A product of post-revolutionary Mexico's social and political chaos, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was created in 1929 to help control regional strongmen and provide structure where none existed. A secondary goal was to help build democracy.

Having long ago provided social and political order, the PRI also succeeded in creating a political dictatorship that allowed it to reign over Mexico the past 71 years. In spite of resistance to change within the PRI, the Mexican people demonstrated with a vengeance last Sunday that they were tired of waiting for the PRI to bring democracy on its own terms.

As electoral observers stationed in the central state of Queretaro (three hours north of Mexico City) we traveled through four counties in Queretaro, reviewing an electoral process Mexico has waited for since independence from Spain in 1810.

Calm, quiet, but with a definite sense of determination, Queretanos throughout the state voted with their fellow citizens throughout Mexico to change the structure of power. To be sure, the PRI did win the popular vote in 10 of Mexico's 32 states, but these were generally the smallest and most impoverished states in Mexico. National results, however, brought to light several interesting observations for Mexico.

In particular, while the PRI lost the two primary competing parties—the PAN (the party of president-elect Vicente Fox) and the PRD—in 10 states, the parties' combined vote totals left the PRI with minorities in just two of 32 states. Similarly, it is interesting to note that the PRI did not win a majority in either the house or senate (although the PRI will still control the senate because six-year terms for many PRI senators did not come up this year). This means that for the first time, the PRI will literally be battling for its political existence.

One of the primary reasons for this is that these were the first non-negotiated, non-manipulated, and non-boycotted elections in post-revolutionary Mexican history. That is to say, for the first time there was a strong sense of confidence the PRI was not negotiating PAN victories, not manipulating voting booths, nor forcing citizens to boycott because of disgust over anticipated voter fraud.

One of the primary reasons for this is that in the past, votes were monitored by the federal government and its appointees, a process always dominated by the PRI. In 1990, after massive voter fraud in the 1988 presidential elections, the Federal Elections Institute (IFE, its Spanish acronym) was created. An independent institution, Mexico's president and congress were in charge of the appointee process. In 1996, several laws surrounding IFE were changed, the most important being the removal of Mexico's president from the selection process of IFE's director.

When the PRI lost the majority in Mexico's congress in 1994, the stage was set for PAN to be made up of citizens nominated by a multi-party congress. In turn, by 1996, IFE became independent from the executive branch and, by definition, from the PRI. The only question remaining was whether the PRI still controlled enough political capital in other institutions to manipulate the vote in 2000.

This concern was not lost on the voting sites we visited. With each site hand counting ballots after voting, we visited each site then reported results to local districts, which in turn sent the count to state and federal election offices—a key concern of site coordinators was whether the PRI would let the vote stand.

As observers, this was a difficult question as we were not entirely sure of either. However, we were sure of one thing: The tally counts we were watching were extraordinary. For example, in one urban voting site, the PRI garnered only 10 percent, the PAN 74 percent. In one rural community, a supposed PRI stronghold, observers looked at each other in disbelief as ballots after ballots went to the PAN. At this particular site, one of the representatives from the PAN was obviously giddy, but he too had a cautious look of excitement. The primary question, obvious by the look on his face, was made apparent when he asked, "Will they respect the vote?"

In the end, the PRI had to respect the will of the people because the people, unlike the PRI, had changed at all levels. Today, having completed its historic mission, the PRI, like the Berlin Wall, now stands out as a fallen remnant of Mexico's past. As a result, the question now is whether Vicente Fox and the PAN can fill a vacuum that the people obviously want filled.

Fortunately, the vote last Sunday demonstrated Mexico has moved beyond the politics of the past and, perhaps just as significantly, is capable of rising to the challenge of the 21st century with Fox.

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