agreements with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the U.S. government, and private banks, Mexico set off on an austerity plan that greatly reduced government spending. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were cut, subsidies to government agencies were slashed, and hundreds of public enterprises were eliminated.
- **Debt reduction** - Mexico's debt still continues to plague her, although the U.S. spearheaded a multinational plan to reduce interest rates on loans and allow more generous terms for their repayment. Mexico still pays an average of about \$10 billion a year in interest payments.
- **Privatization** - In order to allow market forces to drive the Mexican economy, Madrid's government decided to give up much of its economic power. Most importantly, the government privatized many public enterprises, especially those that were costing public money. The banks were returned to the private sector by President Salinas in 1990. By the late 1980s a "mini silicon valley" was emerging in Guadalajara where IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Wang, and other tech firms set up factories and headquarters. Special laws - like duty-free importing of components - and cheap labor encouraged U.S. companies to invest in Mexican plants.

Still, the problems persist today, particularly those of income inequality, urban planning, and pollution.

FOREIGN POLICY:

The crisis that began in 1982 clearly indicated that a policy of encouraging more Mexican exports and opening markets to foreign goods was essential. In the years after 1982 the government relaxed restrictions on foreign ownership of property and reduced and eliminated tariffs. The government courted foreign investment and encouraged Mexican private industry to produce goods for export.

Drug trafficking between Mexico and the United States has been a major problem for both countries for many years. The drug trade has spawned corruption within the Mexican government, so that officials have often been bribed to look the other way or even actively participate in the trade. Fox has vowed to stamp out the corruption and some major arrests have been made, but the problem is far from resolved.

Since the mid-1980s, Mexico has entered into many trade agreements and organizations in order to globalize her economy and pay her way out of debt:

GATT/WTO - In 1986, Mexico joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a multilateral agreement that attempts to promote freer trade among countries. The World Trade Organization was created from this agreement.

NAFTA - The North American Free Trade Agreement was signed by Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Its goal is to more closely integrate the economies by eliminating tariffs and reducing restrictions so that companies can expand into all countries freely. Mexico hopes to stimulate its overall growth, enrich its big business community, and supply jobs for Mexicans in new industries. On the other hand, American firms gain from access to inexpensive labor, raw materials, services and tourism, as well as new markets to sell and invest in. Mexico runs the risk of again being overshadowed by the United States, but hopes that the benefits will outweigh the problems. President Fox has generally supported freer flow of labor and goods between Mexico and its northern neighbors, although some of his advisers are more skeptical of NAFTA.

Mexican President Vicente Fox was critical of U.S. President George W. Bush's policy on the death penalty for drug smugglers

Visit NAFTA's home page.

Read about a border dispute between Mexico and the United States regarding the Rio Grande River.

DEMOCRACY:

Part of the answer to Mexico's economic and foreign policy woes lies in the development of democratic traditions within the political system. Mexico's tradition of authoritarianism works against democratization, but modernization of the economy, the political value of populism, and the democratic revolutionary impulses work for it. One of the most important indications of democracy is the development of competitive, clean elections in many parts of the country.

Election Reforms

Some election reforms include

campaign finance restrictions - laws that limit contributions to campaigns

critical media coverage, as media is less under PRI control

international watch teams, as Mexico has tried to convince other countries that elections are fair and competitive

election monitoring by opposition party members

The 1994 campaign for the presidency got off to a very bad start when PRI candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated in Tijuana. PRI quickly replaced him with Ernesto Zedillo, but the old specters of violence and chaos threatened the political order. The incumbent president's brother was implicated in the assassination, and high officials were linked to drug trafficking. Despite this trouble, Zedillo stepped up to the challenge, and PRI won the election handily. Many observers believe that the elections of 1994 and 2000 have been the most competitive, fair elections in Mexico's history. The election of 2000 broke all precedents when a PAN candidate - Vicente Fox - won the presidency, finally displacing the 71 year dominance of PRI.

Vicente Fox

The 2000 presidential victory of Vicente Fox represents one of the most profound changes in Mexican politics in many years. Fox is typical of the small and medium-sized entrepreneurs who became actively engaged in politics in the early 1980s out of their frustration with PRI's mismanagement of the economy. Before the economic crisis of 1982, Fox focused his energies on working his way from his family's ranch in Guanajuato to the head of the Coca Cola's Latin American operations. After the crisis Fox became active in PAN, supporting its pro-democratic doctrine and opposition to state intervention in the economy. Fox stressed pragmatic politics over ideology, stressing greater flexibility with regard to membership growth and cooperation with other opposition parties.

In 1991 Fox ran for governor of his state of Guanajuato, but lost in a context of widespread fraud, but he ran again in 1995 and won after significant electoral reforms. In 1997 Amigos de Fox formed - a Mexican-style PAC - to help Fox seek the presidency. Through promotional radio and television "infomercials" (like Ross Perot's), globetrotting to meet with international leaders, and a charismatic denim-and-boots cowboy demeanor, Fox won the hearts of the Mexican voters. His pragmatic approach steered the conservative party more toward the middle, and even captured PRD support, after PRD became disenchanted with Cardenas.

Although Fox has served less than three years of his sexenio, he appears to have these goals:

- **Pluralism** - Fox has incorporated diverse political perspectives into his administration. He has looked outside PAN to fill important government posts.
- **Decentralization** - Fox advocates a more active role for the legislature and the judiciary, and greater authority for state and local governments.
- **Electoral Reform** - Some possible further reforms include limited reelection of local, state, and legislative officials,
- **Rule of law** - One of the most significant missing pieces in the puzzle of Mexico's democratic growth has been a strong, trustworthy judicial system. Fox's search for legal expertise will undoubtedly be one of the most important talent searches of his administration
- **Anti-Narcotics** - One of Mexico's most intractable problems is its web of crime syndicates with their connections to drug rings. Fox is trying to break the connection between the government and Mexico's drug lords, and he probably will urge the U.S. to make his job easier by finding ways to reduce the demand for drugs north of the border.

Vicente Fox showed his independence from the United States by criticizing the War in Iraq.

Connect to a biography of Vicente Fox.

Mexican citizens don't always agree with their president. Here's a Vicente Fox protest song.

ETHNIC REBELLIONS:

In his first year of office, Fox made several efforts to negotiate with the Zapatistas to settle their dispute with the government. The EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Front) began in 1994 in the southern state of Chiapas in protest to the signing of the NAFTA treaty. They saw the agreement as a continuation of the exploitation of voracious landowners and corrupt bosses of PRI. Their army captured four towns, including a popular tourist destination, and they demanded jobs, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace. Their

rebellion has spread, and Zapatista supporters wear black ski masks to hide their identity from the government.

The Zapatista rebellion was based on ethnicity - the Amerindian disaffection for the mestizo, urban-based government. It has since spread to other areas and ethnicities, and it represents a major threat to Mexico's political stability.

What will the future bring? Will Mexico be able to sustain a strong, stable economy? Will the political system emerge from its peasant-based patron-client system and corporatism as a modern democracy? Will more social equality be granted to peasants and city workers? Many observers await the answers to these questions, including people in less developed countries that look to Mexico as an example of development. More powerful countries - particularly the United States - realize that international global politics and economies are tied to the successes of countries like Mexico. Despite the instabilities of its past, Mexico does have strong traditions, a well-developed sense of national pride, many natural resources, and a record of progress, no matter how uneven.

What does Mexico teach their children about human rights?

Read more about the Zapatistas and their hero Emiliano Zapatista.

