

# 9

## CASE STUDY: MEXICO

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Studying Mexico introduces students of AP Comparative Government and Politics to a lesser-developed country with a higher GDP than many in the global south. Mexico is classified as a newly industrialized country (NIC) due to its relatively high level of industry for a developing country, part of which is due to its proximity to the United States. Mexico has a rising middle class and a diverse economy as a result of open trade programs such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The political process became more democratic with the end of single party dominance in the year 2000. Nevertheless, Mexico is by no means free of troubles. The global economic downturn has taken a toll on Mexico. Violence related to the illegal drug trade is currently at the top of the list of public policy challenges faced by a weak government. Numerous government officials charged with the task of ending the illegal drug trade are involved in corruption rings, making the problem seemingly insurmountable, as the illegal drug trade is a threat to democratic processes.

### KEY TERMS

*cacique*

*camarillas*

debt crisis

*ejidos*

Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)\*

*haciendas*

Institutional Revolutionary  
Party (PRI)\*

*maquiladoras*

*mestizos*

multiparty system

National Action Party (PAN)\*

North American Free Trade  
Agreement (NAFTA)

one party-dominant system

\*Term is provided in English with the commonly used acronym of the Spanish term provided in parentheses.

Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)*	pendulum effect
patron-client politics	principle of nonreelection
PEMEX	<i>sexen</i>

\*Term is provided in English with the commonly used acronym of the Spanish term provided in parentheses.

## KEY CONCEPTS

- ❑ The Mexican revolution had a great impact on Mexican political culture, especially on the Constitution of 1917, which is still in place today.
- ❑ Mexico has a presidential system of government with a legislature featuring mixed proportional representation and a single-member district system.
- ❑ One party, the PRI, dominated politics for 70 years.
- ❑ Today, Mexico has a multiparty system, with three competitive parties: the PRD (leftist), the PRI (centrist), and the PAN (rightist).
- ❑ The single six-year term (*sexenio*) is an important feature of Mexican politics.
- ❑ For many years, Mexico suffered from electoral fraud, but the *Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE)*, or Federal Electoral Institute, helped to make elections more fair and transparent.
- ❑ Mexico had a corporatist system in which the PRI distributed benefits to key groups.
- ❑ Mexico also had a *camarilla* system (network of PRI supporters) within federal government positions.
- ❑ PRI dominance came to an end from internal and external pressures and culminated in the presidential election of 2000, when Vicente Fox of the PAN won the presidency.
- ❑ Public policy challenges include an unstable economy, the illegal drug trade, and emigration to the United States.
- ❑ Mexico is a developing country, also classified as a newly industrialized country (NIC).
- ❑ Mexico has a federal system of government.

## THE BASICS

Mexico is a poor country. Safe drinking water is unavailable for most Mexican citizens, and housing and health care are inadequate. Nevertheless, it is not as poor as some developing countries. Like most developing countries, Mexico has a national debt that amounts to a large percentage of its GDP, and pollution in the large cities like Mexico City is extremely problematic. On the other hand, the percentage of individuals in poverty is lower than in most developing countries. New industries, especially the *maquiladoras* (factories) on the border between Mexico and the United States, have grown up to provide jobs, albeit mostly low-paying ones.

Mexico has a federal system with 36 states and one federal district. The northern states are more developed and more conservative politically. The southern states are less developed and more liberal.

Mexico is ethnically diverse. Its population is a mix of Spanish descendants, native populations, descendants of African slaves, and *mestizos* (mixed population). One ethnic group, the Chiapas, largely a poor population that lives in the south, has rebelled against the government and alleged discrimination. Most citizens in Mexico are members of the Catholic Church.

## THE FORMATION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF 1917

After Mexican independence from Spain, the country was ruled for nearly a century by a series of dictators. The Mexican Constitution of 1917 is still in place today and was heavily influenced by the ideals of the revolution and the idea that political power should be limited by the constitution. The Mexican constitution is modeled somewhat on that of the United States; on paper at least, it provides for a system of checks and balances. For example, the *sexenio* and the principle of nonreelection both were instituted as a result of the revolution. The *sexenio* is the rule that the Mexican president can serve only one six-year term, which is nonrenewable. Under the principle of nonreelection, no national political leader can succeed himself or herself. This includes the president as well as members of the legislature. Additionally, the constitution established the principle of state control over national resources (effectively creating PEMEX, the nationally owned oil industry). This is a source of pride for many Mexican citizens. Banks were nationalized, and the peso was devalued, hurting the wealthy. Finally, the *haciendas*, or large land estates, were broken up in favor of *ejidos*, or state-owned land worked by peasants.

### PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

The Constitution of 1917 established a presidential system of government with a bicameral legislature. The president is elected by direct national popular vote. The legislature is elected separately, with an upper house consisting of three senators representing each of the states and a lower house (Chamber of Deputies) representing the population. All federal offices are subjected to strict term limits, leaving the president to lead an inexperienced legislature, and generally giving the president wide power.

### SENATE ELECTIONS

The original constitution was altered due to concessions made to appease those sympathetic to non-PRI rule. The senate, for example, is elected in a rather unique way. Senators run for office in pairs, and there is a first and second candidate in each pair. The pair that gets the most votes takes the first two senate seats and the first candidate in the second pair gets the third seat. By having such a system, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was virtually guaranteed a minimum of two senate seats out of three in every state. The lower house is elected by a combination of first-past-the-post and

proportional, and the number of seats selected proportionally was increased in order to appease those who wanted multi-party rule.

## MEXICO'S POLITICAL PARTIES

Mexico has a multiparty system with three competitive parties: PRI, PRD, and PAN.

### INSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTIONARY PARTY (PRI)

Throughout much of the twentieth century, one party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (or PRI), dominated Mexican politics. While the constitution allowed for many parties to form and run candidates, the PRI was practically the only party that won national elections. Until the year 2000, every president for 70 years had been a member of the PRI, and the PRI dominated the upper and lower houses of the legislature by large margins. Gubernatorial and mayoral seats were also won primarily by PRI party members. Within the PRI, there were primaries; however, the outgoing president would simply handpick his successor, a tradition that would not end until the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000).

The PRI remained in power in part due to voter fraud, ballot box stuffing, and other illegalities. Generally, the PRI won elections by large—sometimes unbelievable—margins. During the period of PRI rule, Mexico had strong patron-client relations known as *camarillas*. These *camarillas* were large networks of PRI supporters who gained benefits from PRI rule, including jobs with the federal government and promotions based on loyalty and getting out the vote.

The PRI also used patron-client networks to link the party to the poor and rural population. Direct economic or personal benefits were distributed through a *cacique*, or local party boss, who in return expected political support for himself and for the PRI in regional and national political activities. Voting for the PRI was considered patriotic. The Mexican PRI president was able to dominate the PRI-staffed bureaucracy. The Mexican president benefited from a compliant PRI-dominated legislature each term. Additionally, due to the principle of nonreelection, the legislative branch was inexperienced. In short, the PRI president had wide powers.

During PRI rule, Mexico also had a strong tradition of corporatism. Unlike corporatism in the United Kingdom, corporatism in Mexico stemmed from patron-client politics and corruption. Peasants and workers were organized into PRI-dominated organizations that officially served as unions but were really mechanisms to pressure citizens into voting for the PRI. Not only were votes bought through these organizations, but services such as health care and jobs were also provided, creating a brand of party loyalty that was unrivaled. Even the press was PRI dominated. News organizations were officially independent, but in practice they remained uncritical of PRI leaders.

Political scientists began to classify Mexico as a one party-dominant system, or a political system in which many parties are allowed to run candidates but only one party wins most elections. Such a system is often contrasted with a one-party system in which only one party is legally allowed to hold office.

## PRI IDEOLOGY

The PRI is officially considered to be a centrist party ideologically. However, one could either argue that the PRI has no real political ideology or that its ideology depends on the leader. The term pendulum effect stems from the idea that the PRI swings from the far left to the far right, depending on who is leading it. For example, Lazaro Cardenas, a leftist, nationalized the banks and set the exchange rate. In contrast, a subsequent rightist PRI president privatized many state-owned firms and made a move to privatize the oil industry.

Additionally, the PRI has had many factions. Some PRI members pushed for political reforms that might assist opposition parties in gaining power, such as establishing an independent electoral board or adding proportional elections in the legislature. Other more traditional PRI members, often referred to as the “dinosaurs” of the party, argued against such reforms.

## OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES IN MEXICO

Mexico has two additional political parties with political significance. The National Action Party (PAN) is supported by Catholics and northern businesspeople. The PAN advocates free trade policies, lower taxes, and privatization and is a traditional right-wing party. The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) supports state control over industry, rights for minorities, and social services for the poor. The PRD is a traditional left-wing party. Other minor parties throughout the country also compete for elections.

## THE END OF ONE-PARTY DOMINANCE

One-party rule came to an end in 2000 with the presidential election of Vicente Fox, a member of the PAN. While his election sent shock waves around the world, observers argue that many political reforms that had already taken place within the country led to this event. The PRI had given in to internal and external pressures to reform, and these reforms made the Fox election possible.

First, the number of seats in the lower house of the legislature (Chamber of Deputies) elected proportionally was established in 1954; this number was later increased to 200 (out of a total of 500 seats). This allowed more members of the PAN, PRD, and other minor parties to take seats, eventually leading to a divided government. In the upper house (Senate), a second-past-the-post system was instituted, which effectively allows the PRI to control two of the three senate seats per state and another party to potentially hold the third seat. In this system, senate candidates run in pairs. Within these pairs, there is a first-listed candidate and a second-listed candidate. The pair that wins the most votes takes the first two senate seats. The first-listed candidate from the pair that wins the second-most votes takes the third seat. These two electoral reforms gradually led to non-PRI candidates winning seats in both the lower and upper houses of the legislature. Thus, the PRI lost a majority in the legislature for the first time in 1997.

Following the 1988 presidential election in which there were allegations that the PRI candidate lost the vote and stole the election

through voter fraud, the PRI faced international pressure, including from the United States, to have a more fair and transparent electoral system. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) was then established to count votes and monitor elections. This independent electoral organization limited the PRI's ability to manipulate the outcome of elections through fraud. The IFE monitored elections at all levels, requiring picture IDs and independent counting and reporting of vote totals.

### AP Tip

Mastery of terminology can be a challenge in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. Many terms have similar meanings. On the AP Exam, some terminology may be different from the terms used in the core text you have studied. You should be able, however, to make educated guesses about these similar terms. Here are a few examples of terms related to developing countries that may appear on the exam.

- ▣ Neoliberal economic policies: Privatization programs in the developing world
- ▣ Newly industrialized countries (NICs): Developing countries, like Mexico, with an industrial base
- ▣ Third World: Developing countries, like Mexico
- ▣ Lesser-developed countries (LDC): Developing countries, like Mexico
- ▣ Developing countries: Countries, like Mexico, that have a lower GDP and lower socioeconomic indicators than most developed countries

Before the IFE was created, the PRI appeared to win each election in a landslide, but the IFE reported closer elections. This gave the opposition parties increasing legitimacy. Eventually, candidates from other parties than the PRI began to win (although by small margins at first) at the state level, including Vicente Fox of the PAN party who had been a governor prior to being elected president.

When Mexico faced an economic crisis in the 1980s, the PRI was blamed. Strikes at *maquiladoras* and low incomes for peasant farmers caused a political backlash against the PRI. It began to lose hold over its corporatist networks, and this dissatisfaction played a growing role in many elections.

Ernesto Zedillo, the PRI president, announced he would not handpick a successor. In 2000, Fox ran in opposition to the PRI candidate. The IFE closely monitored the 2000 election. The outcome of this election made it clear that the one-party dominant system had been reformed, and Mexico now had true party competition.

## FOX'S PRESIDENCY AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2006

Vicente Fox had a tough time in office from 2000 to 2006. Faced with a divided government and economic crisis, he had difficulty passing legislation. Poor economic conditions led to massive emigration, and Fox attempted to work with President Bush to open the borders. This was brought to a quick halt after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The election of 2006 proved to be extremely competitive, with each of the three main parties running viable candidates. Roberto Madrazo ran under the PRI label after a bitter primary. He was considered to be of the old guard—a “dinosaur.” He ran against Felipe Calderón of the PAN party (who was not supported by Vicente Fox) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD party. The vote was so close that the top two candidates were separated by less than a percentage point, and no one candidate won a majority. Because the Mexican constitution does not require a runoff, Calderón of the PAN party was officially declared the winner. Allegations of fraud occurred as did protests, and Obrador’s supporters vowed to follow him as the legitimate president. This instability was cause for concern.

## POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Mexicans are very patriotic and have a strong national identity—traits that are often weak in developing countries. These characteristics partly come from the Mexican tie to Spanish culture but also from the culture of its indigenous peoples. The War of Independence and the Revolution are sources of pride, and figures such as Pancho Villa, Father Hidalgo, and Zapata are legendary and still widely respected. The culture remains largely male-dominated and masculine. However, more women in Mexico are becoming educated, and there is a viable women’s movement that has demanded equal rights and equal pay. Women in Mexico make up a higher percentage of the legislature than in most developed countries.

## PUBLIC POLICY AND THE RULE OF LAW

The biggest public policy challenge for Mexico is stabilizing and improving the economy. Mexico is an oil exporter, exporting most of its oil and natural gas from the state-owned PEMEX. When oil prices worldwide are high, they boost the Mexican economy. Consequently, when they are low, economic problems arise. In the 1980s, both oil prices and the Mexican economy spiraled downward. Government revenues did not keep up with spending. Like other countries, Mexico went into debt and borrowed from northern banks such as those of the United States. By the end of the decade, Mexico faced a debt crisis, with debt approaching 70 percent of its GDP.

When oil prices fell, the government nationalized the banks and lowered the exchange rate in an attempt to prop up the peso’s value. This resulted in inflation, and, as was typical, the PRI president reversed these two policies. Although Mexico has never fully recovered from this

economic crisis, the economic situation later stabilized with assistance from the United States under President Clinton and the debt reduction programs of Mexico's President Miguel de la Madrid. Madrid emphasized privatization programs, cuts in government spending, and free trade while at the same time cutting social services.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a treaty among Canada, the United States, and Mexico that eliminated tariffs and reduced other barriers to trade. NAFTA has had both positive and negative impacts on the Mexican economy. Many industries have developed in Mexico, which has created a diverse economy and jobs. On the other hand, the new jobs have paid low wages and have not lifted many Mexicans out of poverty. One of NAFTA's goals was to reduce illegal immigration from Mexico to the United States by improving the Mexican economy, but NAFTA did not significantly change the immigration rate.

The signing of the NAFTA treaty served as the catalyst for a guerilla movement by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). The group seized four towns in the southern state of Chiapas and demanded better jobs, land, democracy, indigenous rights, and an immediate repeal of NAFTA. The conflict brought to light the significant economic disparity between the mostly impoverished southern regions and the more heavily industrialized northern regions of Mexico.

The illegal drug trade within Mexico and between Mexico and the United States has caused violence and instability in Mexico in recent years. Gang violence, kidnappings, ransom payments, and corrupt government officials cooperating with drug gangs have made world news. By some estimates, as many as one-third of all government officials and/or police officers are tied to the drug gangs. This has caused a lack of legitimacy and a sense of lawlessness within the country. The drug problem has increased tensions between the United States and Mexico, because many of the guns used by gangs are manufactured in the United States.

Emigration is also a problem for Mexico. Many workers who are unable to find jobs in Mexico flee the country for employment in the United States. This furthers strains the relationship between Mexico and the United States.

### AP Tip

On the AP Exam, you will be asked to analyze charts, graphs, and perhaps political cartoons. You may have to interpret data on the multiple-choice section, the free-response section, or both. To prepare for this, go over the charts and graphs in your core textbook (in addition to those in this *Fast Track to a 5* guide). Ask yourself, "What are the major trend(s) in this chart?" and "What is the significance of this and why?" See if you can come up with cogent, logical answers. This will be good practice for the AP Comparative Government and Politics Exam.