

Made in Mexico: Party Political Survival at the Local and National Level

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Abstract: During the Mexican protracted transition to democracy most of the analyses about the fate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) were pessimistic concerning its survival after democratization. Other studies pointed out that the Party's vast machinery, control of the corporatist organizations and majority of executive posts at local and municipal level will guarantee its political future and perhaps its comeback (Estevez et. al. 2006). According to the experiences of the third wave of democratization the PRI either should have collapse or reconstitute as the Communist Parties in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, none of these conditions have yet materialized. Rather, the PRI still remains a strong political force at the local and national level. This paper examines the characteristics of the PRI hegemonic rule period, the challenges it faced during the transition to democracy and the strategies it adopted for its political survival. Although, most of the literature attributes its survival to the Party's electoral strength at the local level, this paper argues that this claim is not enough and thus analyses the strategies taken by the party at the national level.

“... the dream of many political elites is to rule perpetually and to rule with consent: Politicians are just PRIstas [sic] by nature”.

Przeworski et al (2000: 26)¹

Introduction

For almost fifty years, scholars tried unsuccessfully to classify Mexico's political regime under the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Different experts used diverse labels to categorize the system such as civilian, inclusive, corporatist, hyper-presidential (Schedler 2000), single-party regime or semi-authoritarian. Nevertheless, those classifications never seemed to fit well with the complexities of Mexico's political system. For example, although the regime appeared to be federalist and pluralistic, in reality political mobilization was limited to the party's corporatist structure and the process of decision making was highly centralized in the figure of the president.

¹ Cited in Schedler (2002: 119).

Moreover, multiparty elections at all levels of government were held periodically,² but they were always won by the PRI. What is more, in contrast with its Latin American counterparts that used repression systematically, the regime only exerted repression after failing to co-opt its political dissidents. In sum, Mexico's under the rule of the PRI was observed as a benign authoritarian system.

Furthermore, even when Mexico's started its transition to democracy during the 1980s, it looked different from the rest of the countries of the third wave of democratization: "no collapse, no foundational elections, no big pacts, no constitutional assembly, and no alternation in power" (Schedler 2000: 6). In comparison with Southern Europe and South America, the object of the Mexican transition was different. That is, in the case of Mexico at the core of the four-player game between authoritarian incumbents and democratic opposition (Linz and Stepan 1996) there was not a change of regime (rupture), but a change of the electoral rules. In this sense, Mexico is an example of protracted transition to democracy through a sequence of electoral reforms.

Lately, it has been argued that Mexico's political system under the PRI was not as exceptional as perceived; rather it belonged to the electoral authoritarian kind (Linz 2000) which was not only extended in the past (Schedler 2000), but also is currently present in Africa and East Asia and it seems to be extending to some of the soviet post-communist republics³. Its main characteristic is the existence of a hegemonic-party

² Actually, since 1934 elections were held "with clockwise precision every six years, punctuating a dense calendar of regular legislative, gubernatorial, and municipal elections" (Schedler 2000: 6).

³ According to Magaloni (2006) other examples of electoral autocracies can be identified in Africa and East-Asia. Examples of still ruling hegemonic-party regimes are: Tanzanian Chama Cha Mapinduzi Party (CCM) that has ruled since 1962, as well as Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in power since 1980; Malaysia United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which has ruled since 1957; Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) ruling since 1959; the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) governing since 1967; Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) in power since 1978; Cameroon's People Democratic Movement

system⁴ for which elections are at the core of the regime's legitimacy. However, elections have restrictions upon party and candidate registration and take place under uncompetitive conditions, for example, the ruling party exercises a monopoly of the access to media and campaign funds or resorts to electoral fraud, use vote-buying and coercion (Schedler 2000).

All these characteristics were present during the seventy one years that the PRI ruled Mexico. Nonetheless, twelve years after committing fraud in the presidential elections of 1988, the PRI yield peacefully power to opposition in the figure of the National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox (Magaloni 2006). Nevertheless, against all predictions the party neither collapsed nor reconstituted (Estevez et al 2006). In fact, after Mexico's consolidation of democracy⁵ important sectors of Mexican society keep voting for the PRI, without the threat of violence or exercise of electoral fraud being the explanation for this. As a result of this support, the PRI is still the third political force at the national level and depending on the state the first or second, at the local level.

(CPDM) , which has ruled since 1966; the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), governing since 1976; and the Colorado Party in Paraguay, in power since 1976. Examples of defeated hegemonic-party systems are: Senegalese Socialist Party (PS), which ruled for forty years (1960-2000); Kenya African National Union (KANU) that lost power in 2002; and Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) that governed the country for nearly four decades. Other countries that are in considered electoral authoritarianism in the rise are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Ethiopia and Russia.

⁴ For the purpose of this paper we will use Magaloni's definition of hegemonic party autocracies: "as the system in which one political party remains in office uninterruptedly under semi-authoritarian conditions while holding regular multiparty elections. Unlike single-party systems, hegemonic-party systems allow opposition parties to challenge the incumbent part through multiparty elections" (Magaloni 2006: 32).

⁵ This paper follows Schedler (1998) definition of democratic consolidation "a regime with a low breakdown probability". In this vein, Mexico is a consolidated democracy. However, this opinion is inserted in the debate between scholars, which sustain that Mexico's is a democracy fully consolidated (Schedler 2000, Barraca 2004) and among others that consider it far from consolidated (Lawson 2000). This debate is part of a conceptual confusion between consolidation of democracy and quality of democracy, as maintained by Schedler (1998)"conceptualizing democratic consolidation as democratic deepening amounts to inviting a free-for-all".

The purpose of this paper is to examine the conditions that explain the survival of the party at the local and national level. Although, some theories have explained the survival of hegemonic party systems during their period of rule,⁶ few have examined the survival of those parties after democratic consolidation. In order to do so, we will build upon the work of Estevez et al (2006) and Magaloni (2006) to analyze the conditions that have allowed the PRI survival. Our hypothesis is that “old dogs can learn new tricks⁷” and by learning to play by the democratic rules of the game, the PRI has guaranteed its survival after democratization not only at the local, but also at the national level.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we will study the characteristics of the hegemonic rule of the PRI. Next, we will examine the challenges faced by the party in during the transition to democracy. Third, we will analyze the conditions for the survival of the party at the local level. Then, we will evaluate the strategies adopted by the party for its survival at the national level. Finally, we end the paper by providing some conclusions.

1. The PRI hegemonic rule

In order to examine the conditions for the survival of the party at the local and national level is necessary to understand the characteristics of the hegemonic rule period of the

⁶ For example, Sartori (1976) asserts that hegemonic party regimes survive because of their imposition against the will of the people; they sustain themselves through autocratic electoral institutions, formal barrier to entry and electoral fraud, which collectively make it impossible for the opposition to effectively challenge the regime. As we will see, in the case of Mexico some of these premises were valid but some not.

⁷ Cited in Schedler (2000)

PRI. In this section we will describe some of the features that characterized the PRI hegemonic-party system. The PRI was created by victorious warlords after the Mexican revolution in order to construct a new political order and to prevent violence among factions. The first to develop the idea of a political party that could embrace all revolutionary leaders, local bosses and existing political parties was President Plutarco Elías Calles. In 1929, he created the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), which was renamed in 1938 as Mexican Revolutionary Party (PMR) and finally as the PRI in 1946. From 1929 to 2000 the most important element of the PRI regime was its **stability**.

Furthermore, in its origins the party was designed as an elitist organization, but by the mid-1930s it was transformed into a party of the masses through an extensive corporatist institutional structure created by President Lázaro Cárdenas, in order to incorporate the peasant and workers into the party.⁸ In this sense, the PRI was constituted as a “multi-class and multi-sector coalition that [was] able to keep together a rather heterogeneous group of interests” (Estevez et al 2006: 38). In sum, one of the elements of the PRI hegemonic rule was its **inclusory** nature (Magaloni 2006).

Another characteristic was the PRI **tolerance of the opposition**. In line with other hegemonic-party autocracies, it allowed different elites to organize into independent political parties and to have a place in the legislature (Magaloni 2006). As asserted by Williams (2002) political representation did not occur in the Congress but in the party’s corporatist organizations, therefore pluralism was limited. In this light, the party was not concerned with the presence of the opposition in the Congress, as long

⁸ The first corporatist structures were created in 1938 such as the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), the Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM) and in 1942 President Manuel Ávila Camacho created the National Confederation of Popular organizations that represented the middle class (CNOP).

as it could control institutional change (electoral reforms) without recurring to coalitions. In order to do so, the party always *managed*⁹ to obtain supermajorities¹⁰ until the Congressional elections of 1997, when it lost its absolute majority for the first time. On the other hand, the acceptance of the opposition served another purpose: to achieve democratic legitimacy. In this vein, by recognizing the opposition the PRI avoided becoming a one-party system and hence had to follow some democratic rituals (Crespo 2004 in Magaloni 2006) such as holding elections frequently.

Precisely, the fourth characteristic was that at all levels of government **elections were held regularly**. However, elections were held not only to achieve legitimacy, but also to prevent personal dictatorship.¹¹ In fact, the Mexican constitution forbids presidential reelection. This is a major difference with other hegemonic-party autocracies, where dictators are reelected for extended periods of time and elections served as ways to share power between lower-level politicians (Magaloni 2006). According to Magaloni, “the PRI [acted] as a collusive agreement that allowed ruling-party politicians to divide the rents of power among themselves while preventing any single individual from grabbing it all. To make this pact to share power effective, consecutive elections took place with clockwork precision and presidents stepped down from office every six years” (Magaloni 2006: 8).

⁹ Since the electoral reform of 1977 the PRI manipulated the electoral rules to retain its majority in the Congress.

¹⁰ This created a perception of electoral invincibility. Nonetheless, other scholars such as Schedler (2000) argue that the party's invincibility was due to the system antidemocratic restrictions and genuine popular support.

¹¹ The Mexican revolution started as a movement against the dictator Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled Mexico for thirty years.

The next feature was the use of **fraud as an exemption** rather than as a rule.¹² Until 1982¹³ the party used to win all state, municipal and congressional elections. As a result, some scholars even consider Mexico as a democracy, although a peculiar one, that was no different from India or Japan. As pointed out by Magaloni (2006) this indicates that electoral fraud was only one of the instruments available to the PRI to retain power, but that was not the most important one.

Perhaps the most powerful tool that the PRI had on hand was the **monopolization of mass support**. This support was attained by the distribution of material rewards¹⁴ that were available before the economic debacle of the 1980s¹⁵ and the mobilization of voters through the party clientelistic networks. Nonetheless, Magaloni (2006) claims that mass support was directed to dissuade elite opponents, mostly those inside the party. Indeed, competing elites within the party have presented a serious threat to the PRI since its creation in 1929.

As we mentioned in the introduction, the regime only used repression as the last resort (Castañeda 2000 in Magaloni 2006). In this light, the PRI used **selective repression** towards elite opponents when it was unable to co-opt them.¹⁶ The final element that characterizes the PRI hegemonic rule was its **ideological flexibility**. Even though the PRI was founded to institutionalize the values of the Mexican revolution,

¹²Scholars such as Molinar even argue that before 1982 “electoral fraud did not normally make the difference between the PRI winning or losing... Fraud was mostly employed to boost the party’s vote share.” (Molinar 1991 in Magaloni 2006).

¹³ From this time the opposition, mostly the PAN, started to obtain unrecognized electoral victories at the local level.

¹⁴ Material rewards included “everything from land titles to subsidized credit, construction materials, and food baskets” (Magaloni 2006: 15).

¹⁵ The economic crisis was caused by excessive borrowing, external shocks, economic mismanagement, capital flow and inflation.

¹⁶ According to Guillermo Trejo (cited in Magaloni 2006: 11) this belief does not apply in the case of the South. For example, “in some regions and municipalities in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Veracruz, political killings on a per capita basis rivaled the levels of per capita repression in military dictatorships”.

such as land redistribution and social justice, the party deliberately avoided to attach itself to a specific ideology that could conflict with its diverse coalition. As Estevez et al (2006) highlight, the PRI was distinguished by its ideological pragmatism and its capacity to adjust its policies to changes in the national and international arena. In this vein, ideology was not a source of conflict for the party elites and the disputes were caused by power struggles among factions or *camarillas*¹⁷ (Smith 1979 and Langston 1994 in Estevez et al 2006) over presidential and gubernatorial nomination processes, which as aforementioned sometimes ended up in major splits.

After presenting the characteristics of the PRI hegemonic period, in the following section we will discuss the challenges the party faced during transition to democracy that in the end caused to yield power to the opposition.

2. Challenges to the hegemonic rule

As argued by Klesner (1998: 479) the PRI always faced a “constant trade-off between legitimacy and control”. This observation could not have been more accurate than during the period of democratic transition, as the party experienced a serious of internal and external challenges that, in turn, led to its hegemonic demise.

¹⁷ For the purpose of this paper we will use Williams' (2002: 166) definition of camarilla as “loyalty-based, patron/client networks that link individuals of different political status, different ministries, different levels of government, and even different regions”. The purpose of these camarillas is the collective career advance of the group. As a result, they established accountability relations among patrons and clients.

2.1. Internal Challenges

2.1.1. Redistribution of power within the party's factions

Since the creation of the party there have always been two identifiable factions or *camarillas*: the right wing (free-market oriented faction) and the leftist wing (populist faction). Intra-elite competition among these two factions led, in the past, to major party splits around the nomination processes. Estevez et al (2006) point out that in 1940, 1946 and 1952 politicians dissatisfied with the presidential nomination process unsuccessfully challenged the PRI in the presidential race as opposition. However, the most important split occurred in 1987¹⁸ when Cuauhtémoc Cardenas –the son of the progressive leader of the 1930s: Lázaro Cárdenas– abandoned the party and formed a new political organization currently known as the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD).

This split can be traced to the party's response to the economic crisis of the 1980s, which produced a **redistribution of power** within the PRI coalition, in two ways. On the one hand, in 1982 the right wing faction of the party won the presidential nomination in the figure of President Miguel de la Madrid, in order to deal with the economic crisis.¹⁹ Nonetheless, when the time of the next presidential nomination arrived, this faction broke the tacit agreement of designating a member of the leftist wing (Cuauhtémoc Cardenas) causing the above mentioned split.

¹⁸ The presidential nomination was done one year before the election, so that the candidate had time to travel around the country.

¹⁹ In order to “stabilized the economy de la Madrid administration restricted public spending, and addressed exchange rates and inflation via a crawling peg rate and wage and price control pact” (Williams 2002: 172). The effect of wage and price control was particularly negative for the political strength of the party's corporatist organizations.

On the other hand, instead of redistributing Federal bureaucratic jobs to the corporatist organizations –as was traditionally done– the right wing faction recruited field specialists in the Federal bureaucracy, better known as “technocrats”, which in many cases were not even affiliated to the party. In addition, corporatist leaders also lost “their traditional share of congressional seats within the Federal Congress” in benefit of the governors (Estevez et al 2006: 9). In sum, these actions reduced the access of corporatist leaders to government positions changing the balance of power in favor of the market oriented faction and the governors.

2.1.2. Weakening of the corporatist structure

The economic policies implemented for the stabilization of the economy after the economic crisis of the 1980s, caused the reduction of the government spoils to its corporatist organizations. In short, the economic crisis increased the cost of maintaining the regime’s broad coalition during this period. The reduction of resources transferred from the regime to its corporatist structure debilitated the political mobilization capacity of the corporatist organizations to support the economic policies. Moreover, de la Madrid’s economic stabilization plan “restricted public spending, and addressed exchange rates and inflation via a crawling peg rate and wage and price control pact” (Williams 2002: 172). The effect of wage and price control was particularly grave for the workers who carried the heaviest load of the crisis.

Another consequence of the economic crisis was change in the composition of the regime’s support coalition. That is, by the mid-1990s the foundation of the regime’s support no longer relied on the corporatist organizations, but on the financial groups

(Williams 2002) which positively embraced the economic liberalization policies, first of President Miguel de la Madrid and then of Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

2.2. External challenges

2.2.1. Increase in the competitiveness of elections

In 1982 and 1983, the PAN won several local elections in large northern cities (Klesner 1998). As a result, the PRI denied those victories by resorting to electoral fraud. Indeed, as elections became more competitive, so did the use of fraud. In response to the fraud, and particularly to the 1986 elections in Chihuahua: “a well-publicized and broad movement against electoral fraud emerged, led by the PAN but including parties of the left” (Klesner 1998: 482).

However, it was the 1988 presidential election –not the campaign conducted by the PAN leaders in the mid-1980s– which forced the democratization process in the 1990s (Klesner 1998). The questionability of the electoral results that granted victory to Carlos Salinas de Gortari caused that the runner-up Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas launched months of post-electoral mobilization. As a consequence, the legitimacy of the regime was seriously challenged.

Since 1989, and as a way to recover its legitimacy, the system started a series of electoral reforms that led to the electoral triumph of the opposition in 2000. Nevertheless, as the issue of the electoral reforms is larger than the scope of this paper we will not deal with them in detail.

The internal and external challenges that the regime faced during the 1980s, resulted in a protracted transition to democracy that cause the demise of the hegemonic-party rule of the PRI. Nonetheless, as we mentioned before the party survived the democratization period and still is a major political force. In the following section we will examine the conditions that have permitted the survival of the PRI at the local level.

3. Survival at the Local Level

Despite losing the Presidential elections in 2000, the PRI is still the strongest party at the local level. It not only governs 18 of the 32 federal states,²⁰ but also 921 of the 2,457 municipalities of the Country, representing 37.48% of them and placing it as the Party with the most municipal governments.²¹ In general, the PRI represents the first or the second political force at the local level with the exception of the Federal District where it occupies the third place.

According to Estevez et al (2006) the PRI strength at the local can be attributed to two factors: **fiscal decentralization** and the party's **capacity to win state-level elections**. The authors claim that fiscal decentralization has given access to the states to larger federal resources, and PRI governors have taken advantage of it in order to cement their power. Regarding its ability to win sub-national elections, they argue that this capacity lies in the transformation of nomination process. This process used to be centralized at the party's national leadership; however since 1998²² it has been replaced

²⁰ The PAN governs in 8 states while the PRD rules in 6.

²¹ The data is [online] Available from: <http://www.pri.org.mx/ReconstruccionXXI/PRIenMexico/english.aspx> [Accessed on March 17 2007].

²² The first attempt to transform the nomination process was given in 1994 without success due to intra-party disputes.

by local party conventions and primary elections that have forced sub-national party elites to be closer to their constituencies.

3.1. Fiscal decentralization

Even though Mexico's has been a Federal Republic since the late XIX century, the centralization of power has always been a feature of the political system. The hegemonic period of the PRI was no exception; on the contrary, this phase was characterized by an extreme centralization of power. Indeed, the Federal government controlled the majority of the economic resources, therefore local politicians depended on the center's generosity to finance their "social development projects, infrastructure and public works, and administrative expenses" (Estevez et al 2006: 10).

The allocation of resources from the federation to the states was determined by the National System of Fiscal Coordination through a series of formulas negotiated between the states and the federation. According to Estevez et al (2006) these formulas were thought originally to offset rich states for the loss of revenue resulting from the introduction of a national value added tax in 1980; however they were steadily modified to benefit poorer states where the PRI was traditionally stronger. Furthermore, during the 1980s when the PRI started to recognize local electoral victories of the opposition, it resorted to these formulas as a way to debilitate opposition governments "by systematically diverting fiscal resources from states and municipalities controlled by [other] parties and rewarding its own with more funds" (Díaz-Cayeros et al 2005, Magaloni 2006). As a result, opposition governments were confronted with the fact of

not having enough resources to answer to the necessities of the constituencies that elected them.

During the 1990s and as a consequence of the *concertaciones* period,²³ several changes were introduced in favor of fiscal decentralization. For instance, the government devolved education and health expenditure to the states, as well as municipal infrastructure delivery. Moreover, since mid-1990s the states have increasingly enjoyed greater discretion to spend the subsidies granted by the federal government, as well as the use of other funds, for example the revenue sharing funds. As Estevez et al (2006) assert a fundamental difference between the hegemonic rule of the PRI and the present time is that now governors have practically total freedom to allocate resources according to their will. In the long run, these changes not only benefited the PAN governors, but also those from other parties including the PRI.

In the case of the PRI, fiscal decentralization has also generated a redistribution of power between the national leadership and the governors. After the 2000 elections, the national leadership no longer counts with the unofficial financial support that the regime used to provide it, and now depends on the informal resources (human and financial) that the governors can mobilize in its behalf.²⁴

²³ The *concertaciones* is known as the local post-electoral negotiations among the PRI and the PAN after the electoral frauds of the 1980s (Eisenstadt 2003). Fiscal decentralization was one of the concessions that the PRI granted to the PAN during this negotiations.

²⁴ It is worth mentioned that since the 1996 electoral reform Mexican political parties are financed by the state, in this sense, the PRI counts with the financial resources stipulated in the law according with its vote proportion.

3.2. Capacity to win state-level elections

As already mentioned, the PRI is still a strong political force at the local realm. Some scholars have attributed this strength to its capacity to win state level elections. For example, from 1980 to 2006, of 156 gubernatorial elections 119 have been won by the PRI²⁵. Furthermore, of the 18 states currently governed by the party (figure 1), the PRI has never lost in 14 of them.²⁶ Its capacity to retain these “safety bastions” has been interpreted as one of the reasons explaining its survival.

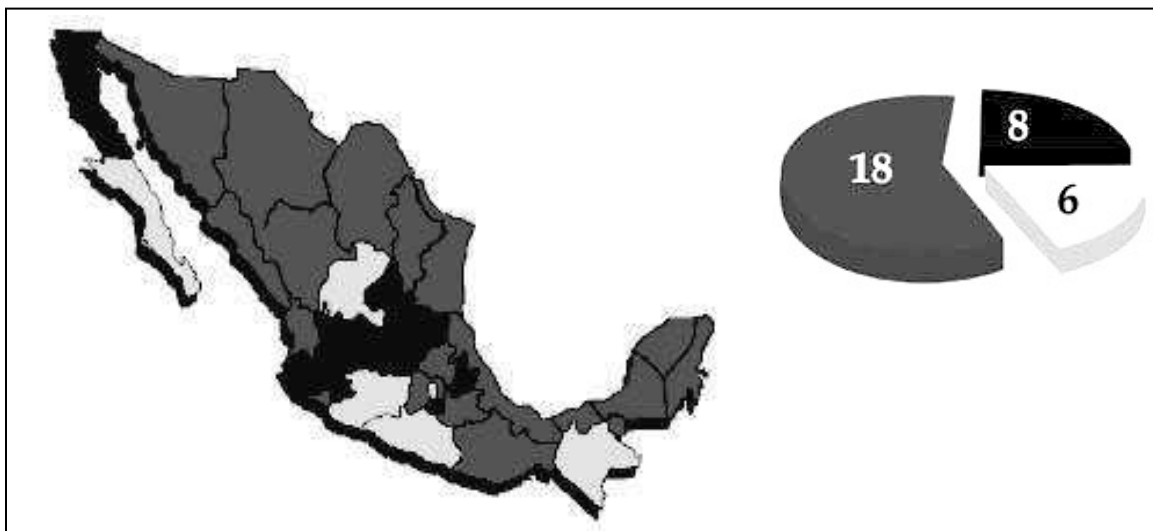


Figure 1. - Federal Entities governed by the PRI. Map taken from the PRI web paged [online] <http://www.pri.org/ReconstruccionXXI/PRIenMexico/english.aspx>. Accessed [19 March 2008]

However, the main difference between the electoral victories of its hegemonic rule and the electoral triumphs of the democratic era, lies in the fact that now the party abides by the democratic rules in order to win. Some studies about gubernatorial elections during

²⁵ This data is taken from the local elections data base of the “Centro de Investigación para el desarrollo, A.C.” (CIDAC) [online] <http://www.cidac.org/vnm/pdf/xls/gobernador.xls> Accessed: [19 March 2008].

²⁶ These states are Campeche, Coahuila, Colima, Durango, Estado de México, Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco, Tamaulipas and Veracruz.

transition to democracy, such as Estevez et al (2006), have applied Markov chain processes and probability studies to different gubernatorial elections periods²⁷ in order to estimate the probability of the PRI to win local elections, by using incumbency status and electoral support. The findings are that "...if the PRI is not the incumbent, it still has a 69 percent chance of winning the election. If the Party is the incumbent, the probability of the victory is 94 percent".

Besides playing by democratic game at the outside, the PRI also introduced some democratic measures at the inside. As we will discuss in the following subsection, the party went through a democratization of the nomination process that proved to be useful to retain its capacity to win local elections.

3.2.1. Democratization of the nomination process

Until the 1990s, the designation of candidates for all levels of government was done by the president and the party's national leadership, hence resulting in a procedure that was far from democratic.²⁸ In 1940, 1946, 1952 and 1987,²⁹ these type of designations caused major splits within the party. Nonetheless, until the mid-1990s the procedure was changed under the leadership of President Ernesto Zedillo.

As a strategy to recover legitimacy for his party, president Zedillo introduced competitive party conventions and open primary elections for the selection of

²⁷ First to 1989 to 2005 and then to 1995-2005.

²⁸ This process was popularly known as "*dedazo*," which responds to the metaphorical presidential finger pointing out his successor (Schedler 2000). Moreover, this process served as an institutionalized mechanism for power transfer, thus solving the succession problem faced by other authoritarian regimes.

²⁹ All these dates coincide with presidential nomination processes.

gubernatorial and presidential candidates. However, as a result of the economic crisis of 1995 the PRI suffered some electoral defeats, causing the momentary abandonment of competitive party conventions. In contrast, primaries proved to be more successful in guaranteeing electoral triumphs. Since 1998, the PRI has adopted competitive party conventions and open primary elections as regular nomination procedures. Indeed, during Fox presidential term, primaries produced about 40 percent of PRI Governor candidates. Furthermore, this procedure was also adopted by the national leadership for the election of the party presidency in 2002 (Estevez et al 2006) and in 2007. These changes have provided the opportunity to be closer to its local constituencies and to increase participation. Inevitably, the democratization of the nomination process “opened the PRI internal politics to public scrutiny and participation” (Estevez et al 2006: 26).

In the next section we will complement the reasons given for the survival of the party at the local level with the strategies we identified that the party have used for its political survival at the national level.

4. Survival at the National Level

There are several strategies that we have identified as the conditions for the PRI survival at the national level. First, the absence of post-electoral discord (Barraca 2004) by the PRI in national elections evidences its respect for the democratic rules. As we argued before, the PRI recognized the electoral victory of Vicente Fox and pacifically

yielded power to the PAN in 2000. Second, it has shown a democratic commitment with the electoral institutions. For example, when the party was fined by the Federal Electoral Court for the misuse of resources for the presidential campaign of 2000, the party paid the fine stipulated by the Tribunal.

The third strategy has been to become a responsible opposition. Even though the party has not supported all the initiatives of the PAN governments it has not represented a legislative deadlock.³⁰ For instance, 2000, 2003 and 2006 elections have resulted in the absence of unified government; however the PRI has supported important reforms sponsored by the PAN such as the Public Information Access Law, Civil Service Act, Fiscal reform and the 2007 Electoral Reform.

In sum, since Mexico consolidated its democracy in 2000, the PRI has not become an actor threatening the system.

5. Conclusion

As argued by Klesner (1998) the constant trade-off between legitimacy and control that the PRI faced since its creation, was exacerbated during the 1980s as a consequence of the internal and external challenges that the party confronted. These challenges end up with a sequence of electoral reforms that resulted in the hegemonic demise of the regime in 2000. As we show the survival of the PRI at the local and national level can be explained for different reasons; democratization of the nomination process, reinvigoration of the Federal pact and the party's transformation into a responsible

³⁰ This argument was used by Barraca (2004) in the case of the 2000 elections.

opposition. Even so, we believe that the most important reason is that at both levels “democracy has become the only game in town”. In sum, the PRI have survived by learning the democratic trick.

Nonetheless, some scholars consider that Mexican democratization has not advanced at the same speed across all regions or levels of government (Lawson 2000). The reality is that even at the PRI most authoritarian enclaves such as Guerrero, Yucatán and Chiapas the party has peacefully yielded power to the opposition. In this sense, we argued that the party transited from a national hegemonic-party system to a predominant-party system at the local level.³¹

Mexico still faces some challenges that affect its democratic quality, such as economic stagnation, social disparities, drug trafficking, corruption, deficient rule of law and weak protection of civil liberties. In this sense, we can claim that Mexico’s is a consolidated bad quality democracy in which the role of the PRI will be determinant for the improvement of the system.

Finally, there are some issues in which further research is needed regarding the survival of the PRI at the local and national level, for instance, the role of the party’s elite at the moment of the alternation. Currently, in the literature it has been argued that more than an intra-elite agreement, it was President Ernesto Zedillo’s democratic agenda in favor of federalism and electoral reform that transformed the traditional patten of governance, and prepare the way for the electoral triumph of the opposition in 2000

(Williams 2002). Furthermore, we will need to come with better measures to assess the survival of the party at the national level, as well as to do more regional comparison at the local level.

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