



## Los Pasos de López (Mexican elections 2018: a commentary)

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### Introduction

The triumph of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (often referred to in the press as AMLO) in Mexico's national election this first of July marks the first real democratic transition of powers in the country's history. Of course, democratic transitions have been proclaimed before. Indeed, the claim has echoed throughout the twenty-first century as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and National Action Party (PAN) alternated in the presidency and in the control of Congress. But those initial transitions were more form than substance, especially as regards the continuity of the neoliberal reforms implemented by the PRI since 1983.

A supposed “democratic transition” occurred when the PAN defeated the PRI in 2000 and continued in power with the election of 2006. Then, in 2012, the PRI regained the presidency. Many in the opposition parties, such as the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) or lesser forces on the left like the Labor Party (PT), often referred to those transitions as “simulations” or, during the 2006 elections, claimed widespread electoral violations and fraud. In contrast, the 2018 election marks an historic political transition for Mexico that, for better or for worse, cannot be characterized as anything but a democratic transition in the balance of forces at all levels of government: municipal, state, and federal.

The numbers give an idea of the dimensions of this political landslide. López Obrador won 53.17% of the popular vote, some 30 points above either of the leading party candidates (double the percentage for the PAN candidate and three times greater than the PRI candidate). Also, a majority was won in both House of Congress by the Coalition “Together We Will Make History” (*Juntos Haremos Historia*) formed for this election by López Obrador's own party (the new National Regeneration Movement, MORENA), the Labor Party, and a recently-formed right-wing party called Social Encounter (PES). MORENA also won the mayoral race in Mexico City and the majority in the capital city's Legislative Assembly, as well as five of the nine governorships that were in play. In addition, they won majorities in 19 of the 26 state

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congresses whose elections coincided with the 2018 presidential vote. But aside from these numbers, several striking political anecdotes marked this sea change in the political balance of forces. Two are circulating insistently now:

Anecdote A: MORENA has now won control of the local municipal government in Atlacomulco, a city in the powerful state of Mexico and birthplace of the outgoing president Enrique Peña Nieto, who governed the state from 2005 to 2011, before becoming president in 2012. Worse yet, Atlacomulco is the seat of a famous group of PRI power-brokers associated with figures like Carlos Hank González (Mexico's counterpart to New York's Robert Moses) and Alfredo Del Mazo (Peña Nieto's great uncle). They formed the core of the powerful Atlacomulco Group, a dominant consortium that operated during the PRI's long history of corporate political control over the heavily-populated central region of Mexico with its vast resources, institutional infrastructure, and wealth concentrated both in the state of Mexico and Mexico City.

Anecdote B: Even now in late July 2018, if you make a *Google* search for "Mexican Political Parties," a common result is an image of the logos of the three parties accompanied by the following statement: "Mexican politics is dominated by three political parties: the National Action Party (PAN), the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)." Surely, this will soon be updated, but it does, indeed, reflect the evolution of politics in Mexico over the last 30 years. Today, however, MORENA has replaced the PRD in this tripartite control of the politics in the country, and the deposition of the PRD actually began a year ago, again, in the state of Mexico, where the gubernatorial election occurs 1 year before the presidential election. Given the State's enormous power, political analysts often see elections there as test cases for the following year's presidential contest. In 2017, Alfredo del Mazo was the PRI candidate, a cousin of the PRI President Enrique Peña Nieto and the son and grandson of former governors. At that time, the recently-created MORENA party was contending as an important part of López Obrador's campaign for presidency in 2018. A few weeks before the election, when it was reasonably clear in the polls that del Mazo had only a weak 3–4-point lead over the MORENA candidate, López Obrador strategically negotiated with his former party—the aforementioned PRD—to form a coalition in which the PRD would withdraw its candidate in favor of MORENA's candidate. However, the PRD refused, and their candidate's resulting 17.84% of the vote turned out to be determinant for the PRI's victory by a tight 2.78% margin: del Mazo with 33.56% of the vote over second-place MORENA at 30.78%. As a result, when the PRD sought to form a coalition of left-wing parties for the 2018 presidential election that would include MORENA, the Labor Party (PT), and Citizens Movement (MC), López Obrador rejected the offer and joined forces with the PT, and PES in a mix of left- and right-wing parties.

But beyond numbers and anecdotes, this change in the balance of forces involves an even more fundamental transition away from the corporate structure of Mexican political hegemony that, at its strongest, was a hegemonic block built from a very clear collective political organization of not-so-clearly-represented sectors of the Mexican population. This hegemonic project began mainly in the 1930s with General Lázaro Cárdenas, and developed as the PRI evolved from its previous incarnations as the National Revolutionary Party (PRN, 1929–1938) and the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM, 1938–1946) over a five-decade period (1930–1980) marked by agrarian reform and modernization through industrialization aimed at the substitution of

imports within a welfare state based on the Keynesian economics of demand. However, a series of severe political and economic crises from the mid-1960s into the 1970s led to a change in the command of the PRI's hegemonic project when a new generation of leaders (often called "the technocrats") introduced a new era of neoliberal reforms in 1983. These changes were instigated in response to crises, but always from above, often under outside influences and through neoliberal reforms based on supply-side economics and the insertion of Mexico into global markets. Amazingly, those movements were still controlled by the aforementioned hegemonic block, despite the fact that it was weakening as its political fabric unraveled thread-by-thread with each ensuing economic or political crisis, including the following:

1. The financial crisis of 1987 that triggered hyperinflation, but was "controlled" through a pact of "Solidarity" among the leaders of the three sectors of the PRI: workers, peasants, and the popular sector (all now euphemisms from past reforms that referred to the different confederations of unions still under PRI control);
2. The simultaneous, expanding political crisis within the PRI leadership, which began around 1987 with the presidential candidacy of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, blossomed into a political struggle with widespread claims of fraud, and propitiated the formation of the PRD as an opposition party led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (Lázaro Cárdenas' only son);
3. After several years of rapid reforms smoothed over by the broad opportunities of a major public works program also called "Solidarity," and the more specific opportunities created by the privatization of large public utilities and federal landholdings, especially in strategic regions for urban, industrial and tourism development, the crisis that marked the end of Salinas' administration and the beginning of Ernesto Zedillo's presidency involved such transforming events as: (i) the Neo-Zapatista uprising that coincided with the implementation of the NAFTA free trade agreement, (ii) the assassination of then PRI presidential candidate, Donaldo Colosio, in March, 1994 (replaced by Zedillo), and (iii) Zedillo's election in August and inauguration in November, which were greeted by a major devaluation and financial meltdown in December; and
4. The 1995–2000 period characterized by increasing unrest and struggle, accompanied by surprising new initiatives for collective organization, resistance, and negotiation, such as the *Barzón* Movement,<sup>1</sup> that further unraveled the fabric of the PRI's hegemonic block.

By the year 2000, the tripartite system of political parties, PRI/PAN/PRD, was clearly ensclosed at the municipal and state levels of government, but the complex politics and power of the PRI's collective organization of unions and confederations from the days of the corporate structuring of different sectors of society persisted in coalitions and alliances that crossed party lines to support the continuity of such well-known practices as: *presidencialismo*, in which the standing leader at all levels of government (federal, state, and municipal) defined and controlled due process with impunity always in ("sometimes negotiated") accordance with the all-encompassing principles of hierarchy reaching to the political apex of the President of the Republic and, of course, *corruption* (largely, the use of public property for private gain) organized around solidarities built on clientage, complicity, and an idiom of privilege associated with family ties and class affiliations. Only now in 2018

<sup>1</sup> *Barzón* was the name of a social movement of debtors resulting from the 1994 devaluation crisis. Its core members were farmers and ranchers, but the movement quickly grew to include a wide range of debtors, both urban and rural. *Barzón* refers to the yoke ring attached to farm implements like plows.

do these continuities begin to appear as possibly threatened, an impression implicit in many of the recent collective negative reactions to López Obrador's landslide victory after presenting a campaign platform largely predicated on the elimination of privilege, *presidencialismo*, and corruption from the government.

## Living through the Mexican political transition

Our family began in the midst of the crisis at the end of the presidency of López Portillo in 1982, which led to the technocratic transition in the PRI. We had come to Xalapa, Veracruz, to work on a research team led by the anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1908–1997). In 1983, the start of formal neoliberal reforms by the PRI technocrats, our first son, Leopold (co-author of this article), was born. As he grew and our other two children arrived, we lived through the ensuing political and economic changes and adjusted to the ground rules laid down by Aguirre Beltrán, who had dedicated his life work to the nationalistic movement coordinated within the PRI's hegemonic project called "indigenismo." This movement was aimed at organizing the indigenous population as affiliates with the National Peasant Confederation (Confederación Nacional Campesina, CNC) and acculturating them as citizens of the Nation, living and participating collectively at the municipal levels of government. Indeed, Aguirre Beltrán had led the creation and organization of the Coordinating Centers of the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI, in English, The National Institute for Indigenous Affairs) aimed at implementing these policies. It is notable that during the 1970s, while still in his twenties, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was the Director of a Coordination Center of the INI in his home state of Tabasco as well as a State Delegate of the INI when Aguirre Beltrán was his Executive Director.

Aguirre Beltrán was a key collaborator in the PRI's original hegemonic project of nation state formation, and as we began to work on his research team, we quickly learned the academic norms associated with that project: we were to publish the results of our research exclusively in Spanish and to seek no international funding for the ongoing projects. These norms were clearly beginning to change during this period but slowly. Indeed, as a faithful collaborator in the PRI project, Aguirre Beltrán agreed to accompany the Salinas campaign to the Nahuatl- and Totonac-speaking areas in the state of Veracruz. He traveled with Salinas and another much younger anthropologist, Arturo Warman, who only a decade earlier had participated in an important critique of the politics of *indigenismo* and Mexican anthropology's role in its development and implementation.<sup>2</sup> When Aguirre Beltrán returned from this campaign tour, he was notably depressed and, at almost 80 years of age, probably aware that political support of the project of nation state formation to which he had dedicated his professional career was being withdrawn, and the project itself radically reformed. Now in 2018, many of us are left wondering over López Obrador's project for Mexico and the weight which his formative experience in the original PRI program before the neoliberal reforms will bear on his leadership and policies during the next 6 years.

In the midst of the economic turmoil and political struggle at the start of the Salinas administration (1988–1994), we relocated to Zamora in Michoacán, the home state of the

<sup>2</sup> *De eso que llaman Antropología Mexicana*, ed. Arturo Warman et al., 9–38. México: Editorial Nuestro Tiempo. [Editor's note: See the DA Forum (Volume 41, number 4, pp. 295–341) in which Roth and other anthropologists discuss the relevance of this book a half-century after its publication.]

Cárdenas family and one of the key centers of political strife over the imposed neoliberal project. In the state of Michoacán, reactions to the Salinas administration were often violent at the municipal levels of government. Opposition parties attempted to violently depose local PRI administrations imposed from above or through oftentimes fraudulent local elections. Much of this opposition was tied to the legacy of General Cárdenas and policies which provided guarantees for minimum levels of general access to health, education, housing, and employment, policies which López Obrador has always actively supported and clearly continued to do so during the 1990s as an important member of the PRD opposition under the leadership of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and while serving as the national president of the PRD from 1996 to 1999 and as the elected PRD mayor of the Federal District from 2000 until 2005 when he resigned to become the PRD candidate in the 2006 presidential elections.

This was López Obrador's first of three attempts at the presidency. His tenure as the mayor of the Federal District (Mexico City) had been hugely successful. Indeed, through a combination of social welfare programs and massive public works, he had become a very popular politician at the national level, and polling showed him with a narrow lead over the other candidates for the presidency, Felipe Calderón for the PAN and Roberto Madrazo for the PRI. However, during the campaign, a series of political attacks and corruption scandals that involved members of his Mexico City government narrowed his lead, especially in the final week before the election. When the election results came in, the PAN candidate, Felipe Calderon, won by a 0.6% margin of the vote. In a country with an electoral history fraught with fraud and abuse by the ruling party, this margin of victory did not go uncontested. A general climate of protest took over Mexico City, engulfed public universities, and spread to numerous other cities. Faced with this post-election reaction, the outgoing Fox administration offered to negotiate possible reforms of the electoral system. Much needed reforms were offered, such as the possibility of staging runoff elections between the two leading candidates in those cases in which no candidate received more than 50% of the electoral vote (called "segunda vuelta" in Spanish). Such measures would have reduced in important ways the strategic manipulations of the electoral process by the dominant parties in collusion with the myriad of marginal parties, many of which appear to seek the minimum electoral votes for registration in order to benefit from constitutionally guaranteed public financing. But instead of channeling this fight into such reforms of the electoral process followed by productive legislative opposition, López Obrador proclaimed himself the legitimate president of Mexico and created a "performative" presidency with a shadow cabinet and no institutional support. To many in Mexico, this response was no more than a childish tantrum.

López Obrador's reaction to the 2006 election is still a source of questioning and commentary. Nevertheless, the events of the last 12 years severely undermined the public's confidence in the policies of both the Calderón (2006–2012) and the Peña Nieto (2012–2018) administrations. During Calderón's administration, a war was declared on organized crime but was then extended to include the informal economy. As a result, homicide rates soared. In 6 years, an estimated 80,000 people died. Peña Nieto's presidency has been dedicated to legislative reforms in areas such as education and energy, but with apparently no planned administration of the implementation of these reforms, as the ensuing shortages, violent protests, and production problems attest. Without doubt, the 2018 election results reflect this growing dissatisfaction with the results of the PAN and especially the PRI administrations of the last 18 years.

## Final considerations

“Los pasos de López” roughly translates as “López’s path,” but for readers of Mexican literature, it also evokes Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s last novel, *Los pasos de López*, a parody and historical satire of the Queretaro conspiracy during the early phase of Mexico’s independence from Spain. Similarly, “los pasos de López” could allude to López Obrador’s path to the presidency and, at the same time, Ibargüengoitia’s use of a very common Mexican surname and the narrative of everydayness to describe the scenes of the Queretaro conspiracy and its aftermath as a parody of the standard narrative form assumed appropriate for evoking a sacred national memory.

In Mexico, López, like Smith or Jones in the USA, is a very common surname. Since colonial times, Mexican surnames have been treated as important markers of family heritage with subtle notions of nobility. Surnames such as those of the technocrat presidents, De la Madrid, Salinas de Gotari, and Zedillo Ponce de León, are for many markers of family membership and denote perhaps foreignness but also a certain exclusivity. By contrast, López denotes commonality, the everyman.

Such, at least, is a “classist” view current in comments and innuendo heard in numerous conversations and commentaries during everyday gatherings involving waiting (bank lines, immigration at the airport,<sup>3</sup> grocery checkout, and so on); references to “López” as the newly elected president often convey this classist feeling. There is an implied complaint: the election of López to the high office of the presidency is somehow, somewhat, out of place. Of course, it is an implied complaint, which appears to reference its senders and reference them as concerned with class privilege. Apparently, class membership is a necessary filter to assure Mexico’s future. The election indicates otherwise for a notable majority of the electorate, but the division is there and points to a notable polarization.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal experience from July 2, 2018, in Mexico City