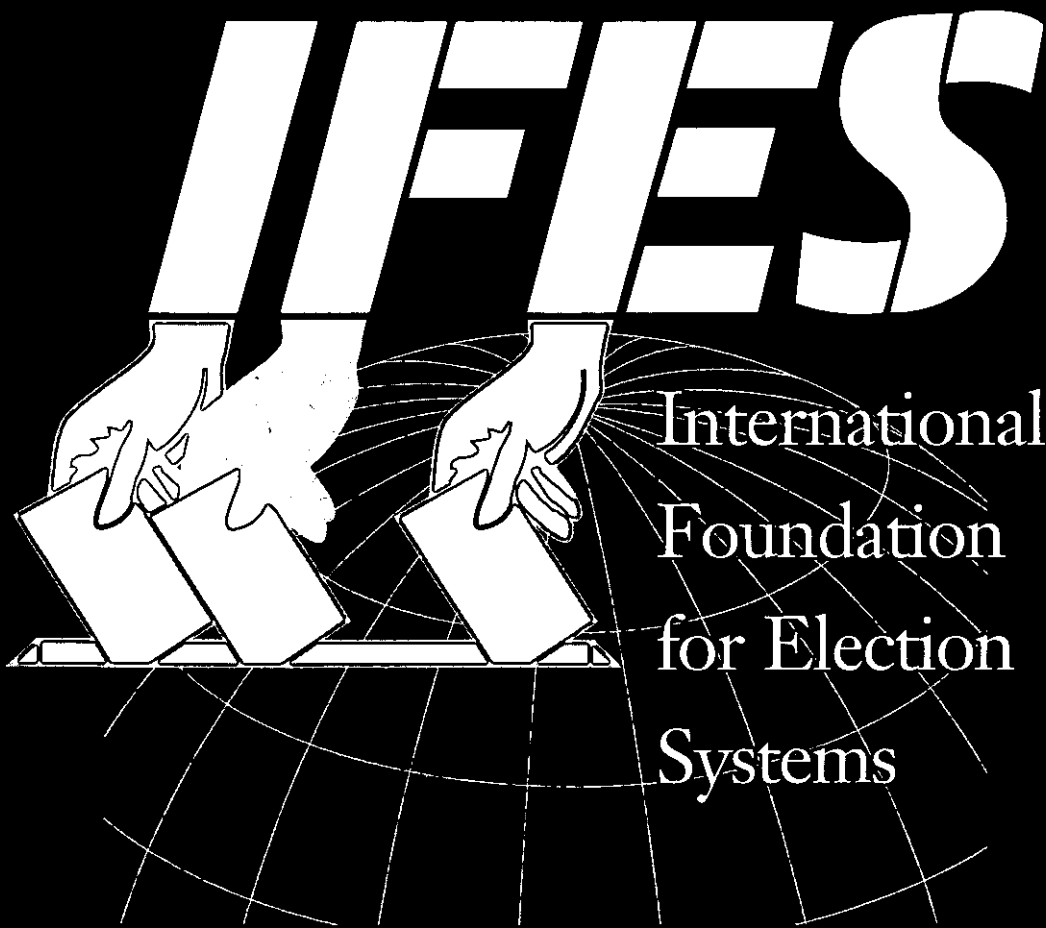


Date Printed: 11/06/2008

JTS Box Number: IFES_7
Tab Number: 28
Document Title: 1997 Federal Elections in Mexico: A
General Overview, September 15, 1997
Document Date: 1997
Document Country: Mexico
IFES ID: R01742



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**1997 FEDERAL ELECTIONS
IN MEXICO
A GENERAL OVERVIEW**

September 15, 1997

José Woldenberg Karakowsky

- ▶ **Mr. Charles Manatt, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the International Foundation for Election Systems, IFES.**
- ▶ **Mr. Richard Soudriette, President of IFES.**
- ▶ **Mr. Jesús Silva Herzog, Ambassador of Mexico to the United States.**
- ▶ **Ladies and Gentlemen:**

I would like to thank the International Foundation for Election Systems for granting me the opportunity to be here to present some of the most important features of the recent federal elections in Mexico.

As you may know, on July the 6th my country held a democratic, clean and transparent election, acknowledged as such by all the political parties, the government of the Republic and the different sectors of Mexican society.

July 6th seems to have been a very important event for Mexico's political life, for the following four reasons:

1. Because it demonstrates that one of the most fundamental and oldest national issues, after being the cause of much frustration and conflict, has been solved: the conducting of clean and legal elections.
2. Because it confirms that the electoral route, which is the open competition on a legal and peaceful basis, is a feasible path. Our plurality, formed by all the organized forces, programs, personalities and projects can find a space, a way of expression and of political representation through participation in electoral races.
3. Because it shows a profound consolidation of Mexican political parties. That is to say, the existence of organized options with truly national alternatives, able to contest effectively, has been fully demonstrated. The party system took a great step forward not only due to its professionalization and its political efficiency, but also because of its expansion and its new regional roots.
4. All these changes in the party system and the electoral system are introducing new issues in Mexico's political agenda. If recently our problems had to do with the adequate expression of different positions and

the level of representation of the different forces in governmental institutions, nowadays issues are related to those of mature democracies: how to achieve more efficient governance.

Through these changes and new possibilities, our country intends to receive the coming century with solid and trustworthy political institutions, which would be able to direct and express the plurality of all forces in our society.

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The July 6th election had the objective of renewing the 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies, 32 Senators (one fourth of the Senate) by national lists and by the formula of proportional representation; to renew the Legislative Assembly of the Federal District, and to elect for the first time the Head of Government of the capital city.

Elections were preceded by an extensive reform process, modifying Mexican electoral institutions and legislation. These reforms resulted in one of the longest and most intense political negotiations in recent history. Since January of 1995 the four political parties represented in the Congress of the Union initiated a debate lasting almost two years, and culminating in a new juridical-electoral framework. This was a long and difficult process which did not attain the expected consensus, but did produce a number of fundamental changes leading towards the democratic advancement of Mexico; changes which were undoubtedly the basis to guarantee legal, fair and transparent elections.

The wide scope of this reform impedes a detailed description in a speech such as this one; however, the following points might illustrate how deep the reform was:

1. The total autonomy of electoral bodies was achieved; that is to say, from now on the electoral authority will be completely independent from the government and the political parties. The eight Electoral Councilors and the President Councilor, the only members with the right to vote in the Federal Electoral Institute's General Council, were elected by consensus of political parties in the Chamber of Deputies.

Here the intention is twofold: to render the electoral organization independent from the government by transferring this activity to people trusted by the political parties.

The Electoral Tribunal, which is the institution responsible for solving legal controversies, became totally independent as well. The appointment of justices is no longer a prerogative of the President of the Republic, since they are elected in the Senate after their candidacies are nominated by the Supreme Court of Justice.

It is from here that the new control over legality and constitutionality emerges. On the other hand, the Tribunal is no longer limited to solving solely federal controversies, but can also address local conflicts; the constitutionality control was thus extended to all actions carried out by local authorities, without any exception. And finally the law added new defense procedures, new legal avenues to address political-electoral demands presented both by citizens and parties.

2. The electoral reform modified the legal status of political parties: the access to representation in Congress became more stringent (only parties obtaining a national vote higher than 2% were able to enter the Chamber of Deputies) and a new figure was created in order to offer a different category to organizations, that of Political Groups.
3. Conditions for competition were also improved. This may be the most visible and decisive effect of the reform. Public financing for political parties was markedly increased, as well as the access to electronic mass media and its allocation on a fairer basis. The electoral authority currently holds better instruments to control, revise and regulate campaign spending of parties.
4. Representation formulas in Congress were adjusted in such a manner that the vote-seat ratio became more balanced. Margins of over and underrepresentation of political parties in the Chamber of Deputies were decreased. A higher plurality was introduced to the Senate by means of the election of 32 senators from a national list of proportional representation.
5. Finally, the electoral contest was initiated in Mexico City by means of the direct election of its Head of Government.

Very briefly, these were the most relevant aspects of the electoral reform. This was a very broad endeavor, touching and improving upon all the aspects included in the electoral debate in Mexico during the last ten years: independence of electoral authorities, equal contest conditions, access to electronic mass media, revising campaign financing, as well as the formulas to constitute the Congress, and finally the beginning of the electoral experience in Mexico City.

In order to achieve this the Mexican Constitution was modified, as well as six other laws: the ruling law of Article 105 of the Constitution, the Organic Law of the Judicial Branch, the Criminal Code, and the Act for the Government of the Federal District. A new law regarding the claims system on electoral matters was issued, and finally the Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures was substantially modified.

I have no doubt in my mind when I say that the 1996 electoral reform was one of the most broad and more important reforms in the history of my country. Therefore, it has an important place in the long cycle of political and institutional changes which Mexico has experienced in the last two decades.

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The new legal structure imposed a number of challenges which define the electoral processes in Mexico, rendering them unique.

The first of these challenges is the fact that we were attempting to base electoral processes on laws and a system which never before had been put into practice. The second is the magnitude of the task. In other words, the number of people which are required according to the procedures stated by the law. And finally, the complexity of such procedures and the need to establish a series of instruments granting new security mechanisms to ensure trust and transparency was another challenge.

The 1997 elections were successful because they covered all the guarantees and even added some new ones. This is the case with the appointments of the Electoral Councils in the 32 entities of the Republic. This was a comprehensive process which followed a vertical model: if the highest electoral authority had been elected unanimously in the Congress of the Union, electoral authorities in each state were to confirm to this consensus.

Thus, it was the responsibility of the eight Federal Electoral Councilors to visit the 32 entities with the objective of exchanging ideas with local political actors and to compile a list of citizens who could guarantee impartiality and balance. The result of this complex negotiation process was encouraging. In the end we were able to vote unanimously to appoint the 192 local electoral councilors (six per state of the Republic) as well as their substitutes.

At the same time it was necessary to appoint the presidents of each Local Council. In order to do this, the law established a period for parties to challenge citizens occupying those positions. Another commission of the General Council was responsible for solving the challenges that were presented. The solution of these was to be based on existing conditions and laws, and by attempting to separate the real from the apparent, by following the criteria of performance and professionalism. In the end, nine presidents of local Councils were renewed and 23 were ratified.

There was also the need to reconform the Councils of the 300 districts. The General Council appointed the presidents of the 340 District Councils using the same method (300 federal President Councilors and 40 Executive Coordinators for the Federal District election).

At the same time, the 32 Local Councils held a session to appoint the 6 electoral councilors of each of the 300 District Councils. In 29 of 32 Local Councils, agreements were reached unanimously, and the remaining three by a majority of six votes in favor and one against.

In order to obtain the trust of the political parties, a president and eight electoral councilors of the General Council, an executive secretary, six executive directors, 32 president councilors of Local Councils, 300 of the District Councils, 192 local councilors, 1800 district councilors, 40 executive coordinators in the Federal District, and 240 district councilors in the same state were appointed by means of a comprehensive consultation.

Given the nature of this operation, it constituted an unprecedented exercise of negotiation and balance. The meaning and the political message were one: political parties were to trust the arbitration on all levels of the electoral authority.

A second example of the complexity of building the electoral stage in Mexico is the method of appointing polling station officials, who are responsible for overseeing the ballot boxes, surveying the procedures on election day, counting votes, and delivering electoral packages. Their work is crucial. The legality of the election in the crucial moments of the process is in their hands.

The selection of the pollworkers is one of the processes contributing to building trust in our elections. This is also the most complex and difficult process of all tasks conducted by IFE. The intention is to make political parties trust the impartiality of polling officials. In order to achieve this, an open and baroque mechanism is used, based upon the massive training of citizens and random selection.

By law, pollworkers are citizens selected through a lottery; all of them take a training course in order to be able to direct and oversee voting procedures in each polling station.

In 1997, a total of 5,093,344 Mexican citizens were selected through the lottery. 2 million, 78 thousand citizens attended, which is equivalent to 40.7% of the summoned people. This is an important figure: never before did we have such a high percentage attending IFE's call. These 2 million people throughout the country were given a preliminary training course and an aptitude test. As a result of this process, in the July 6th election there were 3 citizens ready to occupy each polling official position.

In order to conduct an operation of such proportions, IFE hired 11,695 trainers, who taught at least two courses per selected citizen, regardless of their social condition, or how far these citizens lived. Such an experiment was full of anecdotes and incidents, but in spite of that, these trainers were able to prepare 733,124 citizens who were responsible for ensuring the legality and transparency of the 104,732 polling stations.

The training and selection process is a mechanism which introduces a great dose of trust for political parties, and which demonstrated its feasibility. The massive involvement and participation of the citizenry in the electoral process was worth this great effort.

Another good example of the dimensions of the electoral tasks in Mexico is the electoral registry. 53,022,198 citizens were registered as voters by the Federal Electoral Institute. Approximately 52,208,966 collected their voting card (98.3%), which is the number of voters included in nominal lists on election day. This means that the total possible potential voters grew by 6.4 million citizens compared to 1994, a growth of 14.2%; moreover, 93% of the voting age population already appear in our electoral registry.

Very few countries are able to achieve such a large coverage, and even fewer have incorporated measures to ensure security and trust in this instrument as the ones contained in our electoral registry, which was reconstructed completely in 1992 incorporating the close surveillance of all political parties in every step by means of a National Surveillance Commission.

Moreover, during the months of March, April and May, the electoral registry was subject to two crucial tests: a national sample check (with methods and instruments defined by the political parties themselves) and an evaluation made by the Technical Committee (which is formed by high level and impartial scientists).

These systematic tests are imposed due to our political mistrust and because the Mexican registry is subject to a complex situation: the enormous demographic mobility of our population, which makes some of the information outdated (especially home addresses).

This was a study of national proportions. There was not a single party challenging the results of this verification. Its results reconfirmed the consistency of data superior to 95%.

The registry was compared to demographic information available in Mexico, in order to study "atypical" areas, or those which present a different pattern of behavior from the rest of the country, in order to verify the security of our information procedures; and finally a field test in order to locate citizens, check their data in their

voting cards as well as their home address. These tests were deliberately stringent, i.e., they were not applied to the entire registry, but were focused to particularly difficult areas.

In the end it was possible to demonstrate that our registry containing more than 53 million Mexicans includes 93% of the voting-age population, it is compiled from accurate data in 95% of the cases, and since 1994, has been tested in more than 44 local elections. The main guarantee being offered was: Mexican citizens were able to vote without being subject to illegal exclusions.

It is important to stress the magnitude and complexity of our process, especially because the electoral procedures were always open to surveillance from political parties and public opinion: trying to make our steps and developments accessible to the public.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize the last of the pieces contributing to achieving trust on election day: our Preliminary Results Program.

Among political parties, observers and public opinion, there was an expectation nurtured by suspicion regarding our capacity to present timely official results. The big question was that maybe on election night the most irksome and traumatic issue of our electoral history would not be solved: to reveal results immediately and with certainty.

I think that the last proof of trust in our election is related to a technical and political fact, without precedent in Mexico: at one a.m., six hours after the last polling station had closed, our counting systems were able to show the results of 54,974 polling stations throughout the country, which accounted for 52% of polling stations that were installed from the northern state of Sonora to the southeastern state of Yucatán, and from the southern state of Chiapas to the capital city in the Federal District.

The results we delivered were consistent with figures appearing in previous opinion polls, quick counts conducted on election day and official counts three days later. The National Action Party obtained 28.02% of national votes; the Institutional Revolutionary Party obtained 39.49%; the Democratic Revolution Party obtained 26.5%; the Labor Party obtained 2.54%, and the Green Ecological Party of Mexico obtained 4.53%. The political challenge was solved: official results had been arriving non-stop, sorted by categories: polling station, district and state in the country; without any possibility of manipulation, and in a continuously verifiable manner rendering them transparent through the Internet to thousands of people in Mexico and the world.

This was the most visible and solid operation carried out by the Federal Electoral Institute. Thanks to this and a few hours after the closing of the polls, we were able to verify results corresponding to polling stations and districts, as well as general voting trends and turnout.

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30,214,419 Mexican citizens voted, which accounted for 57.61% of the electoral registry. This figure constituted a clear national statement without important irregularities, rendering the election an effective portrait of the will of the majority.

This process added itself to the advancement of a new democratic life in Mexico, which is the era of transparent elections which do not require challenges or discontent, and which allow differences to be solved through institutional and peaceful methods, in order to produce legal and legitimate governments and political representations.

If future elections are to follow the model set on July 6th, then elections will no longer be the recurrent obsession and frustration of our political life, and parties and politicians will find no obstacle to address other central issues of democratic life in Mexico.

The foundation of the election, that is to say, the complicated structure which makes voting possible, achieved its goal: the participation of millions of citizens, ensuring fair conditions for competition, and providing help to parties in order to avoid wasting their time challenging the electoral authority. None of the issues which had been the subject of endless debates and conflicts without solution, appeared on stage: the electoral registry, party financing, access to mass media, and the publication of the results. Any differences occurring during the preceding eight months of preparations were duly processed and juridically addressed both in IFE and in the Electoral Tribunal, using the law and not accusations, public conflict, or demonstrations.

The great task, transcending IFE, is to maintain the pace of the process of democratic consolidation in the context of difficult situations such as inequality and poverty. To maintain democracy and the open competition among parties, while addressing growing demands of democracy itself is the big challenge. And I think this is a goal to be achieved in the coming years.

My commitment as President of IFE General Council is to ensure the proper respect for the people's votes; this is the basis of the democratization process and a requirement for its strengthening. Parties will keep contending for votes and elections will be more competitive in time. We will see an increase in phenomena we are

already living: high competitiveness, authorities of different beliefs living together, plural congresses; this is the fortunate future of our political plurality.

All these changes in the party and the electoral system are imposing new issues on Mexico's political agenda. If recently our problems had to do with the adequate expression of different positions and the level of representation of the different political forces in government offices, now the current issues are related to a mature democracy: the requirements to make government more efficient. This is the subject of the upcoming debate: how to make our democracy a lasting one, and how to make it reproduce itself providing the government with instruments to solve society's problems.

Meanwhile, and fortunately for us all, the July 6th election was successful, and it demonstrated that Mexico's political future has well-built foundations. There are bases for a long lasting democratic political life, for Mexicans of tomorrow and the days after tomorrow.

Thank you.

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