

CITIZENS, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE

For many years Mexican citizens have interacted with their government through an informal web of relationships defined by patron-clientelism. Because the camarillas are so interwoven into the fabric of Mexican politics, most people have had at least some contact with the government during their lifetimes. However, interactions between citizens and government through clientelism generally have meant that the government has had the upper hand through its ability to determine which interests to respond to and which to ignore. The role of citizens in the Mexican political system is changing as political parties have become competitive and democracy seems to be taking root, yet the old habits of favor-swapping are engrained in the political culture.

CLEAVAGES

Cleavages that have the most direct impact on the political system are social class, urban v. rural, mestizo v. Amerindian, and north v. south. These cleavages are often **crosscutting**, with different divisions emerging

as the issues change, but in recent years they have often **coincided** (see p. 23) as urban, middle-class mestizos from the north have found themselves at odds with rural, poor Amerindians from the 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.
- **Social class** – Mexico’s Gini coefficient is .46 (2008 estimate), which means that economic inequality is high. In 2002 the poorest 10% of the population earned about 1.6% of Mexico’s income while the wealthiest 10 percent earned 35.6%. This economic divide translates into higher infant mortality rates, lower levels of education, and shorter life expectancies among the poor. In very recent years Mexico’s middle class has been growing, even in poorer sections of the country. Some are from the informal economy (businesses not registered with the government), and others from new industries or service businesses. Middle and upper class people are more likely to support PAN, and are more likely to vote than the poor, especially as PRI-style patron-client ties unwind.
- **Mestizo v. Amerindian** – The main ethnic cleavage in Mexico is between mestizo (a blend of European and Amerindian) and Amerindian. Only about 10% of Mexicans actually speak an indigenous language, but as many as 30% think of themselves as Amerindian. Amerindians are more likely to live in marginalized rural areas and to live in poverty. This cleavage tends to define social class, with most of Mexico’s wealth in the hands of mestizos.
- **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 many are involved in 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. A typical adult in the south has only six years of schooling, as compared to 8.1 years on average 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.

One recent change worth noting is that the incomes of the poorest half of the population are growing faster than the average. Poverty levels as defined by the government have fallen, and income distribution is becoming less unequal. For example, Mexico’s Gini coefficient has dropped from more the .54 in 2002 to .46 in 2008. If significant numbers of the poor begin making enough money to move them into the middle class, cleavages that define political behavior will certainly be affected. Likewise, if job opportunities in the formal sector (businesses recognized by the government) spread into new regions of the country as the economy grows, regional and ethnic divisions may also change.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation in Mexico has been characterized by revolution and protest, but until recently, Mexican citizens were generally subjects under authoritarian rule by the political elite. Citizens sometimes benefited

from the elaborate patronage system, but legitimate channels to policymakers were few. Today, citizens participate through increasingly legitimate, regular elections.

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 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 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-clientelism 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. Until the election of 2000, within PRI most positions on the president's cabinet were filled either by supporters or by heads of other camarillas that the president wanted to appease. Peasants in a camarilla received 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. However, vestiges of the old patron-client system were at work in the controversy surrounding the 2006 presidential election, with the losing candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador accusing the winning candidate's PAN party of election fraud. Polls indicate that between a quarter and a third of voters believed Obrador, since decades of one-party rule had sustained fraudulence under the patron-client system. As a result, many Mexicans still deeply distrust government officials and institutions.

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 through **co-optation**. 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 expanded 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 live in appalling conditions with little hope for the future. President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) made some efforts to incorporate the Zapatistas into the political system, but the group still has not formally called off its rebellion. However, the federal government currently supplies electricity and water to the villages the Zapatistas still control, a measure that may have helped to quiet the movement.

A major protest erupted in 2006 in Oaxaca, a neighboring state to Chiapas in the south. The unrest began as a teachers' strike in the state capital, but when local police tried to break it up, other activists joined in, the police lost control, and the demonstrations went on for months. The protests focused on Ulises Ruiz, the governor of Oaxaca State, one of the few PRI candidates to win gubernatorial elections in 2004. Activist

groups demanded his resignation, claiming that his election was fraudulent and criticizing Ruiz for ruling with an iron hand. Eventually President Vicente Fox sent a national police force to Oaxaca to shut down the demonstrations, but activists vowed to continue their struggle to remove Ruiz from office. Since Fox' action took place during his last month in office, he left it to his successor, Felipe Calderón, to deal with the unruly state.

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 turnout was probably at its height in 1994, when about 78% of all eligible citizens actually voted. This is up from 49% in 1988, although any comparisons before 1988 have to be considered in light of corruption, either through fraudulent voting or simply the announcement from PRI of inflated voter participation rates. Voter rates have declined since 1994, but a respectable 64% of those eligible actually voted in the election of 2000, and 60% in the election of 2006.

Some factors that appeared to influence voter behavior in the presidential election of 2006 were:

- **Region** – Regional differences were quite dramatic, with 47% of the voters in the north choosing PAN candidate Felipe Calderón, 27% choosing PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo, and 24% selecting Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. In contrast, 40% of voters in the south selected Obrador, 29% chose Calderón, and 27% chose Madrazo. Obrador also picked up many votes (44%) in the central part of the country around Mexico City, where he served as mayor before running for president.
- **Education** – The higher the amount of education, the more likely voters were to vote for the PAN candidate Felipe Calderón, with about 42% of all voters with college educations voting for Calderón. However, PRD on the left had significant support, with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador garnering 38%. In contrast, only 14% of those with university educations voted for Roberto Madrazo (the PRI candidate).
- **Income** – Income also made a difference, with 50% of upper income voters choosing PAN's Calderón, compared to 30% for Obrador, and 14% for Madrazo.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite the fact that PRI formed an umbrella party over elites in the years that it ruled, Mexico has always had a surprising number of groups who have refused to cooperate. These groups have formed the basis for a lively civil society in Mexico, which also has provided an atmosphere where public protests have been acceptable. PRI practiced **state corporatism**, with the state mediating among different groups to ensure that no one group successfully challenged the government. PRI formally divided interest groups into three sectors: labor, peasants, and the middle class ("popular"), with each dominated by PRI-controlled groups. However, The Confederation of Employers of the Mexican Republic (a labor group) was an autonomous group that vocally and publicly criticized the government.

PRI's downfall started in civil society with discontented businessmen who were not incorporated into the government's system. This group was behind the formation of PAN in 1939, and though the party did not successfully challenge PRI for many years, PAN's 2000 presidential candidate – Vicente Fox – emerged to successfully challenge PRI partly because he had the backing of powerful business interests. With the narrow PAN victory in 2006, business interests again benefitted, so PRI's old state corporatism clearly has been broken up. What will emerge in its place is now the question – state corporatism, neo-corporatism (where interests, not the government controls), or pluralism (independent interests have input, but don't control).