

Do the Elections Matter?

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H.L. Mencken, a satirical U.S. critic, thought that "the saddest life is that of a political aspirant under democracy. His failure is ignominious and his success is disgraceful". Whenever I read these lines the Mexican elections come to mind, particularly the intermediate ones this coming June.

According to the most fundamental principle of electoral democracy, elections are the means by which voters elect their representatives and governors. Mexico has advanced a great deal in this dimension of democracy and has constructed solid electoral institutions that (generally) receive wide recognition. That said, the transcendence of the upcoming elections is distinct, from my perspective, from what is commonly assumed. What follows is my evaluation of what really matters on this occasion.

First, there will be gubernatorial elections in nine Mexican states, for local legislative powers in 17 and the totality of the House of Representatives will be elected. State elections have evident local relevance, above all those that will elect governors, typically landed lords and masters. From the national point of view, what's important is how many governorships each party wins or loses, but this is more a dalliance in arm wrestling (who's stronger) than a factor of universal transcendence.

Second, the case of federal legislative branch is different. Independently of the final result, President Peña's government has demonstrated the capacity of achieving the approval of any law initiative, thus the true importance of the election is strictly symbolic. For the federal government it is crucial to attain a victory, which it could tout as popular ratification of its political project, something not insignificant in view of the extremely low popularity of the President. For the same reason, for the opposition political parties it is imperative for the PRI not to reach the threshold of 42.8% of the popular vote (which triggers the so-called "governability clause" giving 8% additional seats to that party), with this denying to it the absolute majority. In any case, the issue is one of symbolism.

Third, what's not in dispute is which party's going to be the largest in the House of Representatives. It's evident that the PRI will continue to be the factotum, whether it wins the absolute majority or not. Nor is it in dispute that there's a high likelihood that the PRI-Verde combination will hold a majority of seats in the House of Representatives. As that is not the case in the Senate, which continues the same for the remainder of the Peña six-year term, negotiation with the other parties will be similar to that of the past two years.

Fourth, there will be two particularly relevant races. The first is between the PRD and Morena parties, Morena being Lopez Obrador's party that spun off PRD. Although the total vote of the Left continues to be around 22% of the total, the way those votes end up being distributed,

now between those two parties, will be of great transcendence. On the one hand, Morena, headed by Manuel López Obrador, seeks to create conditions for his presumed presidential candidacy in 2018. On the other hand, the PRD wants to continue maintaining leadership of the Left in general. There's much involved in that vote distribution.

Fifth, another relevant race will be for third place globally. Electoral legislation consecrates three "great" parties, to which it grants extraordinary benefits and prerogatives. To date, these three great parties are the PRI, PAN and PRD. One leading question is which of the two parties of the Left resulting from the division of the PRD will register a greater percentage of the vote. But a second question, no less relevant, is whether the Verde Ecologista Party will surpass the parties of the Left. In the last election, the Green Party obtained nearly 6% of the vote, a number suggesting a low probability of its becoming the third political force. However, recent polls place that party at 13% of voter preferences, opening up all sorts of possibilities. In contrast with PRD and Morena, the Green Party is a quasi-family business that, potentially, would set in place a party clearly not prepared to govern (nor is this its historic objective) at the heart of the country's political and legislative negotiations.

Finally, the result of the legislative election will depend nearly completely on voter participation levels on Election Day. The PRI strategy is oriented toward raising voter abstention, a measure that, given the well-oiled PRI electoral machinery, would potentially allow it to end with a much larger number of seats in Congress than current polls suggest. And that's what's tragic: instead of vying for a better government, the race is strictly about which party appropriates more public funds and power sources. Nothing new under the sun.

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