



Advancing Democracy Worldwide

---

**MEXICO  
PRE-ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION  
REPORT #3**

**Issued June 29, 2000**

**INTRODUCTION**

With less than one week to go before Mexico's historic July 2 elections, the campaign is reaching its final stages. The most recent polls consistently indicate a very close race at the presidential level between Francisco Labastida of the long-governing Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) and Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN). In his third consecutive run for the presidency, Cuauhtémoc Cardenas of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) remains in third place, although his poll ratings have been inching upwards in recent weeks.

In broader terms, the political environment in Mexico has greatly evolved in recent years, becoming substantially more competitive at all levels. President Ernesto Zedillo deserves much credit for guiding the delicate process of opening up the political system and moving away from Mexico's seven decade history of one-party dominance. This progressive opening of the political system has been accompanied by steady gains by the major opposition parties at all levels of government.

At the presidential level, although chosen by an unprecedented national primary process, which gave him an initial boost of public support, PRI standard bearer Francisco Labastida has faced serious challenges from the beginning of the campaign. He has had to convince an increasingly restive public that the PRI can and should be trusted with continued stewardship of the country's affairs, and at the same time, compete with ever-fewer of the often less-than-democratic electoral advantages the PRI enjoyed in the past. The opposition has clearly benefitted from these circumstances, and collectively is sure to out-poll the PRI on July 2.

The opposition is mainly divided between the left-leaning PRD, which boasts most its electoral strength in Mexico City and the poorer areas of the south; and the center-right PAN, which has its greatest strengths in the northern states and among the country's growing middle classes. For its part, the PRI continues to hold solid positions among large segments of Mexican society, particularly in the more rural areas of the country, where a substantial portion of the population lives. Given Mexico's first-past-the-post

electoral system at the presidential level, the PRI can credibly compete for a winning plurality over a divided opposition.

## **NATIONAL ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT**

Despite major advances in the competitiveness of Mexico's political processes and the significant reforms that have contributed to those advances, concerns persist regarding the fairness of the country's electoral system. This is not unexpected given past history and the closeness of this year's elections. Rendering a balanced and informed judgment will be an important duty for both domestic and international observers.

Across the political spectrum, there is virtually unanimous confidence in the administration of the federal-level elections, the responsibility for which lies with the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). Still, there are concerns mostly in terms of equitable access to the media and balanced coverage by it; overspending legally established limits on the campaigns; use of state resources for partisan purposes; and vote-buying or coercion of voters.

Large increases in public campaign financing have significantly leveled the playing field in terms of paid political advertising, with substantial portions of the public funding reportedly going to paid advertising. Parties generally do not complain about paid access to the media. The quantity and quality of news coverage, however, are other matters. Although not totally equitable according to recent analyses, quantitative news coverage of the major parties and candidates is now substantially more equal than ever before. The quality of the coverage, however, is an area where the opposition parties continue to claim the coverage they receive is more often negative, whereas that of the PRI and its presidential candidate is substantially more positive. IFE's own analyses tend to confirm this general trend toward proportionally more positive coverage afforded the PRI and more negative coverage of the PAN.

The question of the extent to which Mexico's political parties are abiding by legally stipulated spending limits is difficult to ascertain. By law, the parties receive substantial public funding in large measure based on their performance in previous elections. Parties also can and do receive voluntary private contributions. At this stage in the process, because a relatively comprehensive accounting is not required until after the elections, charges of excess spending are as common as they are difficult to verify. For example, all of the opposition parties routinely accuse PRI candidates of having access to government funds, money raised clandestinely from powerful groups, and their own (often allegedly ill-gotten) private resources. And the PRI appears to believe that PAN presidential candidate Fox enjoys secret business support and that Fox and the PRD's Cardenas raise campaign donations abroad (which would be illegal). Prior to the elections, it will be impossible for international and domestic observers to render a definitive and independent judgment on these matters. IRI urges, however, that substantiated cases be adequately and impartially investigated by competent judicial authorities.

Regarding the use of public funds, it was once standard procedure for the PRI/government to employ public funds and resources for partisan purposes at election time – almost openly and on a massive scale. Such practices are now acknowledged to be illegal and have been publicly foresworn by all parties. Although the practice does not appear to be as openly used as in the past, it is not likely to be completely eliminated in the near-term. As the political system has become more competitive and more opposition candidates have won at the state and local levels, the charges now fly both ways between the PRI and its challengers.

Vote buying and coercion of voters are also matters of concern frequently raised by candidates, in the media, and during conversations with private individuals. These accusations run a wide gamut – from the possibility of modest payments of cash, food or goods on election day to much grander schemes. For example, it is sometimes alleged that distribution of considerable quantities of construction materials, foodstuffs or household furnishings (presumably from government stores) are offered to residents of particular areas for producing a desired outcome from the polls there. Public works projects are purportedly offered to localities in exchange for electoral cooperation. Poor people are said to be threatened with the loss of government welfare programs to which they are legally entitled or government/union jobs menaced in similar fashion. Although still problematic, such practices are undoubtedly less common than formerly – as well as harder to carry out within a pluralistic political system and given great improvements in the inviolability of the voting booth. Vicente Fox, for his part, has urged citizens to accept whatever the PRI or the government offers them and then vote for the PAN on July 2.

Vote buying and coercion almost certainly still occur to a certain extent, more likely in the less well developed areas of the country. The issue could take on greater significance if serious controversies result from an extremely close election. At the same time, it is important to maintain a sense of objectivity and realism in the midst of a highly charged election atmosphere where past abuses understandably could influence one's perception. As IFE President Jose Woldenberg often notes, with an expected voter turnout of approximately 40 million citizens, influencing just one percent of the electorate via these means would require buying or coercing the vote of 400,000 individuals, and probably many more because no one will know for whom any individual voter actually votes.

## **ZACATECAS**

In Zacatecas, IRI assessors met with election and other local officials, party leaders, media representatives, local citizens, and others. As in previous IRI pre-election assessment missions to Mexico City, Jalisco, Tabasco, and Nuevo Leon, IRI seeks to devote attention to areas of the country where major local/international media scrutiny and the balance of power among contending forces tends to be less well self-regulating than in major urban areas.

The state of Zacatecas covers a large and relatively remote area of north-central Mexico with a sparse population amounting to some 1.5 million. Once a prosperous silver-

producing center, it fell on ever harder times as mines closed due to lower mineral prices and lack of investment capital for more modern extractive technologies. An arid climate limits agricultural potential; there is little in the way of a manufacturing base; and Zacatecas is too far away from the border with the United States and the central valley of Mexico to have significantly benefitted yet from the maquiladora boom or the emergence of the "new" Mexican economy. Under these circumstances, the state of Zacatecas has been heavily dependent upon income from the federal government, and a great many of its inhabitants have migrated to the United States – from where they provide a significant source of remittance support to their remaining family members.

In the past, these circumstances have constituted the classic formula for maintenance of one-party dominance by the PRI. But the situation in Zacatecas has been evolving rapidly over the course of recent years. The defection by one of the PRI's most popular local leaders led to his election as governor in 1998 under the PRD banner. And the PAN is now showing surprising signs of political life there – despite the absence of many of the characteristics normally associated with its strength, such as a large middle class, significant church influence, and a vibrant business community.

Especially given Vicente Fox's rise in the polls nationally, the prospects are good for a surprisingly competitive presidential race in Zacatecas this weekend, with corresponding impact on contests for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. In other respects, the political environment there has become increasingly like that of other, more developed parts of the country. The IFE, for example, is widely respected across the spectrum and there are no serious concerns about election day administration.

Other concerns persist, however, with respect to issues such as local media fairness. Although not accused of political bias, according to numerous individuals with whom IRI assessors met, local media appear to routinely charge fees for adequate coverage of candidacies. This would seem to affect the PAN mostly given its more limited financial resources in this state. For its part, the PRD complains of federal support for PRI standard-bearers as well as their purportedly high levels of spending individually. The PRI expresses its suspicions that the state government's resources are being put to the service of PRD candidates, and the PAN agrees with them both.

Interestingly enough, however, as best as IRI assessors could determine, no documented complaints have been filed with judicial authorities. In conclusion, there are many reasons to expect a competitive and honest election in Zacatecas on July 2. But suspicions are reasonably wide spread that abuses of the law – beyond the voting system itself – could occur (or might already be occurring). This is a matter that might conceivably give rise to controversy and merits monitoring in a balanced, responsible fashion in the days leading up to the balloting and on election day.

###