

Mexico: Democracy Without Citizenship?

Written by Philipp Dreyer

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PHILIPP DREYER, JUN 26 2012

Mexico's federal elections in 2000 represent an important milestone in the country's history of political uncertainty. For the first time since 1929, the traditional governing party PRI lost hold of the presidency and thereby brought Mexico's authoritarian system one step closer in its quest for a long overdue democratic transition. However, these reforms in the electoral arena by themselves do not amount to the culmination of this long and gradual process (Lawson, 2000: 274). First, this essay will demonstrate that the quality of a country's democracy is inextricably dependent on the extent to which active citizenship is exercised. It will then show that Mexico's political and neoliberal economic reforms over the last decades have been associated with a substantial decline in civic engagement and political contestation thus undermining the democratic experience. The material hardships of the majority of the Mexican population, the systematic exclusion of indigenous people, and the structural disadvantages of women have only been partially challenged with social struggles and remain an obstacle to the development of a democratic political culture. This political culture, as well as a vibrant civil society, are needed in Mexico for reaching a more efficacious democratic threshold.

While it is true that, by definition, a democratic government requires electoral competition, the consolidation of a civilian rule may not necessarily follow (Fox, 1994: 151). In order to fully explore the reciprocal relationship between citizenship and democracy, some methodological remarks should be made on the former concept before turning to the specific case of Mexico. Citizenship, according to T. H. Marshall, is often associated with social, political, and civil rights which are to be preserved and developed by the state's main institutions. By defining citizenship as a 'status bestowed on those that are members of the community' (Marshall, 2009: 149), Marshall systematically underestimates the potency of social movements or struggles since he believes rights to be predominantly passive (Turner, 1990: 207). For this reason, the concept of active citizenship will equally be deployed in order to capture the influence that civil engagement and collective activity have on democratic politics. Looking at the experience of public representation of society, not only from above, but also from below, will help to determine whether a gap between formal and actual citizenship is prevailing in Mexico.

This important point is often overlooked for transitional Third Wave Democracies mainly because of the widely accepted belief that the 'major device for facilitating the formation of the popular will, its generation of meaningful choices and its impact upon the government, have been political parties' (Schumpeter, 1950: 257-58). Although the position of political parties is central in democratic politics, Mexico presents a more complex and challenging case. According to Olvera (2010: 102), the legitimacy of the three main parties -PAN, PRI and PRD- is questionable due to their tendency to opportunism, the persistence of clientelistic practices and their lack of differentiation from the past authoritarian system. Statistical support for the underrepresentation of the diversity of societal interests is striking as the people's confidence in Mexican democracy has declined precipitously from 45 per cent in 1997 to 17 per cent in 2005 (Crow, 2010: 42). The provision of citizenship from above has been demonstrated to be flawed in many ways and the institutionalization of political parties has only to a relatively small degree contributed to the democratic experience in Mexico. It seems to be clear, therefore, that the realm of citizenship has to be extended to include other aspects of representation and to assess the responsiveness of common concerns in societal institutions (Tilly, 1995: 9). Without these, the quality of Mexico's democracy can in no way be adequately evaluated. This essay will now analyze how civil society has been affected by Mexico's political and neoliberal economic reforms that were designed to democratize the country.

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For the first time since 1929 the Institutional Revolutionary Party lost the majority in the chamber of deputies in 1997 and was forced to transfer the presidency to PAN member Vicente Fox in 2000 (Wallis, 2003: 30). It is problematic, however, to call Mexico a democracy by virtue of these political reforms alone, for the process of democratization is long and gradual and requires in addition the development of a democratic political culture. In the 1980's, the Mexican government initiated a series of neoliberal economic reforms as part of its democratic transition (Lawson, 2000: 272). The trade liberalization strategies over the last decades, most notably the North American Free Trade Agreement, have been followed by diminished forms of citizenship. According to Kurtz (2003: 302), the nature of the neoliberal reforms has been detrimental particularly to the poor, the indigenous people, and women, all of whom did not benefit from Mexico's growing economy (Philip, 1999: 77). There is no doubt that a democratic government depends on economic efficacy in order to attain legitimacy (Lipset, 1994: 1). The Mexican government, however, did not manage to successfully address the structural issues responsible for the increasing inequality and poverty among its own people. For instance, the various social programs of Mexico's Ministry of Social Development have shown very little commitment to poverty reduction and to creating equal opportunities for all citizens (Franceschet, 2003: 18).

Despite the fact that Mexico's economic liberalization has been politically stabilizing, the observed simultaneous decline in collective action and expression is striking (Kurtz, 2004: 265). Kurtz (2004: 273) suggests that growing employment uncertainty and residential instability among Mexicans are considerably responsible for social atomization and the lack of civic engagement. When political dynamism in forms of voting, social protest or labour mobilization is declining, the prospects for social integration seem remote. Mexico's democratic experience is severely marked by an apparent gap between actual citizenship and the status of citizenship defined by the 'constitutional-legal regime' (Houtzager & Acharya, 2011: 3). For instance, electoral rights and access to the parliament are officially conferred on all citizens, yet clientelistic networks have been longstanding as well as unequal access to healthcare, sanitation and security (Houtzager & Acharya, 2011: 2). It is safe to say, therefore, that Mexico's democratic transition is not complete as practices of citizenship, that are responsible for holding the state accountable for reducing the level of inequality and injustice, have continued to be undermined.

An example of how civil action has been undermined by the Mexican government is given by the Zapatista uprising, probably the most famous social movement in the last two decades. In 1994, the indigenous people of the Chiapas region attempted to challenge unavailingly the severe consequences of the neoliberal shift in Mexico's economy, which had intensified ethnic cleavages even further (Ramirez, 2006: 5). Although progress has nowadays been made in the provision of education and social programs, indigenous people, who make up around 12.4 per cent of the Mexican population, continue to suffer from extreme poverty (Yashar, 1999: 289). In this context, the extent to which Mexico is a democracy without citizenship is pointed out by the National Income and Consumption Survey which arrived at the conclusion that since 1992 the percentage of indigenous people who live below the poverty line has never been lower than 65 (Ramirez, 2006:155).

The brevity of this essay makes it impossible to provide an extensive statistical analysis of the exact degree to which other excluded groups such as women and peasants, for instance, suffer from poverty and discrimination. It suffices to say, nonetheless, that the general decline in social movements and civil action is indicative of the political and social weakness of civil society (Olvera, 2010: 79). So far, it has been beyond the reach of democratic political institutions to initiate a process of 'thickening of citizenship' (Sabet, 2008: 410). As a result of this deficit in democratic political culture, the Mexican government is currently challenged by the proliferation of corruption, violent crimes, and drug trafficking (Canache & Allison, 2005: 92). These illegal activities can be interpreted as a way to regain some of the substantial material losses that marginal groups of Mexican society had incurred in the wake of economic liberalization (Kurtz, 2003: 276). It follows that democratic governability is at stake if rights associated with citizenship continue to be undermined in Mexico.

Looking at Mexico's political, social and economic development over the last twenty years, it can be concluded that the process of democratization is not yet complete. The notion of active citizenship allows us to see that a vibrant and engaged civil society is necessary for holding the government responsible for meeting its legal obligations. Mexico's neoliberal economic reforms in the 1990's and the resultant financial hardships experienced by the majority of the population have created barriers to social movements and other forms of collective expression. The Mexican people

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have experienced a democracy without citizenship not only because of the persisting structures of discrimination that disable citizenship rights but primarily because there have been few opportunities of contesting these patterns of injustice. The dramatic decline of Mexicans' confidence in its democratic institutions demonstrates that the prospects for democratic consolidation without citizenship are highly unlikely.

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