



Imagining the Mexican Election

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The media has informed us that the electoral returns are not in our favor.

—Opening remark in the election night concession speech of PRI presidential candidate Francisco Labastida, July 2, 2000

For us the system is like a snake. What happened last night is that it shed its skin and now has a different color.

—Aurelio Maceda, of the *Frente Indígena Oaxaqueña Binacional*, July 3, 2000

The 2000 presidential vote promised to be a watershed event in Mexican politics, anticipated by both domestic and international observers as the cleanest in Mexico's history. The country's elections had historically been controlled by the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), well known for cooptation, corruption, and repressive electoral tactics that resulted in 71 years of uninterrupted control of the federal government. To ensure its fairness, the 2000 election was overseen by the *Instituto Federal Electoral* (IFE), an

independent and nonpartisan agency similar to the US Federal Election Commission. Founded in 1990 and strengthened after several legislative initiatives over the decade, in 2000 the IFE oversaw new procedures for the conduct and financing of campaigns, for ensuring secret balloting, and for the unbiased counting of electoral returns, among other responsibilities.

Added to the efforts of the IFE was the self-policing of the media, which for the first time took steps to ensure that at least the two major candidates received roughly equal time and fair reporting. The election was also marked by the presence of a record number of independent observers, some 10,000 from Mexico and another 860 from outside the country. The nongovernmental organization *Alianza Cívica*, a prodemocracy group active in electoral oversight since 1994, acted as an independent watchdog. The international groups included the Carter Center, established by former US President Jimmy Carter. On Thursday June 29, three days before the election, the Center, echoing the comments of IFE head José Woldenberg, deemed election fraud “impossible,” noting that vote manipulation, most likely in rural areas, would encompass at most between one and two percent of the vote. Even the Zapatistas, who protested the 1997 congressional elections in the southern state of Chiapas by burning ballot boxes and blockading roads to polling stations, offered a weak endorsement. Just days before the vote, their spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, issued a communiqué stating that for millions of people the election represented a “dignified and respectable battleground.”¹

In the end, these promises and aspirations turned out to be true, but only in relative terms, for the 2000 Mexican election was not without its historically ingrained underside. Just days before the vote, *Alianza Cívica* filed 288 complaints of vote buying and coercion with the IFE, 82% of which were lodged against the PRI. Nearly half of the cases filed involved public workers who charged that they were being pressured to vote for one candidate or another. Moreover, independent observers could reportedly only cover some 10% of the country's 113 thousand polling stations. And, although there are reportedly some ten million Mexican nationals living in the US, the Mexican government provided only limited opportunities for migrants wishing to cross the border to vote. There were only twenty special polling stations for nonresidents along the entire US-Mexican border, and the ballots allocated to them numbered only 75,000—hardly enough for those living in the San Diego metropolitan area, to say nothing about Los Angeles, Arizona, Texas, and the growing population in the US South. Even though the migrant vote was expected to be largely

anti-PRI, opposition parties pushed to limit the stations because they would not have voter registration rolls, making them an excellent site for organized PRI fraud.

However, our purpose in this paper is not to evaluate the cleanliness of the 2000 vote; the election clearly represented a marked improvement over those of the past. Instead, our aim is to provide an assessment of the electoral process itself, which witnessed several new developments that mimic US electoral politics, from voter registration rolls and campaign polling to intensified forms of voter segmentation and widespread advertising. These, we argue, constitute serious barriers to a truly democratic Mexico, for in mimicking the West so faithfully they reduce democracy to a purely technical or procedural issue, thereby continuing in the long tradition of development's hidden agenda: "nothing less than the Westernization of the world" (Sachs, 1992:3-4; see also Esteva, 1992).

Framing our analysis is the work of the late Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla. In particular, we read the election through his categorical distinction between Mexico's modernist "imaginary" and its traditional Mesoamerican *profundo*. In the section that follows we briefly outline his contribution, situating it with respect to electoral politics. We then survey the PRI's historical tactics and explain its downfall, as well as offer an account of the election's outcome. The next section describes the electoral process, noting its Americanization and illustrating the numerous ways in which the election was the most "imagined" in Mexico's history. We conclude, again reading through Bonfil, with the problems that arise when one equates democracy with the electoral process.

Mexico's *Profundo*

In his now seminal work *México Profundo*, published in Spanish in 1987 and translated into English nine years later, Bonfil argues that Mexico exists as two civilizations. Mexico *profundo* is Mesoamerican, comprised of Indians, campesinos, and the marginalized urban populations. They are remarkable for their continuity in the face of a five-hundred-year attempt at elimination and expulsion in the name of various modernizations and developments, perpetuated by the other Mexico, the "imaginary" Mexico. The persistence of *profundo* is a story of tenacious struggle, "from armed defense and rebellion to the apparently conservative attachment to traditional practices" (Bonfil, 1996:xix), and has been successfully nurtured at relatively small scales in hamlets, villages, and neighborhoods throughout the

country. Meanwhile, the imaginary Mexico is the result of a never complete decolonization, in which Western ideas and practices of state-building, capital accumulation, and cultural hierarchicalization have denied and attempted to suppress *profundo*. In a significant and early postcolonial move, Bonfil argues,

The groups that have held power since 1821 [the year of independence from Spain] have never abandoned the civilizational project of the West and have never abandoned the civilizational project that is the essence of the colonizer's viewpoint. Thus, the diverse national visions used to organize Mexican society during different periods since independence have all been created within a Western framework. In none of them has the reality of the *México profundo* had a place. Instead, it has been viewed only as a symbol of backwardness and an obstacle to be overcome. (1996:xvii)

Tracing a broad historical path from the conquistadors to the nationalist campaigns of *mestizaje* (or racial mixing), and presaging even many of the problems inherent in a “multicultural” Mexico—whose emergence as policy in the 1990s his book helped foster—Bonfil argues against most of the trappings of the imaginary mindset: the view that history proceeds as an infinite process of “rectilinear advance”; the idea that this advancement consists of increasing the capacity for natural resource exploitation; and the belief that the benefits of this control will be expressed in higher levels of consumption (1996:164).

With respect to electoral politics, Bonfil urges us to reject the “formal, docile, and awkwardly traced democracy of the West” (1996:xix), for, like all of imaginary Mexico’s projects, “[t]he model of the country we aspire to be *is copied in every case from some other country recognized as advanced*, according to the standards of Western civilization” (1996:163; emphasis added). We view the recent Mexican election in terms of Bonfil’s “substitution project,” a “poor imitation,” with its faith in democracy hinging on the individualized “one person, one vote” model (1996:163, 175). In contrast to a democracy that “emphatically asserts the rights of historical collectives” (1996:166):

[the] Western notion of democracy, based on formal, individualistic criteria, is insufficient to guarantee the participation of an ethnically plural population. In fact ... it becomes an obstacle, a mechanism that prevents the participation of groups that do not

share that way of understanding democracy. Western-style democracy has functioned in Mexico to justify a structure of cultural control, limiting the development of Mesoamerican cultures. (Bonfil, 1996:168)

Finally, this imaginary Mexico crosses the border, becoming equally the West's imaginary of Mexico. This was demonstrated in the pages of the Western press in the months leading up to the election, where there were daily reports expressing both faith and hope that Mexico would conduct a free and fair vote. As Bonfil reverses the imaginary vision: "The West sees itself as the bearer of *the* universal civilization. As something unique and superior, it entails the negation and exclusion of any other, different civilizational project" (1996:167; emphasis in original). Given the importance placed by the international community on the cleanliness of Mexico's 2000 election, it is also important to analyze how the West, particularly the US, has deployed its own visions of *profundo* and *imaginario* as it has encouraged electoral reform—cajoling its architects, decrying its detractors, and ultimately insisting upon it for reasons of "national security" and domestic stability.

The PRI and the 2000 Election

The history of the PRI's dominance of Mexican elections is well established (Centeno, 1994; Klesner, 1996; Castañeda, 1999), and is aptly summarized in Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa's characterization of Mexico as "the perfect dictatorship."² Briefly, the PRI traces its beginnings to 1929, when the presidency of General Plutarco Elías Calles formed the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) as a way to formally end the power struggles within the Mexican revolution. Calles hoped the party could consolidate various constituencies, from radical peasants to urban intellectuals, and institutionalize the goal of building a modern nation state.

To formalize control over the landscape of postrevolutionary Mexico, the party's leaders began building a system of functionaries at the state and local level. Their job was to impel electoral support for the burgeoning party through a sophisticated combination of cooptation and coercion. On the one hand, the party's machinery, which came to permeate all electoral levels, distributed government resources in return for electoral support. On the other hand, the PRI relied on numerous electioneering "tactics" to maintain its control over the government. These became so legendary that they generated

their own lexicon, still in use today. Just days before the 2000 election, an opposition candidate warned: “We know what to look for: the ‘crazy mice,’ the ‘merry-go-round,’ and the ‘ballot tacos’.” “Crazy mice” (*ratones locos*) refer to the frenetic actions of voters looking for their polling places, which in nonPRI locales were regularly moved at the last minute by “raccoons” (*mapaches*), local functionaries of the PRI establishment. The “merry-go-round” refers to voters who move from one polling place to another, echoing the urban-machine tactics in the US (“vote early, vote often”). And the “taco” is a folded fistful of ballots, all marked for the same party and stuffed into the ballot box by a single voter. Yet another tactic is the “pregnant box,” a ballot box delivered to the polling station full of already-marked votes.

In 1938 President Lázaro Cárdenas renamed the ruling party, calling it the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM). A widely popular figure even today, Cárdenas established the tradition of *dedazo*, whereby the sitting president handpicks his successor. In 1946 Mexico elected its first nonmilitary president, Miguel Alemán Valdéz, who renamed the PRM the Party of the Institutional Revolution. For the next forty years the PRI controlled the presidency and both legislative houses, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The oil boom of the 1970s, centered in southern states like Tabasco and Chiapas, provided the party with relative stability despite its widespread corruption.

By 1981, however, the PRI machinery began to unravel. The oil crisis rocked Mexico, causing the government to cut its oil prices by eight dollars a barrel. President Miguel de la Madrid, who took office that same year, addressed the crisis by instituting the country’s first neoliberal reforms, devaluing the peso, privatizing 743 state-run enterprises, and accepting a structural adjustment package from the International Monetary Fund (Cockcroft, 1998). His reforms only bolstered the growing dissent against the PRI, and in the 1983 elections the PRI lost municipal seats to opposition parties. In the presidential election five years later, the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari faced stiff competition from Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. A former *príista*, as PRI supporters are known, Cárdenas is the son of 1930s President Lázaro Cárdenas. The younger Cárdenas was widely believed to have won the election, but the computer system receiving the vote counts mysteriously crashed, and Salinas was named president, illustrating the PRI’s continued determination to hold onto the most powerful office in the nation.

While the likely victory of Cárdenas in 1988 illustrated the vulnerability of the PRI, it was also remarkable for what it said about

internal strife within the party. Although Salinas was “given” the election by the PRI machinery, he also faced serious opposition from the party’s “dinosaurs,” as the old-guard nationalists are called. Salinas belonged to the PRI’s new breed of technocrats, up-and-comers trained in neoliberal macroeconomic theory at Ivy League schools such as Yale and Harvard. The 1994 presidential election provided even starker evidence of in-fighting within the PRI. Salinas’ handpicked successor, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated at a Tijuana campaign rally in mid-March, only three and a half months before the vote. The Tijuana police chief investigating Colosio’s murder was also assassinated. Although the Mexican attorney general’s office stands by its arrest and sentencing of a lone gunman, it is widely believed in Mexico that the party’s dinosaurs engineered the hits. Salinas then named Ernesto Zedillo to succeed him. Although Zedillo was initially opposed by the party’s old guard politicians, he negotiated the internal strife by appointing several of them to key campaign posts. Zedillo won the election but faced serious competition, garnering just 50.4% of the vote. Cárdenas, making his second run for the presidency, again charged major fraud. As Cockcroft notes, “in classic PRI corporatist fashion, on the eve of the election the government implemented the National Program of Direct Aid to the Countryside (PROCAMPO) to win voter support ... [paying] some 3.3 million peasant producers \$100 dollars a hectare to assure their voting for the PRI” (1998:309).

In summary, the PRI’s stranglehold was loosened by widespread dissatisfaction over a string of corporatist PRI presidents (one of whom, Salinas, looted the country of billions and is now in self-imposed exile in Ireland), blatant corruption in the elections of 1988 and 1994, and the country’s near economic collapse in 1994 and 1995, coming after a long decline in real wages that began in the early 1980s. These spurred a strong prodemocracy movement in Mexico, exemplified by nongovernmental actors such as *Alianza Cívica* and by formal institutions such as the IFE. Coupled with internal dissent within the PRI between old-guard “dinosaurs” and putatively reform-minded “technocrats,” the party became incapable of maintaining control over federal, state, and local elections. In 1997 the PRI lost a number of important positions, including its absolute majority in the national Chamber of Deputies, key governorships in the more prosperous northern states, and mayorships in most urban areas around the country. Moreover, the PRI’s ability to continue to manipulate at least the presidency was eroded by international threats against the signing of free trade agreements without real electoral reform.

With all of these factors at play, on July 2, 2000, Mexico held its most contested presidential election to date. The PRI candidate, Francisco Labastida, ran his campaign on traditional PRI staples, promising as many had before him to end corruption and help the poor. In light of the economic crises of the previous decades, however, Labastida downplayed his support of the free market reforms trumpeted by his predecessors. In contrast to the staid Labastida, Vicente Fox, candidate for the right-of-center Party for National Action (PAN), which was aligned with Mexico's fledgling Green Party, ran a more flamboyant campaign. Fox regularly dressed in jeans and cowboy boots (adorned with his own name) at campaign rallies and launched verbal volleys at Labastida's promises to end corruption from within. Although he made no secret of his support for neoliberal reforms, Fox's campaign was largely defined through its opposition to the PRI, claiming that only he had the strength to topple the party. Cárdenas made his third run for the Presidency as candidate for the Alliance for Mexico—a coalition of five left-of-center parties, including the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and the Workers Party. Although discounted as a potential winner in the days just prior to the election, his coalition made serious inroads into Mexico City, where he had been mayor, and in peasant communities long known as PRI strongholds.

On the day of the vote, newspapers, pundits, and independent polling organizations in both the US and Mexico termed the battle between the Francisco Labastida and Vicente Fox too close to call. The interest in the election was mirrored at the polls, as Mexico witnessed one of the highest voter turnouts ever (the official estimate was 65%). At 6:00 pm central standard time the polls closed in Mexico City and the nationwide television network, Televisa, began its election coverage, although polls did not close for another two hours in the sprawling border town of Tijuana. By 7:30 pm Televisa was publicizing exit polls indicating a strong showing by the PAN, and by 8:00 pm it had called two governorships, announcing PAN victories in Guanajuato and Morelos. An hour later Televisa ran a lengthy interview with Fox. Although he refused to declare victory, he thanked the IFE for running a clean election and hinted that victory was near. Shortly afterwards the IFE held a press conference, reporting returns received (roughly 11%), and again indicating a strong showing by the PAN.

Given the low percentage of returns early in the evening, the most surprising moment of the night came when President Zedillo made a speech on the heels of the IFE report. Trumping announcements from

both the Labastida and Fox camps, Zedillo, standing in front of a large painting of the country's only indigenous president, Benito Juárez, announced that the PRI had lost the historic election and that he would work with Fox to oversee a smooth transition. Given the early hour and the low number of returns from rural areas—long mainstays of the PRI machinery—the party's dinosaurs and local functionaries were stunned (many no doubt felt that the election could still be fixed). With Zedillo already conceding, Labastida held a press conference directly after Zedillo's speech, announcing to a somber audience of supporters that the PRI had lost.³

Imagining, American Style

In government proclamations, in campaign speeches, and in media commentary, the 2000 presidential election was widely celebrated as the beginning of real democracy in Mexico. The international community followed suit, declaring it a watershed event for Mexico and noting approvingly that Mexico's commitment to "reform," previously economic, was now political. In this section we discuss some of the ways in which the election differed from previous ones. Throughout our discussion we comment on how these developments, though remarkable in their own right, represent an acceleration of the goals of imaginary Mexico while further displacing those of *profundo*.

First, the Mexican presidential vote was clean *and* competitive. The whole process of making Mexico's election clean, and therefore legitimate in the eyes of the population, was no easy task, given longstanding corruption in, and distrust of, the system. To this end, the IFE developed an elaborate system to ensure the fairness of the process and the validity of the votes. The visible outcome of this effort was the voter identification card, a picture "ID" that is now widely used throughout the country. The polling stations maintained lists of the names, addresses, and pictures of all registered voters in the district. Voters were fingerprinted prior to casting their ballot in private voting booths. Aside from their utility in ensuring a fair election, these "modern" measures helped convince the populace of the seriousness of the electoral process. They also reinforced the notion that the practice of democracy requires the individualization of the voter, thereby undermining more collective forms of politics, such as those practiced by Mexico's *profundo* (see below).

As a result of the efforts of the IFE, the election was also competitive for the first time in Mexico's history. As a consequence, the candidates of the two major parties cautiously staked out the center of

the political spectrum, mirroring the Hotelling-like process (Downs, 1957) by which US candidates move to the imagined majority while hoping to capture voters to their left or right. As a result, there were few real agendas or ideas expressed by either of the candidates, both of whom promised a better economy, the end of corruption, and efforts to alleviate poverty, extend social welfare, and improve infrastructure. Instead, the candidates were distinguished largely on the basis of what they could not possibly deliver. For Labastida, this was English-language instruction and computers in every schoolhouse in the country; for Fox it was an open border across which both US and Mexican citizens could freely move. IFE changes to campaign finance reinforced the centrist character of the campaign: in the 2000 Mexican election, political parties received government funds for campaigning based on their past performance in state and local elections. These changes drew the major party platforms towards the center, so as to secure sufficient monies for future elections.⁴

Second, the campaigns of both candidates were heavily invested with US-style forms of electioneering. Like the Zapatista rebellion in 1994, the 2000 election *was* televised. All major parties spent millions on advertising, and each had elaborate websites outlining their campaign promises. In concert with the media campaign, for the first time in its history the PRI looked outside of its traditional machinery for help in securing a presidential win. Early in his campaign, Labastida secured the assistance of hired guns from the US, most notably electioneering mercenary James Carville, architect of Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign against George Bush. Meanwhile, Vicente Fox eschewed the PAN's own machinery in his search for a campaign manager, relying instead on a headhunting firm's recommendation for his selection. The selection of Carville had a predictable, American-style, effect: Labastida was counseled to use his wife, an expert in Mayan history, to enhance his lackluster image with both women and campesinos. However, Carville's quiet demotion from campaign insider to consultant in the months before the election illustrates the limits of this approach. Replacing him were several of the PRI's old guard, brought in to mobilize the rural vote, long the party's most loyal constituency but that least likely to be understood by American consultants.

This was also the first Mexican election significantly driven by polls, both domestic and foreign. The polls were closely watched, even though their sample design, relying on telephone questionnaires, necessarily overlooked the 90% of the population without phones. As a consequence, the polls tended to oversample the middle and upper

classes, placing Fox in the lead in some polls and in a dead heat with Labastida in others. The media, however, tended to report the polls as “scientific” and thus “representative,” the effect of which was to confuse support from the Mexican middle and upper class with that of a larger constituency. Labastida and Cárdenas countered with their own polls, but the importance of campesinos and the urban poor to both of their campaigns made polls an ineffective way to mobilize public perception on their behalf. This was especially the case for the Cárdenas campaign. It was recognized early on in the campaigning that the success of either Fox or Cárdenas would hinge on their ability to establish themselves as capable of beating the PRI. With the bias built into the polling process, Fox was better positioned to define himself a potential winner than was Cárdenas, and the latter’s campaign failed to generate much enthusiasm. When considered in this context, the Fox victory can be read less as a widespread endorsement of his pro-business politics than as a protest vote thrown behind the most likely winner. As Mexican political scientist Javier Hurtado succinctly noted, “The fact is that the PAN established itself as the party of change, which removes the [importance of its] conservative element. People did not vote for Fox for his ideology.”

Third, this was the first campaign in which US-style identity politics played a significant role. Mexican candidates have always courted *el pueblo* (the people), and—in more complicated ways—the working class and campesinos. In this election, however, voter segmentation took on new forms, with the votes of women, the youth, the disabled, and the elderly openly courted in advertisements and campaign rallies. Though the campaigns failed to generate a Mexican counterpart to the US “soccer mom” or “Generation X” voter, both candidates made strong appeals to women and youth, and for good reason: the media estimated that either category alone would constitute one half of the voting populace. Migrants to the US formed another voter category. All three candidates campaigned in border towns in the US. The better-financed PRI even distributed phone cards to migrants, asking them to call home and urge a Labastida vote.

The overall effect of this segmentation process was the creation of new, “modernized” divisions within Mexican society, divisions that largely mimicked US identity categories, ones based on the presumption of individuality and the subsequent grouping of people into sociodemographic categories. These new forms of voter segmentation are aspatial and rely on more abstract categories, such as “women” or “the elderly,” whose members can be targeted in nationwide advertising campaigns. Undermined in this new style of campaigning

are historical, spatially cohesive collectives such as rural communities and urban barrios that constitute the basis of Mexico *profundo's* social organization. The PRI historically recognized these spatial collectives and took advantage of them by promising development targeted specifically at these communities. While many indigenous activists were suspicious or even adamantly opposed to the PRI regime, they also view the new model of politics as dangerous, because the entry of several political parties into communities can cause social divisions within tightly knit systems built on collective decisionmaking. At another scale, these processes work to limit the political pressure that community-based social organization can put on state and federal governments in an effort to meet collectively defined needs.

Fourth and finally, there was the less tangible but no less significant imaginary behind a “clean and fair” election. The PRI mimicked US party politics by holding a primary for the first time in its history. Though largely symbolic—there was never real doubt that Labastida would be the PRI candidate—the PRI proffered the event to illustrate, at least rhetorically, its claim to “play fair,” dubbing itself “The New PRI.”⁵ President Zedillo guaranteed the Mexican people and the international community that the country would achieve true democracy with the election, and the domestic and international press picked up on the promise, with mainstream commentators across the world eliding the complexity of “democracy,” equating it in US style with electoral fairness. As one headline put it, Fox “Ushers in New Era of Democracy.” Not atypical were the heady proclamations of Mexican pundit José Antonio O’Farrill Avila, writing in the English-language paper *The News* the day after the election:

... we Mexicans experienced passionately, but also soberly [alcohol sales were suspended two days before the vote], a day of complete and authentic democracy.... Thanks to the new IT [information technologies]..., the world is already attesting that we Mexicans have built, and are experiencing in passion and soberness, a full and authentic democracy.... There’s a general belief that the consolidation of democracy has been one of the greatest and most valuable victories in our history, and is today based on one of the world’s most comprehensive and effective electoral systems ...

At stake in this discursive conflation was the symbolic integration of the country with the US and Canada through the NAFTA accords. Indeed, the successful selling of this image was so consolidated that

the Mexican government entered into its own free trade agreement with the European Union on the day of the election.⁶

Democracy, *Profundo* Style

Our claim that the Mexican election was Americanized is not meant to discount the importance of “free and fair” elections; as Marcos put it, they can be an acceptable “battleground” for politics. The problem, however, is that in attempting to imitate the West, Mexico’s imaginary fails to address the systemic problems experienced by *profundo* after five hundred years of colonialism, imperialism, and—more recently—neoliberalism. The election’s “one person, one vote” model is based on an individualistic conception of the political process, and is largely at odds with the more collective model of politics practiced by Mexico’s *profundo* population.

In Mexico *profundo*, access to political power is gained over a lifetime, through service to the community. Such service is organized into a hierarchy of political positions known as *cargos*. Entry-level *cargos* are usually responsible for basic maintenance work, such as cleaning public areas, while higher-level *cargos* are expected to organize and fund the village fiesta. As a person moves through the *cargo* system, his service, measured in time and commitment to achieving the collective’s goals, contributes to his authority in the village or pueblo. This participation, as Bonfil notes, “presupposes the convergence of individual will and conduct toward joint goals. Such a convergence can be achieved only if individuals share common aspirations and values” (1996:36). This commitment to the collective also underpins communal property rights and limitations on private landholding in rural villages, and in part accounts for the absence of great disparities of wealth in indigenous communities. This is not to romanticize indigenous cultures or, especially, the gendered politics of the *cargo* system, in which men are usually the only formal participants (see Mallon, 1995:chapter 3). However, the fierce adherence to this traditional system—based on civic, religious, and moral duty as well as patriarchy and generational status—must itself be understood as a form of politics, one that is resistant to change precisely because the alternative is to Westernize political practices.

Without a campaign to develop the *profundo*’s systems of democracy, ones that are based on volunteerism and individual contribution to the collective, the recent Mexican election has only further solidified the imaginary’s grip on the country. With the world watching closely, and with mainstream Mexico not willing to disappoint, the country held its

first clean presidential election. Yet on the many counts described above the election was “imported” from the US as much as it originated within Mexico. Consistent with his “poor imitation” model of Mexico’s imaginary, Bonfil writes:

In the imaginary Mexico, the democratic formalities developed in the West as a result of the French revolution and the US constitution have replaced the true and profound meaning of democracy. The attempt is to impose a foreign model as the only legitimate form of participation in the political life of the country. This is a leveling mechanism, which ignores the methods and criteria through which one accedes to power and through which authority is legitimated in the real life of local groups throughout the country. The exercise of electoral rights, as established in the imaginary Mexico, implies participation in a specific political culture that is foreign to the real political culture of the majority. The conceptions of authority and representativeness, the criteria and mechanisms for designating who should occupy posts in the structure of power, the networks of social organization that enter into play in these processes, the language codes and the intellectual and emotional motivation for participation, all are different in the Mexican Constitution and in the reality of the *México profundo*. (1996:127)

When considered in this context, the heady proclamations regarding the groundbreaking nature of the election must be reconsidered. Its cleanliness does make for a watershed event in Mexican political history—but only within the imaginary Mexico that framed the form of change. For Mexico *profundo*, the 2000 election is easily read as the most recent development in a long process in which their needs and plans are displaced by those of a Mexico imagined.

In considering yet again how to sustain their communities largely outside of the ever-changing terrain of an unfinished imaginary, Mexico’s *profundo* will continue to look beyond the electoral sphere, and it is here that we can discern new opportunities for Mexico’s *profundo* communities. Paradoxically, notwithstanding our criticisms developed above, these opportunities can be glimpsed from the election’s outcome, particularly the loss of power associated with the presidency. PRI presidents have long enjoyed centralized power: they served as the head of the party, circumvented constitutional controls, and dispersed rewards and levied punishments at their will. With the fall of the PRI in this election, the government is no longer equivalent

to the party. Relatively speaking, this puts more power in the hands of governors, mayors, and other local officials at the *municipio* level. No longer subjugated by the top-down power structure, activists may find new pressure points in this shifting balance. When coupled with the dismantling of the PRI's machinery at the local level, Mexico's *profundo* communities may be better positioned to resurrect or reinvent their cultural and political practices.

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Endnotes

¹ This and subsequent quotes and data pertaining to the election were obtained from several newspapers published in Mexico in the period before and after the July 2 vote. In particular, we relied on the English language newspaper, *The News*, published in Mexico City, on *La Jornada*, also published in Mexico City, and on *Noticias*, published in Oaxaca. We have elected not to cite these sources individually, for the quotes and data we use were widely reported throughout the country. All three of this paper's authors lived in Oaxaca in the month leading up to the election.

² Vargas made his televised comment at a conference held in Mexico City in September 1990. He left the country the following day.

³ That the elections were called on the night of the vote represents another first for Mexico and demonstrates the new role of information technology in the country's electoral process. It typically takes weeks for the PRI to "count" their votes. As goes one (now outdated) joke about Mexican elections:

American: "Our system is the best in the world. Ten minutes after the polls close we know who won."

Mexican: "Our system is better. We know who has won a half a year before the election."

⁴ In a charge reminiscent of those leveled against Al Gore in the 1996 US election, the PRI accused Fox of having laundered foreign monies into his campaign. The IFE is investigating.

⁵ This attribute was quietly dropped later in the campaign when it became clear that its only value was to provide endless jokes about the party.

⁶ The Italian government wanted to postpone the agreement until after the election was certified by the IFE and international observers.

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