

2003

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Recommended Citation

Guy Poitras, *The Rise of the Pan*, 9 Law & Bus. Rev. Am. 271 (2003).

Available at: <https://scholar.smu.edu/lbra/vol9/iss2/5>

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THE RISE OF THE PAN

Guy Poitras*

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the year 2000, while much of the world was anxiously anticipating the new century, Mexico was passing a significant and remarkable milestone. For almost a decade Mexico had experienced a neoliberal transformation in economic policy. Privatization, de-regulation, fiscal restraint, market access, regional integration, and other structural adjustments had gone a long way toward making Mexico one of the most market-oriented large economies in the world. At first these economic reforms overshadowed political reforms. If the current Mexican elites, especially those in the government party, had any hopes that such economic changes would inoculate them against political competition, they were wrong. In 2000 the government party lost its monopoly of power. For the first time since the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) another political party, one founded in opposition to the revolution itself, came to power. By winning the presidency, Mexico ended the longest continuous rule of a party in any country in the world.

The defeat of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2000 was not entirely unexpected. When the National Action Party (*Partido de Accion Nacional*, hereinafter PAN) won a plurality of votes for the presidency in the national election of 2000, the PRI's hegemony over Mexican politics officially came to an end years after President Carlos Salinas had declared it to be over. After more than seventy years of one-party dominance Mexico acquired a competitive party system and a more democratic and open political system. Mexican democracy, which has been long questioned as thinly veiled authoritarianism, was given the credibility it lacked for so long.

Of all the questions that are raised by this monumental change in Mexican politics two rather simple ones are addressed here. First, was the rise of the PAN as impressive a triumph for the political party as it appeared to be? And second, why did it happen? In this early attempt to answer these two questions there is much we still do not know. What is clear even now is that the rise of the PAN, as symbolized by its first *sexenio* of the Mexican presidency, is not just about the political party or its leaders but, about the fundamental changes in Mexico and in Mexican politics. In other words, while the PAN had a hand in its emergence as the central

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political player in the new Mexican party system it also benefited from changes and developments in Mexico that provided an opportunity that PAN was able to seize.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY

The PAN is no newcomer to Mexican politics. Unlike the myriad of minor parties that emerged during the democratic opening of the 1990s or the Democratic Revolutionary Party (*Partido de Revolucion Democratica* or PRD), the PAN has a relatively long pedigree. Established in 1939 by Manuel Gomez Morin and some middle class businessmen and lawyers, the party never presented the dominant party with a serious electoral challenge for much of its history. In fact, the PAN's mere existence probably gave the PRI and the government a veneer of legitimacy. After all the rhetoric of the Mexican revolution was a powerful symbol for the party. Isolated and small the original PAN provided the government with a weak opposition out of sync with popular opinion. PAN's early, principled opposition to the Mexican revolution served its purpose for the revolutionary elite who managed the system from above. The PAN also sided with the religious (pro-clerical) elements of the country against the secular power of the emerging political system of the 1930s and 1940s. While Mexicans are overwhelmingly Catholic, many resent the secular power of the clergy before as well as after the revolution. The PAN was also swimming upstream earlier in the twentieth century on another issue. The Mexican government under the revolutionary leaders of the PRI opted for a mixed economy with private and public ownership and regulation. This static approach to import substitution industrialization was clearly at odds with some PANista preferences for free markets and weak government. The early PAN position within the one-party system was that of a principled dissenter settled on the margins of the Mexican political mainstream.

The principles the PAN held dear were not always cherished in official Mexican circles. Among the most venerable principles of the party are nationalism, human dignity, the common good, democracy, and the importance of the community or group.¹ To some extent, these represent the era of national unity and independence in the post-revolutionary life of the country that many Mexicans more or less accepted long after the revolution ended. Business elites and religious conservatives who formed the bedrock of early political support for the PAN would later broaden and deepen their commitments to related principles. Early on the PAN rejected the corporate system of governmental control over civil society that was institutionalized under Cardenas in the 1930s. The PAN also rejected the populist system of mass mobilization found in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil during the 1930s and 1940s. Finally, it rejected the

1. Partido Acción Nacional, at <http://www.pan.org.mx> (last visited Apr. 17, 2003).

state capitalism practiced off and on by the PRI-controlled government until the 1980s.

Later in the twentieth century the PAN remained true to its ideological identity and began to expand its principles to reflect liberal democracy in the tradition of John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. Property rights, religious freedom, and free trade were incorporated into the PAN's pantheon of basic principles. Somewhat later, as Mexico began to undergo change and self-doubt it protested corruption and lack of political freedoms and human rights. The "Republican Party of Mexico" survived at the margins of Mexico's political system for more than a half century.

Principles and platforms are one thing, but electoral success is quite another. Led by traditional purists for many decades, the PAN posed no serious challenge to its dominant adversary at the ballot box. It was never able to garner many votes during the heyday of the PRI. By the 1960s PAN was able to achieve double-digit support at the polls for the presidency, but its strengths remained concentrated at local and regional levels. Its first state gubernatorial triumphs did not come until the more open reform period in the late twentieth century. Until the PRI broke into two rival factions in the late 1980s, PANista hopes for electoral victories mostly rested on a rather small segment of the voting populace. PANistas are typically educated, wealthy, and urban. They are also concentrated in the north, where PRI is less strong.

III. THE RISE

In the turbulent period of 1988-2000 the PAN went from being an also-ran for the largest prize to the winner of the largest prize. In 1988, the PAN placed third for the presidency behind the PRI and a coalition of left parties (then called the Democratic Current), however, the election results were widely questioned. Indeed, the PRI probably lost the election outright to the candidate on the left or at best did not win by the margin it claimed. The PRI won 50.7 percent of the vote.² Twelve years later things could not have been more different. Not only was the 2000 presidential election fair, but the PAN won the election with 42.5 percent of the vote, which beat out the PRI (with 36.1 percent) and the PRD (with 16.6 percent).³

How much of this change of political fortunes is linked to the PAN prospering as a political party and how much of it is due to other factors? This is not a question that can be answered completely at this point. Still, one can and should distinguish between relative and absolute rises (or gains) to help us understand this remarkable turnaround. The rise of the PAN is first based on its electoral success compared to that of its adversaries. It became more competitive against the other parties and more pop-

2. Instituto Federal Electoral, at <http://www.ife.org.mx> (last visited Apr. 17, 2003).

3. DANIEL C. LEVY & KATHLEEN BRUHN, *MEXICO: THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT* 90-100 (2001).

ular among the voting public in Mexico. The absolute rise of the PAN is based on the increasing numbers of popular votes in local and state elections once dominated by others.

The PAN has become enormously successful. In comparative terms the PAN went from last to first among the major parties in the span of three national elections. From 1988 to 2000 popular votes for the PAN in Congress more than doubled - increasing by 118 percent. Similarly, popular votes for the PAN candidate for the president increased sixty-eight percent from 1994 to 2000.

The other side of this perspective is the decline of the PRI. PAN's rise must be seen within the context of the emergence of a multiparty system. While the PAN posted strong relative gains during the 1988 to 2000 period, the leading party went in the other direction. The PRI declined 25.6 percent in its share of popular votes from 1988 to 2000 in Congress and about the same (twenty-five percent) from 1994 to 2000 for President.⁴ The balance of popular support was changing throughout the 1990s but it was not until 2000 that the PAN moved ahead of the PRI and the PRD in relative strength for both the presidential and legislative elections. Given the choices available, Mexican voters shifted allegiances from the two other parties and became more independent and willing to consider more than one party seriously. Neither the PRI nor the PRD were able to hold their relative strength for president or for the national legislature for the entire twelve-year period. The reversal of fortunes was seismic.

However, the PAN was able to do more than switch places with its opponents. It was able to increase the overall number of voters as well. The absolute rise in electoral support for the PAN indicates that it is not just a matter of declining enthusiasm for its opponents, but also a matter of the PAN being able to increase its electoral attractiveness by getting new voters into the fold, doing better throughout the country than it had in the past, and taking advantage of ticket splitting and weakening party identification.

This led to some changes in voting behavior. Although it is doubtful that many PRD voters voted for the PAN enough did, which boosted the PAN's vote totals for president. Some PRD voters voted for PRD candidates in Congress but then vote for Fox.⁵ Some PRI voters may have done the same thing. The positive side of this voting behavior is that the PAN, under the leadership of Vicente Fox Quesada, increased the absolute number of its votes at the voting booths (*casillas*) **with** increasingly clean and fair elections monitored by the independent Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). The PAN won 15.9 million votes for president in 2000 out of 37.6 million total votes cast compared to 9.2 million PAN votes for president in 1994 with 35.6 million total votes. In the Senate PAN won about 2 million more votes in 2000 than it did in 1994 with 16.2 million in 2000 and 14.3 million in 1994.

4. Instituto Federal Electoral, *supra* note 2.

5. LEVY & BRUHN, *supra* note 3.

The shifting strengths within the Mexican Congress are somewhat more complicated. Party representation and alliances in a system with both single member district and proportional representation in both the upper and lower house affected the PAN's overall position. In the House of Deputies, the lower house, the term of office is two years. 300 of the 500 seats are selected from single member districts, and 200 are selected by proportional representation. It is here that the *Alianza por el Cambio* (a coalition of the PAN and PVEM, or the ecologist party) grabbed 44.8 percent of the 500 seats compared to 41.6 percent for the PRI. Another coalition, this time on the left, was unable to make significant gains. The *Alianza por Mexico* garnered 13.6 percent of the seats. In the Senate, with four senators for each state and the Federal District, the PRI outpolled the opposition by winning 45.3 percent of the seats; the PAN-led alliance got 41.4 percent and the PRD-led alliance got 13.3 percent.⁶

This is a slight change from the 1997 mid-term elections in which the PRI led the pack in the House of Deputies with 238 of 500 seats. The PAN did not achieve a ruling majority in either house; in the 2003 mid-term elections, things got worse. The PAN lost its plurality in the House of Deputies to the PRI. This leaves Mexican national politics in a competitive stance. Since 1997 no party has controlled the presidency and both branches of the legislature. Further, since 2000 the PAN stepped onto the center stage of Mexican national politics for the first time with the presidency but without a governing majority in the legislature.

IV. EXPLAINING THE ASCENDANCY

Why did the PAN win the presidency in 2000? The PAN's success is indicative of important changes in elections, party politics, and Mexico itself. Speculation about the rising fortunes of a once minor, right-wing party suggests that any future answers should focus on several dynamics in Mexican politics at the turn of the century.

In the glow of the 2000 triumph, the temptation is to stress the role that the PAN played in its own ascendancy. There is certainly something to be said for this emphasis on intra-party renovation, but the evolution of the PAN must also be placed in a broader context. The PAN did not come to power in a vacuum. Rather, Mexico and its political system began to emerge as a more open and less corporatist enterprise. An opportunist interpretation of the PAN focuses on its ability to adjust to a changing dynamic.

The PAN is not quite the same party that it was in the 1980s. The party of Manuel Clouthier (who ran in 1988 as the party's presidential candidate) and Diego Fernandez (who ran in 1994) came in third behind the PRI and the PRD. In those two years the PAN only did slightly better in Congress. The PAN placed a distant third behind the PRD in congres-

6. Calculated from Instituto Federal Electoral, *supra* note 2; see also LEVY & BRUHN, *supra* note 3, at 100.

sional seats in 1988 but surged into second place ahead of the PRD in 1994. While retaining its essential identity and electoral base, the PAN made adjustments that proved to be very wise.

The most visible change was in the leadership of the PAN. The selection process for PANista candidates became more open, allowing candidates to compete for nominations in a way that no Mexican party had done before. This put pressure on other parties to do the same. Perhaps due in part to this, PAN's presidential candidate Vicente Fox Quesada, who was inspired by Clouthier to get into electoral politics, was stamped out of a different mold than previous PANistas. A more outgoing and charismatic candidate, Fox adopted a more American-style approach to public image and campaign. This flamboyance and personalism stood in stark contrast to the more subdued and conservative style of previous PANistas. The Fox campaign also downplayed PAN's roots and narrow partisan base and sought to appeal to a broader electorate. More populist and less partisan, Fox was not your traditional PANista candidate. In fact, he asked his strategist to "sell" him in the campaign as if he were any other product.⁷ This "selling of the president" quite strongly evokes the image of U.S. campaigns. As a result, the PAN campaign became less elitist and unified as it became more appealing and attractive. Standing on principle became less compelling to the PAN, at least under Fox, than winning. In this sense, the triumph at the polls in 2000 can be attributed to the candidate as much as it can be to the PAN as a traditional player.

Along with these came changes in electoral strategy. The PAN had been a party of the north for many years - strong in some states and some *municipios* but certainly not nation-wide. But given the chance the PAN took advantage of incremental electoral reforms in the 1990s and of the independent supervision of elections by the Federal Electoral Institute to seek a more national and dynamic electoral strategy. Due to its own role in negotiating a new pact on electoral reform, the PAN could and did field more attractive candidates at local, state, and national levels. While the PRI could still tap the coffers of the government to fund its campaigns, a more level playing field made it possible to popularize and extend the PAN campaign strategy. The increasing competitiveness of elections also helped the PRD, another opposition party, but it had a negative impact on the PRI which was the ruling party.

The ideology of the PAN may have helped as well. The party did not stress its ideology or platform because, in many ways, it had already won on these issues. Political discrimination against the church and the clergy ended almost a decade earlier under the opposition party. A more open political system with a more level playing field had been an important part of the agenda for Mexico throughout much of the 1990s. Also, the PAN's free-market capitalism had been adopted, at least in most respects, by the PRI if not by the PRD. Political discourse in Mexico had shifted in

7. Sam Dillon, *The 'Sell Me' Politician the Mexicans Bought*, N.Y. TIMES, July 4, 2000 at A6.

the PAN's direction before the 2000 election. With this shift the political spectrum had also shifted to the right. This left the neoliberal leaders of the PRI in a position of saying "me too". The PAN had become legitimate and even important to Mexico in a way it never had before. The PRI's efforts to expropriate the PAN's neoliberal ideology of free markets and property rights did not stem the rise of the PAN but only confirmed the PAN's rise as the new empowered player.

The PAN can obviously take some credit for what it accomplished in 2000. Looking to the PAN to better understand its rise to power assumes that the PAN was the architect, perhaps even the sole architect, of its triumph in 2000. This may overstate the case. While the PAN clearly did what it had to do to become a major player in the emerging multi-party system, a number of important facilitating factors in Mexican politics at the time considerably helped the PAN to its ascendancy. In this sense, the PAN can be viewed as both an independent variable and a dependent variable in the changes leading to the 2000 earthquake in Mexican politics.

Several arguments or hypotheses can be advanced that the PAN was in the right place at the right time. In other words, Mexican voters were ready for a change as called for in the PAN's campaign. Changes in Mexican civil society, the implosion of the PRI, the dealignment of parties, the shifting voting patterns, as well as the changing political culture, had an impact on the PAN's fortunes. In some cases these were a long time in coming, but they were indispensable to setting the parameters of the PAN's rise.

The first argument is that Mexico had changed more than its politics. In this argument the PRI is portrayed as an atrophied party that changed a lot less than the country it ruled. Socio-economic changes such as urbanization, education, industrialization, and structural adjustments made the PRI corporatist and semi-authoritarian rule less relevant to Mexican society in the waning years of the twentieth century. Mexico was not the same country in the 1990s that it was in the 1930s when the corporatist model was established. The PRI was out of step with the most dynamic elements of the Mexican society and economy.

The changing Mexico argument has a corollary. Not only did the broader changes erode the rationale for the old system but the old system proved to be self-liquidating. The static policies during much of the PRI's rule contributed to social and economic changes that made it harder to sustain the PRI rule. At the same time, this permitted the PAN, other parties, and civil society in general to become more independent and more insistent on a place at the table. In fact, it could be argued that the growth of civil society and its pressures on government were even more important than electoral reform.⁸ As political change began to make

8. NORA HAMILTON, *MEXICO, THE POLITICS OF LATIN AMERICA: THE POWER GAME* 319 (Harry E. Vanden & Gary Prevost eds., Oxford University Press) (2002).

elections a contest for power rather than a corporatist device for regime legitimation, a trend toward vote maximization reflected the more competitive openness of Mexico's society and economy. Mexican voters had a choice within the neoliberal camp between the PAN and the PRI. A vote for the PAN was often against the PRI and its tarnished reputation.

Another hypothesis or argument about the PAN as a dependent variable in its own rise to power is the implosion of the PRI. Essentially, this argument is that the PRI was its own worst enemy. What the PRI did or did not do was instrumental in the rise of the PAN. During its long tenure as ruling party in Mexico, the PRI was essentially a patronage party to mobilize support to keep the leadership in power. It was not prepared to compete on a level playing field because for many years it did not have to. Its purpose was to mobilize support, legitimize its rule, and control civil society. Since the PRI or its minions counted the votes for many years, the PRI would only lose if this could not be helped or if "winning" would carry a high cost. During the late 1950s and early 1960s the presidential vote for the PRI reached astronomical heights and fictional levels. Elections had a number of functions under the PRI, but deciding who won the election was not often one of them.

1988 marked the beginning of the end of the PRI's impunity. The debacle of the 1988 presidential election unleashed changes in the election process that the PRI, while it could not entirely control, had no choice but to participate. The momentum from below continued to build for reform throughout the following decade, although the reform only very gradually kept going at a pace the PRI would allow. Eventually, these delaying tactics ran out and the election codes of Mexico began to take on the reality and the appearance of a state with genuine democratic leanings.

The PRI also continued to be its own worst enemy away from the voting booth. In 1994, after Salinas stepped down, was the first time that the government and its party were exposed as being severely corrupt and perhaps even worse. Assassinations of government officials, including the Attorney General and of PRI candidate Colosio, led many to suspect that the PRI and the government were irredeemable as a positive force in Mexico. Drug cartel links to high government officials or relatives further scandalized the government. There were other calamities as well: the Zapatista revolt in Chiapas on January 1, 1994, the mishandling or delayed handling of the peso devaluation in late 1994, the criminal activity of Carlos Salinas's brother, the decline in real wages for many workers and the middle class in the mid-1990s liquidity crisis, and the growing sense of outrage among many over the sacrifices the people made in the face of politics as usual. The PRI seemed more out of touch with Mexico than it ever had been.

There is also the dealignment argument. In the 1990s, the party system began to change in important ways for the first time since the PRI was created under Plutarco Calles in the late 1920s. For Mexico dealignment

meant the death knell for the one-party system. The party system, with the PRI at the center and all others on the far periphery, splintered badly. In this sense, what happened in 2000 was a continuation of what began in the 1980s.

Dealignment came with greater competition. Except perhaps for the PRD, the other major parties have parity for many races at different levels in the country. Each retains its historic stronghold. Yet each is seeking to build upon or mitigate the damage from the new opportunities in electoral politics. In other words, the democratic transition, long delayed by the PRI intransigence, has now moved on to democratic consolidation. In this sense, democratic consolidation in Mexico began to resemble what Costa Rica, Chile, and other countries had experienced. Two of the parties competed in most regions (PAN vs. PRI or PRI vs. PRD). In 2000 PAN carried eighteen states for the presidency; the PRI carried twelve; and the PRD carried one. Shifting and declining party identification has affected the PAN, its opponents, and the party system itself. A related hypothesis deals with election integrity and dealignment. Dealignment was possible with a more level playing field supervised by an independent electoral commission or court coupled with clean and fair elections. Less than half of all Mexican voters have a fixed party identity.⁹

The final argument is about changing political culture. Although slow to change, political culture, or the body of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions that people have about politics, is hardly immutable, even in a semi-authoritarian system like Mexico's. In the 1990s political culture may have become a factor working against the old system and its principal leaders. Mexican political culture has become noticeably less passive and more assertive. The blows to the body politic in the 1990s may have taken their toll on a more subject-oriented culture detected in Mexico some forty years ago. While too fine a point should not be made on the argument, there does seem to be a more general willingness for different social groups and classes to protest or complain about everything of concern to them, which ranges from crime rates to the location for a new airport for Mexico City. The PRI in power probably could not easily convince many that the party was blameless for the increasing restiveness of a more aware and less patient populace that had suffered from political and economic strains for many years.

V. THE PAN IN POWER

What can we expect from this shift in political fortunes? However difficult the transition for the PAN and for Mexico in the last decade of the twentieth century what lies ahead could be just as challenging.

Mexican party politics are likely to move forward after 2000. Just as important, continuities can be found before and after the Mexican revolu-

9. LEVY & BRUHN, *supra* note 3, at 100.

tion. This more recent sea change in Mexican politics will not erode all the features of Mexican politics or society. An election can usually have only a modicum of impact, lasting or not, on the behavior and prospects for an emerging democratic system in Mexico. For example, freer elections in a more pluralistic political system are no cure for corruption, but corruption itself may change and be exposed more effectively in such a system. A PAN government cannot expect to avoid criticism about corruption in its own house. Likewise, a system of "divided government" in Mexico, where one party holds the presidency but no party has a voting majority in one or both houses of the Congress, suggests that there are important challenges that lie ahead for inventing a process that helps to govern the country effectively.

After years on the political fringe the PAN is currently at the center of Mexico's political universe. But shifting from the opposition to the ruling party is not that easy, just as the PRI is finding it hard to be an opposition party with some degree of unity. No longer can the PAN select the issues with which it wishes to challenge or bash an aging party. Now, it must set an agenda for governance and take on risks as well as opportunities that were clearly beyond its prowess in the old system. The real challenge of the rise of the PAN will come as it attempts to govern in a "weak state" with multiple parties and independent institutions vying for influence.

Can the PAN hold onto its gains or will the PRI make a comeback? Something is happening in Mexico to suggest that changes in executive-legislative relations, inter-party competition, and even federal-state relations may make it difficult for any party to become dominant in the future. There is no going back. While the PRI may hope to alternate in power with the PAN or with other parties in the years to come, no party, including the PAN, can expect to resuscitate one-party rule. That genie cannot be put back in the bottle, which may be just as well.

In the era of post-hegemonic power, the world of politics and parties cannot guarantee the PAN or any party a secure, predictable future. Victories and defeats lie ahead. For example, already Fox has won some battles with the oil workers union, but he has not been able to get foreign investment into some facets of the oil exploration business. His tax policies, immigration plan, and pro-business policies have opened him up to stiff criticism from the rural poor and from a politically divided yet independent legislature.¹⁰ At the same time, the PRI struggles to find a role in the new party system. It controls two-thirds of the governorships and has more seats in the national legislature than any other party. Its heyday may be over for now, but a political future without a major role for the PRI seems unlikely at best.

The transition to political competition in Mexico does have its downside. As Winston Churchill once said, "In a war you can only be killed

10. Ginger Thompson, *Mexico's Leader is Finding the Democratic Road Bumpy*, N.Y. TIMES, May 10, 2001, at A3.

once, but in politics many times.”¹¹ Unlike the old days under the PRI, the PAN and any other party in twenty-first century Mexico should be prepared for that looming eventuality.

The PAN under Fox did something, perhaps unintentionally, that is very important for Mexico. In 2000 it ended the national myth that only one party was synonymous with the government, the Revolution, and even the country itself. Today Mexican voters have helped push Mexico beyond this central myth of post-revolutionary politics to consider the possibility that there is room for contention and competition. Bounded competitiveness could be good for Mexico and does not suggest the end of order and stability that was so prized in the PRI years. The PAN, in its drive to power, has perhaps unintentionally showed Mexicans something that is important to everyone - whether the PAN is their party or not.

Mexico under PAN leadership could be far more trying than anything the PRI had to face during its long tenure. If it has any hopes of doing more than going down in history as ending PRI hegemony in Mexico, the PAN, and the other parties as well, has its work cut out for it. Although Mexicans do not live in a totally different country as a result of the 2000 election, they do live in a Mexico in which power is shared more readily. Whatever the future of the PAN its triumph in 2000 may have more far reaching consequences for Mexico than the closing of one era and the opening of another.

11. Famous Quotes, at <http://www.brainyquote.com> (last visited Mar. 19, 2003).

