

Focus Questions

In what ways is economic integration with the rest of the world affecting political and social changes in Mexico? Which groups of people is it hurting most? Helping most?

What challenges does the process of globalization pose to Mexicans' strong sense of national identity?

How successful has Mexico been in confronting the legacy of authoritarian rule? To what extent have recent administrations been able to make the government more accountable and transparent?

Does Mexico offer lessons for other countries moving from authoritarian forms of governance to more democratic ones? What features of the Mexican experience might other countries usefully follow? What features are so peculiar to Mexico that they offer little guidance to the rest of the world?

Article 69 of the Constitution of 1917, the executive branch delivers a report on the state of the nation and the actions of the administration to the Mexican congress at the opening of its annual session. For decades, this date was known informally as the “Day of the President,” as the ritual surrounding the address highlighted the prestige and authority of the chief executive. The president would don his ceremonial red, white, and green sash before traveling to the legislative chambers from the National Palace, the symbolic seat of power in Mexico since the days of the Spanish viceroys. While delivering his *informe* (report), the president could count on a respectful hearing from an attentive audience of deputies and senators who were overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of his own party. Though the spectacle of the *informe* during the heyday of PRI dominance excluded dissenting voices, it projected an image of a strong, stable political system. Even in 1982, when President José López Portillo broke into tears while reporting on his failure to avert a debt crisis that sent the country into an economic tailspin, legislators dutifully applauded.

That deference to the president began to break down in 1988, however. After a contentious presidential election marred by allegations of fraud, a legislator who had broken away from the PRI to support opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas dared to interrupt President Miguel de la Madrid's September 1 speech. More recently, after members of the PRD charged that Felipe Calderón's election in 2006 was illegitimate, outgoing President Vicente Fox was prevented from even reaching the rostrum when he arrived to give his address on September 1 of that year. He complied with his constitutional mandate by submitting a printed copy of his report and then left the building without delivering his speech. In 2007, President Felipe Calderón likewise appeared before a deeply divided Congress only long enough to hand over a printed version of his *informe*, and new rules introduced in 2008 eliminated the requirement that the president deliver his report in person. Since then, the annual report of the executive branch has been transmitted by a government minister to the legislature, where representatives of all the parties represented in Congress then deliver a response. Thus, the number of voices heard on important national issues has increased, though to many the fact that the president is no longer able to appear before Congress suggests that the capacity of the state has been diminished.

Political Challenges and Changing Agendas

As Mexicans adjust and adapt to the dramatic political transition of recent years, they are conscious that their nation faces many challenges, and they are struggling to build a political system that will be both democratic and effective. They are calling upon the state to be open about abuses of authority in the past and to protect citizens from such abuses in the future. They seek to address long-standing inequalities in Mexican society, in part by ensuring that women and ethnic minorities have access to economic opportunities and social services. They also hope to preserve Mexican identity while, at the same time, realizing the economic benefits of integration into global networks.

Mexico today provides a testing ground for the democratic idea in a state with a long history of authoritarian institutions. The democratic ideas of citizen rights to free speech and assembly, free and fair elections, and responsive government are major reasons that the power of the PRI came under so much attack beginning in the 1980s. As part of its commitment to delivering a sharp change from the practices of the past, the administration of Vicente Fox (2000–2006) pledged to make government more transparent and to improve the state of human rights in Mexico. In the past, the government had been able to limit knowledge of its repressive actions, use

the court system to maintain the political peace, and intimidate those who objected to its actions. Fox appointed human rights activists to his cabinet and ordered that secret police and military files be opened to public scrutiny. He instructed government ministries to supply more information about their activities and about the rights that citizens have to various kinds of services. Fox also invited the United Nations to open a human rights office in Mexico. He encouraged the ratification of the Inter-American Convention on Enforced Disappearance of Persons. The government also sought to protect the rights of Mexicans abroad, and the United States and Mexico established a working group to improve human rights conditions for migrants.

The results of these actions have been dramatic. For the first time, Mexicans learned of cases of hundreds of people who had “disappeared” as a result of police and military actions. In addition, citizens have come forward to announce other disappearances, ones they were unwilling to report earlier because they feared reprisals. In 2002, former president Luis Echeverría was brought before prosecutors and questioned about government actions against political dissent in 1968 and 1971, a kind of accountability unheard of in the past. The National Human Rights Commission has been active in efforts to hold government officials accountable and to protect citizens nationally and abroad from repetitions of the abuses of the past.

Yet challenges to human rights accountability remain. Opening up files and setting up systems for prosecuting abusers needs to be followed by actions to impose penalties on abusers. The Mexican judicial system is weak and has little experience in human rights cases. In addition, action on reports of disappearances, torture, and imprisonment has been slowed by disagreement about civil and military jurisdictions. In a revelation that was embarrassing to the government, Amnesty International reported several cases of disappearances that occurred after Fox assumed leadership of the country. There were also reports of arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial executions. In October 2001, Digna Ochoa, a prominent human rights lawyer, was shot. In the aftermath of this assassination, the government was accused of not doing enough to protect her, even when it was widely known that she had been targeted by those opposed to her work. Human rights activists claimed that police and military personnel, in particular, still had impunity from the laws, and human rights concerns have grown as the military has taken a more direct role in law enforcement in the context of the Calderón administration's effort to dismantle drug trafficking organizations. Human rights advocates point to recent alleged abuses by members of the armed forces and call for greater accountability from an institution that is still shielded from much civilian scrutiny. Although human rights are much more likely to be protected than in the past, the government still has a long way to go in safeguarding the rights of indigenous people, political dissidents, migrants, gays and lesbians, and poor people whose ability to use the judicial system is limited by poverty and lack of information.

Currently, Mexico is struggling with opening up its political institutions to become more democratic. However, efforts to bring about greater transparency in the Mexican political system often run up against obstacles. These setbacks have left some Mexicans skeptical of claims that a truly open, democratic political culture is being forged.

Mexico is also confronting major challenges in adapting newly democratic institutions to reflect ethnic and religious diversity and to provide equity for women in economic and political affairs. The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of more organized and politically independent ethnic groups demanding justice and equality from government. These groups claim that they have suffered for nearly 500 years and that they are no longer willing to accept poverty and marginality as their lot. The Roman Catholic Church, still the largest organized religion in the country, is

losing members to Protestant sects that appeal particularly to the everyday concerns of poor Mexicans. Women, who make up 37 percent of the formal labor force and 42 percent of professional and technical workers, are becoming more organized, but they still have a long way to go before their wages equal those of men or they have equal voice in political and economic decisions.

Another significant challenge for Mexico today is reconciling its strong sense of national identity with the strains placed on a country's sovereignty by the process of global economic integration. Mexicans define themselves in part through a set of historical events, symbols, and myths that focus on the country's troubled relationship with the United States. The myths of the Revolution of 1910 emphasize the uniqueness of the country in terms of its opposition to the capitalists and militarists of the northern country. In the 1970s, Mexicans were encouraged to see themselves as leading Third World countries in arguing for enhanced bargaining positions in relation to the industrialized countries of the north. This view stands in strong contrast to more recent perspectives touting the benefits of an internationally oriented economy and the undeniable post-NAFTA reality of information, culture, money, and people flowing back and forth across borders.

The country's sense of national identity is also affected by international migration. Every year, large numbers of Mexicans enter the United States as workers. Many return to their towns and villages with new values and new views of the world. Many stay in the United States, where Hispanics have become the largest ethnic minority population in the country. Although they believe that Mexico is a better place to nurture strong family life and values, they are nevertheless strongly influenced by U.S. mass culture, including popular music, movies, television programs, fast food, and consumer goods.

The inability of the Mexican economy to create enough jobs pushes additional Mexicans to seek work in the United States, and the cash remittances that migrants abroad send home to their families and communities are now almost as important a source of income for Mexico as PEMEX's oil sales. However, the issues surrounding migration have become even more complex since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Hopes for a bilateral accord that would permit more Mexicans to enter and work in the United States legally evaporated after U.S. officials suddenly found themselves under greatly increased pressure to control the country's borders. Whether or not the U.S. government approves, the difference in wages between the United States and Mexico will persist for a long time, which implies that migration will also persist.

There is disagreement about how to respond to the economic challenges that Mexico faces. Much of the debate surrounds the question of what integration into a competitive international economy really means. For some, it represents the final abandonment of Mexico's sovereignty. For others, it is the basis on which future prosperity must be built. Those who are critical of the market-based, outward-oriented development strategy are concerned about its impact on workers, peasants, and national identities. They argue that the state has abandoned its responsibilities to protect the poor from shortcomings of the market and to provide for their basic needs. They believe that U.S. and Canadian investors have come to Mexico only to find low-wage labor for industrial empires located elsewhere, and they point out that many of those investors did not hesitate to abandon Mexico when the opportunity arose to move to even lower-wage countries such as China. They see little benefit in further industrial development based on importation of foreign-made parts, their assembly in Mexico, and their export to other markets. This kind of development, they argue, has been prevalent in the *maquiladoras*, or assembly industries, many of which are located along the U.S.–Mexico border. Those who

favor closer integration with Canada and the United States acknowledge that some foreign investment does not promote technological advances or move the work force into higher-paying and more skilled jobs. They emphasize, however, that most investment will occur because Mexico has a relatively well-educated population, the capacity to absorb modern technology, and a large internal market for industrial goods.

Inequality represents another daunting challenge for Mexican society. While elites enjoy the benefits of sumptuous lifestyles, education at the best U.S. universities for their children, and luxury travel throughout the world, large numbers of Mexicans remain ill-educated, poorly served with health care, and distant from the security of knowing that their basic needs for food, shelter, and employment will be met. As in the United States, some argue that the best solutions to these problems are economic growth and expanded employment. They believe that the achievement of prosperity through integration into the global economy will benefit everyone in the long run. For this to occur, however, they insist that education will have to be improved and made more appropriate for developing a well-prepared work force. They also believe that improved education will come about when local communities have more control over schools and curricula and when parents have more choice between public and private education for their children. From their perspective, the solution to poverty and injustice is fairly clear: more and better jobs and improved education.

For those critical of the development path on which Mexico embarked in the 1980s and 1990s, the problems of poverty and inequity are more complex. Solutions involve understanding the diverse causes of poverty, including not only lack of jobs and poor education but also exploitation, geographic isolation, and discriminatory laws and practices, as well as the disruptive impact of migration, urbanization, and the tensions of modern life. In the past, Mexicans looked to government for social welfare benefits, but their provision was deeply flawed by inefficiency and political manipulation. The government consistently used access to social services as a means to increase its political control and limit the capacity of citizens to demand equitable treatment. Thus, although many continue to believe that it is the responsibility of government to ensure that citizens are well educated, healthy, and able to make the most of their potential, the populace is deeply suspicious of the government's capacity to provide such conditions fairly and efficiently.

Mexican Politics in Comparative Perspective

Mexico faces many of the same challenges that beset other countries: creating equitable and effective democratic government, becoming integrated into a global economy, responding to complex social problems, and supporting increasing diversity without losing national identity. Indeed, these are precisely the challenges faced by the United States, as well as by India, Nigeria, Brazil, Germany, and others. The legacies of its past, the tensions of the present, and the innovations of the future will no doubt evolve in ways that continue to be uniquely Mexican.

Mexico represents a pivotal case of political and economic transition for the developing world. If it can successfully bridge the gap between its past and its future and move from centralization to effective local governance, from regional vulnerability to global interdependence, and from the control of the few to the participation of the many, it will set a model for other countries that face the same kind of challenges.

Summary

What will the future bring? How much will the pressures for change and the potential loss of national identity affect the nature of the political system? In 1980, few people could have foreseen the extensive economic policy reforms and pressures for democracy that Mexico would experience in the next three decades. Few would have predicted the defeat of the PRI in the elections of 2000 or the electoral outcome of 2006. In considering the future of the country, it is important to remember that Mexico has a long tradition of relatively strong institutions. It is not a country that will easily slip into sustained political instability. Despite real challenges faced as Mexico confronts criminal organizations and seeks to reform its police forces and judicial system, the country is not in danger of becoming a “failed state,” as some outside observers have been tempted to suggest. A tradition of constitutional government, a strong presidency, a political system that has incorporated a wide range of interests, little military involvement in politics, and a deep sense of national identity—these are among the factors that need to be considered in understanding the political consequences of democratization, economic integration, and greater social equality in Mexico.

Key Terms

<i>mestizo</i>	North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	green revolution
Amerindian	newly industrializing countries (NICs)	informal sector
indigenous groups	corporatist state	proportional representation (PR)
<i>maquiladoras</i>	civil society	<i>sexenio</i>
coup d'état	state capitalism	technocrats
anticlericalism	import substitution	parastatal
<i>ejidos</i>	industrialization (ISI)	accommodation
<i>ejidatarios</i>		
clientelism		

Suggested Readings

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Suggested Websites

Office of the President (in Spanish and English)
www.presidencia.gob.mx

Secretariat of Foreign Relations (in Spanish and English)
www.sre.gob.mx

Mexican Embassy to the United States
<http://embamex.sre.gob.mx/usa/>

Office of Mexican Affairs, U.S. Department of State
<http://www.state.gov/p/wha/ci/mx/>

The Mexico Project, National Security Archive
www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/mexico