

The 1976 presidential campaign

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Election campaigns as a means of acquainting the public with the programs and positions of a political group that aspires to reach power with the freely expressed support of a majority of citizens are concomitant to creation of the political party and party systems. Both emerged in the United States in the late eighteenth century and it is not accidental that the U.S. procedure—together with that of Western Europe—continues to be one of the most common points of reference when the electoral processes of other societies, to which they were introduced at a later date, are examined. Though the political procedures of these countries today approach the ideal model, few are free from imperfections. It could hardly be otherwise inasmuch as the model requires the conjunction of several elements rarely found together.

Ideally, for a liberal democratic electoral system to function it must have an attentive, well-informed and active public whose participation is completely free; but even more important, the options presented by political groups must be genuine. This means that the programs of political parties contending for the right to form a government must differ substantially from one another. Lastly, the losing group or groups must be respected and permitted to maintain some form of representation in legislative bodies so that they may act as a watchful conscience. As a minority, they should have a twofold role: to oversee the fulfillment of programs set forth during the election campaign and preserve their team of alternative leaders in case current political authorities should fail or the electorate change its preferences. Historically, these conditions have not been frequent in any country, and much less in Mexico.

Mexican political parties were born laboriously in the first half of the nineteenth century, but the country's colonial past did not provide the necessary social or cultural conditions for the emergence of a true electorate. Most Mexicans kept to the fringe of the great political debate and the decision as to who would occupy posts, to be filled presumably, and in principle, through general elections, was reached not at the polls but in armed battle.

The first party which tried to come directly before the electorate and the people in general with a government program constituting a real alternative to the one in force was the Anti-Reelection Party in the presidential campaign of 1910. As presidential candidate, Gustavo Madero undertook an extensive tour of the country, touching some of the major cities, in an effort to test what President Porfirio Díaz had stated in 1908: the Mexican people are ready to practice democracy. Reality soon showed that conditions for such liberal democracy did not exist, nor did they appear when the Revolution brought an entirely new governing group to power.

The Revolution gave the country a constitution which continued to accept the liberal democratic model as the vehicle through which the various political currents could express themselves and the peaceful transmission of power would be effected by taking into consideration their relative weight among the voters. Reality, however, shaped things differently, first because up to 1938 those who felt they had the capacity and right to guide the country's destiny insisted on the use of arms to attain—or at least attempt to attain—power, and later because the revolutionary group consolidated its preeminence through a party which though not the only party was the dominant one and therefore had come into being not for the purpose of contending in elections with other parties and programs, but to discipline and civilize the action of its members.

The first political campaign of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), with Ortiz Rubio as candidate, was not geared to beat the coalition headed by José Vasconcelos—which really never had the slightest chance of winning—but to present to public opinion an obscure general and engineer, recently arrived from a diplomatic post in Brazil, whose program could not have been more vague and confused, but whom Calles was determined to make president. According to official figures, the PNR candidate obtained 93.55 percent of the vote and his opponent, unquestionably Mexico's foremost intellectual, with an impressive record as Minister of Public Education, received a scant 5.32 percent.

But it was undoubtedly the 1933-1934 electoral campaign that became the model for later elections. PNR candidate General Lázaro Cárdenas toured not only the capitals of states and territories but small towns and villages as well. The opposition hardly went out into the country and its action was obstructed by local authorities. In his tour, Cárdenas set forth a government program which though still somewhat vague, contained such specific points as the need to speed up working class organization and land distribution, increase spending for education, modify the structure of the agrarian reform program, and others. Though better known than Ortiz Rubio, Cárdenas appeared for the first time before a great many local leaders and a majority of citizens; he listened to innumerable petitions, noted them, promised to resolve them, and above all, became aware of the countless problems besetting the country. Once in power, the experience, contacts and information thus acquired permitted him to adopt more rational decisions.

Other practices were consolidated in the course of this campaign: the carting of masses of people to demonstrations and the resulting absence of spontaneity, use of public funds to cover the expenses of such extensive touring, et cetera. Cárdenas' victory over his opponents, Villarreal, Tejeda and Laborde, was even more spectacular than that obtained by the PNR in the previous election; the official count gave him

98.19 percent of the vote. The opposition as such simply did not exist; no one competed with Cárdenas for power.

Certain changes in this pattern were made in subsequent campaigns; the opposition was awarded greater importance, especially when it began to be represented by parties linked less to personalities than to programs, as in the case of Acción Nacional (until then, the only political group with these characteristics was the Communist Party). Meetings of the dominant party's candidate with professional groups to hear out special problems and propose more or less specific, technical solutions were institutionalized with Alemán and lastly, the party desisted from repeating the Six-Year Plan of 1933, which Calles imposed on Cárdenas, and settled for a more modest, indeterminate program which would not commit the candidate in advance.

In all essentials, the current presidential campaign follows the established pattern. However, there are variations which merit special notice, primarily the complete absence of recognized opposition to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) candidate. Of the three minority parties granted legal registry by the Ministry of the Interior, two easily decided to back the PRI candidate, José López Portillo, who appeared at the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) and the Partido Auténtico de la Revolución Mexicana (PARM) conventions to receive and accept their support. The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), long established as the dominant party's most serious opponent, abstained from presenting any presidential candidate. The decision was not the outcome of a previously planned strategy, but the result of a profound division between the party's national leadership and a large group of rank-and-file members working for the candidacy of Pablo Emilio Madero. Though Madero supporters won 72 percent of the delegates' vote at the PAN convention, the minority refused to give way and Madero failed to obtain the 80 percent vote required by the party's statutes. The PAN had received 13.6 percent of the vote in the 1970 elections and it is possible that it would have maintained or surpassed this percentage in 1976. The internal crisis prevented it from presenting its own candidate, or backing any other, for the first time since the 1952 campaign.

Thus, López Portillo found no opponent other than Valentín Campa, postulated by the Mexican Communist Party, to which, however, the Ministry of the Interior refused registration. The result is that there will be no electoral opposition at presidential level in the 1976 campaign; Mexican voters will participate in a plebiscite, not an election, and those not disposed to back the PRI candidate will have no choice except to abstain—eight million out of 22 million registered voters abstained in 1970— or nullify their vote.

The legally registered opposition will function only in certain districts where one or more of the three parties present candidates for deputy or senator. But even here there will be problems; after the national leadership of the

PPS accepted defeat at the hands of the PRI in the November 9 elections for governor of Nayarit, local PPS leaders—headed by Alejandro Gascón Mercado, the loser—, together with others in Veracruz and the Federal District, rebelled against Secretary General Cruickshank García, taking issue with his acceptance to run for senator from Oaxaca on a joint PPS-PRI ticket. The outcome was that several PPS candidates for legislative posts withdrew from the campaign. The Partido Popular Socialista, never very strong—it obtained barely 1.35 percent of the vote in 1970—, now faces, as does the PAN, the possibility of a disastrous split. If under these conditions the institutional opposition still manages to retain some voting power, it is in spite of itself and owes more to the dissatisfaction of certain sectors, especially urban, with predominance of the PRI than to its own programs and actions.

A second peculiarity of this campaign, in contrast to those immediately previous, is that the President has not abandoned the political foreground to the official candidate. In the past, from the very moment the various sectors of the PRI came out for a given candidate, the incumbent President reduced his initiatives, or consulted them with the candidate, gradually giving way so that the new man could occupy the headlines in mass communications media. This pattern was followed when Echeverría was nominated PRI candidate. In the present situation, however, the President has insisted on exercising his mandate fully up to the last minute, thereby indicating that the gradual transfer of power characterizing past campaigns will not take place this time.

As a result, the candidate has found few opportunities to adopt a position independent of the President's; further, on several occasions when he has had to express an opinion on a current problem, he simply followed the line established by Echeverría. This is the case of his declarations on the public conflict between the Chief Executive and certain members of the Monterrey business group; further, the terms in which both condemned the Chipinque meeting were practically identical, and so forth.

During his entire campaign, López Portillo has simply backed Echeverría's policies and implicitly made them his own; he has even suggested that his Administration would make use of Echeverría's experience through some form of collaboration.

Very few of the PRI's candidates for deputy and senator, who will compose the Congress with which the future President will have to work, are identified or connected with López Portillo. The same conclusion is reached when observing the change of guard in the PRI at the commencement of the campaign: now heading the party are two former ministers of state closely tied to the President, who were, moreover, close competitors for the presidential nomination. This does not necessarily mean that the independence and freedom of action of the new governing group will be impaired; the incoming President will have sufficient resources at his disposal to prevent this from happening. It

simply means that at this late date, the process of transferring power has barely begun and the López Portillo team is far less visible than were those formed in other presidential campaigns.

From the time of Miguel Alemán's round table meetings with certain groups of specialists, PRI presidential candidates have sought contact with, and the support of, professional groups; however, the importance the present candidate has awarded this sector is exceptional. The Institute of Political, Economic and Social Studies (IEPES), set up by the PRI, has called numerous meetings of experts and professionals to provide the candidate with an assessment of conditions in their particular fields and propose the most diverse solutions to what appears to be an unending accumulation of problems. The members of the IEPES Advisory Council—two dozen "notables" in various disciplines, especially the social sciences—and their colleagues, undertook to invite a great many professionals to set forth, both verbally and in writing, their points of view on such varied matters as dairy cattle, higher education, small and medium-sized industry, sea ports and maritime transportation, aquiculture, energy, international relations, communications, urban development, et cetera. Many of these expositors also met with the candidate—for similar reasons—at meetings where the basic plans of each state were put forth, and a few continued to encounter him at breakfasts given at the homes of certain prominent professionals and intellectuals, where matters relating to their specialties were again discussed. The conspicuous importance given these sessions—43 national meetings, 64 local meetings and 27 quasi-private meetings attended by 17 000 professionals at which 4,650 papers were presented—led certain observers to speculate on the predominantly technocratic nature of the campaign, which could be the future Administration's distinctive trademark, especially since López Portillo's own training and career took place not in the back rooms of the party but in government offices; the former Minister of Finance had never held an elective post before his nomination as presidential candidate and his closest collaborators are similarly placed. The technocratic image created was so strong that at the close of his campaign the candidate was obliged to reject publicly the idea that he proposes to head a government of technocrats, though he said he would not fail to use advanced methods to resolve social problems, but always within the framework of the country's laws rather than the rationality of technique.

The PRI presidential candidate conducted an intensive campaign. He accepted the nomination on October 5, 1975 at Mexico City's Palacio de los Deportes and on the ninth was in the city of Querétaro ready to initiate the first phase of his tour. He covered the entire country, ending up in La Paz, Baja California on June 5. The candidate's schedule was exhausting: he worked an average 18 hours a day, covering 78,000 kilometers in 221 days; he visited 924 towns and cities, presided over 453 meetings, made 1,550 speeches, visited 310 private homes, and received over 132,000 petitions.

A huge staff of secretaries made thousands of telephone calls in his name and sent nine million pieces of correspondence requesting voters' support and their opinions. A great many youth brigades were employed during the tour to prepare receptions, of which there were 13,000. Several claques, such as those organized by the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC) and lottery ticket vendors, accompanied the candidate throughout the tour to enliven meetings. In contrast to the public appearances of the dominant party's candidate, accompanied by a great display of energy and resources, those of his only opponent went unnoticed. The campaigns organized by candidates for deputy and senator, in all parties, were perfunctory and dull, limited—with some exceptions—to propaganda painted on fences, throwaways using general slogans, and a few meetings.

The intensity of López Portillo's campaign cannot fail to contrast with its content. His slogan, "all of us are the solution", simply repeated in other words the theme of every Administration since Avila Camacho: national unity, the alliance of classes. Posters covering cities throughout the country contained equally vague ideas: "toward justice through freedom", et cetera. According to the candidate, the tour had served to place him in contact with real problems, but his thousand and a half speeches were far too meager in the exposition of possible solutions; it may be that he is reserving them for his government program, which will be made known one week before elections.

However, he appeared to find that two problems most urgently require solution: the need to provide education and employment for the enormous contingent of children and youth which each year exerts increasing pressure on educational institutions and the labor market. The root of both problems is to be found in the country's peculiar demographic structure, as a result of which half the population is under fifteen, and the possibility to modify this structure in the short term simply does not exist. If, then, this problem demands immediate and specific, though partial, solution, the ordinary citizen, or the specialized observer, was unable during the campaign to identify López Portillo with specific solutions to the specific problems that unceasingly beset the different social groups.

During the campaign, the candidate's publicity apparatus presented him as a man full of energy and sense of humor, conciliatory and, above all, optimistic. But optimism regarding his possibilities to resolve the many problems placed before him at formal meetings and in spontaneous petitions is founded on nothing more tangible than a profession of faith in the country's destiny. On various occasions he expressed the fear that promises long unfulfilled would make Mexico a nation of cynics; true, he avoided making promises, but his party and predecessors bequeathed him a responsibility from which he cannot abdicate, and the campaign's sweeping generalizations were hardly the best antidote for the majority's scepticism and the impatience of a minority. □