

**NGOs Take to Politics: The Role of Non-Governmental
Organizations in Mexico's Democratization Effort**

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Glossary

IFE	<i>Instituto Federal Electoral</i>
AC	<i>Asociaci3n Civil</i>
Alianza*	<i>Alianza C3bica, A.C.</i>
AMDEC*	<i>Asociaci3n de Mujeres para los Derechos Civiles, A.C.</i>
AMDH*	<i>Asociaci3n Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, A.C.</i>
ANCIFEM*	<i>Asociaci3n Nacional C3bica Femenina, A.C.</i>
Centro Prodh	<i>Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agust3n Pro Juárez, A.C.</i>
CEMEFI	<i>Centro Mexicano Para la Filantrop3a, A.C.</i>
CIDHAL	<i>Comunicaci3n, Intercambio y Desarrollo Humano en Am3rica Latina, Centro para Mujeres, A.C.</i>
CMDH*	<i>Comisi3n Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, A.C. (NGO)</i>
CNDH	<i>Comisi3n Nacional de Derechos Humanos (State agency)</i>
COFIPE	<i>C3digo Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales</i>
Convergencia*	<i>Convergencia de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia, A.C.</i>
CPC	<i>Comisi3n de Participaci3n Ciudadana (C3mara de Diputados)</i>
FAM*	<i>Foro de Apoyo Mutuo, A.C.</i>
GIMTRAP*	<i>Grupo Interdisciplinario sobre Mujer, Trabajo y Pobreza, A.C.</i>
MCD*	<i>Movimiento Ciudadano Por la Democracia, A.C.</i>
MLD*	<i>Mujeres en Lucha por la Democracia, A.C.</i>
NAFTA	<i>North American Free Trade Agreement</i>
NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organization</i>
PDP	<i>Promoci3n de Desarrollo Popular, A.C.</i>
PRD	<i>Partido de la Revoluci3n Democr3tica</i>
PRI	<i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</i>
RMALC*	<i>Red Mexicana de Acci3n frente al Libre Comercio, A.C.</i>

*These organizations were considered civic NGOs and NGO networks for the purposes of this study.

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Mexican non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are growing in number and size, and receiving more and more attention as promising social actors. Now in the midst of unprecedented political opening in Mexico, many NGOs have turned their sights to the political arena. A new movement of civic NGOs has arisen since 1988 to fight for transparent political processes and political accountability, and to build a democratic culture among citizens. Civic NGO spokespersons are enthusiastic about the important role their organizations have played in Mexico's democratization, but are civic NGOs really a democratizing force? To what extent and in what ways have NGOs helped to democratize the country?

In this paper I will attempt to answer those questions, by analyzing the evolution and actions of the civic NGO movement over the last decade, as well as the results they have produced. I will then turn my focus to a bigger picture, the course of Mexican democratization. Breaking down the requisite components of democracy and exploring them separately, I will analyze the character and strength of the civic NGO's democratic contribution.

This paper is based upon primary research conducted in Mexico City in June and July of 1997, during which the first-ever elections were held for the office of Mayor of Mexico City, previously an appointed position. Amidst an environment of euphoria, prompted by opposition strength and hopes of clean elections, I interviewed one representative from each of 23 Mexico City organizations, and based my analyses on the 14 of these that I later categorized as civic NGOs. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, and was supplemented with in-house studies and publications, NGO web sites, and relevant articles and advertisements in the local print media.

This research begs deeper, more systematic exploration by sociologists and political scientists alike, but makes one point clear: civic NGOs represent a burgeoning force in Mexico's political arena, and offer great promise of future change. Their long term success is anything but certain, but their achievements until now have been encouraging, and their potential is vast. As watch-dogs, educators, and interlocutors, they

have already expanded the democratic process beyond the expectations of many. Indeed, their contribution is clear today, and so is the hope they inspire for the future.

Theoretical Foundation

The first order of business in discussing the civic NGO movement is to establish a definition for a civic NGO. Defining NGOs in general is a difficult task, due to their very nature, but concentrating on the civic subset simplifies the process a bit, at least from the empirical standpoint. Fusing the empirical definition of Vicente Arredondo Ramírez with a more legalistic approach outlined by Luis Hernández Navarro, I have arrived at the following designation which I will use for civic NGOs throughout this paper. They are private entities with or without legal status; which are not for profit; with objectives of social benefit toward the community in general; without interest in pursuing group or guild demands; whose aim is to stimulate citizen participation in the areas of electoral politics, citizen agency or initiative, governmental vigilance, human rights, and environmental conservation; and who value knowledge and analysis of national problems, and citizen participation as the key to a more responsible government, rule of law, and citizen co-responsibility.¹

I have used social movement theory as the foundation for this paper, principally the premise of McAdam, McCarthy and Zald that the collective action, political opportunity, and mobilizing structures of a movement work together to determine its success or failure.² In this case, the opportunities afforded the movement by the weakened PRI and increased political opening, in conjunction with the mobilizing structures the civic NGOs inherited from their social predecessors, which can quickly mobilize a well-educated, professionalized staff and thousands of volunteers, led the movement to evolve and adopt certain forms of collective action, such as the drafting of proposed legislation, observation of elections, and production of educational materials. In

¹Vicente Arredondo Ramírez, *Hacia una nueva cultura ciudadana en México* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, FAPRODE, Foro de Apoyo Mutuo, 1996), 141; and Luis Hernández Navarro, "Notas sobre las ONG, la democracia y el desarrollo," *El Cotidiano* 12:71 (September 1995): 87.

²Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes - Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, eds. (New York:

the contemporary context these actions have enjoyed marked success.

Finally, to answer the ultimate question posed by this research, how and to what extent the civic NGOs have influenced Mexico's democratization, one needs some guide by which to measure democratic change. Notwithstanding the problematic discussed by Przeworski, who has argued that democracy is only one possible result of what appears to be a "democratic" transition, visible steps toward a more democratic society are critical in securing a positive end result, and may themselves produce the impetus for this change, starting a ball rolling that could be difficult to stop.³

I believe that if democracy is in one sense a state of affairs, it may also be thought of as a continuum. A liberalizing political system is necessarily more democratic than before, for example, even if it retains some authoritarian elements. Adopting this viewpoint, one may analyze the degree of democratic change by comparing it to an objective ideal. For the purposes of this study I have selected Roderic Camp's model, comprised of five requisites for a solid democratic state: "policy debates and political competition, citizen participation, accountability of the rules to law and representative mechanisms, civilian control over the military, and respect for the views and rights of others."⁴ I will return to these elements at the end of the paper, to structure my analysis of the civic NGOs' results.

Background

The civic NGOs were born out of the social NGOs of the 1980s, who worked to ease the suffering caused by Mexico's financial crisis, shrinking State, and austerity measures, as well as several human rights NGOs who naturally turned their sights to politics as the political scene opened itself wide. Civic NGOs inherited the network structure forged by the social NGOs, and the "second tier" orientation of the human rights organizations, which consisted of middle class citizens working for the benefit of others. The current movement's resources are heavily weighted toward the talents of a

Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-20.

³Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 37; Adrián Acosta Silva, "Imágenes de un tiempo líquido," *Nexos* XVIII:211 (July 1995): II.

professionalized, well-educated staff and the volunteer labor of well-wishers, which supplement foreign funding and limited resources from the Mexican government. The civic NGOs are unencumbered by excess bureaucracy and are therefore more flexible and efficient than some of their governmental counterparts. They are also unencumbered by money, since as *Asociaciones Civiles* they are non-profit but must pay high taxes on all of their income, and national donations are scarce, for they are not tax-deductible.⁵

The political climate has been influential in inspiring and making room for the civic NGOs' labors. First the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) began to crack in the 1980s, with both a rift between the *políticos* and technocrats, and the major split of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's democratic faction. When Cárdenas came close to upsetting Salinas in the 1988 presidential elections and the PRI used blatant electoral fraud to ensure its own victory, election reform came to be seen by many as an urgent need, and a vehicle for political change. At the same time, NAFTA talks and global neo-liberal trends placed greater emphasis on political opening and a streamlined State. Finally, the Mexican State's inconsistent repressive tendencies, commonly known as the carrot and stick approach, provided enough violence to anger and unify dissidents, but did not quell State opposition altogether.⁶

These circumstances left gaps for non-governmental actors to fill, provided them freedom of movement, legitimizing democratization rhetoric and electoral reform, which had never coexisted in Mexico. The nascent networks of small NGOs found themselves in a position to take advantage of these opportunities and trends, and turned their focus

⁴Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 227.

⁵Sergio Aguayo Quezada and Luz Paula Parra Rosales, *Las Organizaciones No Gubernamentales en Derechos Humanos: entre la democracia participativa y la electoral*, Serie ONG de los Sesenta (Mexico: Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, 1997); John Clark, *Democratizing Development: The Role of Voluntary Organizations* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1990), 7; Daniel Moreno, "ONG: Hay que poner orden," *Enfoque* 25 June 1995, 7; and Jorge Villalobos, CEMEFI, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 9 June 1997; Natalia Armijo and Sergio Garcia, eds. *Organismos no gubernamentales: Definición, presencia y perspectivas* (Mexico: Foro de Apoyo Mutuo, 1995), 17; Armando Ramírez Palomo, "Organizaciones No Gubernamentales," *El Día*, 31 July 1990, 9; Luis Hernández Navarro, "En el país de Gulliver: ONG: Democracia y desarrollo," *Enfoque*, 25 June 1995, 9; Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández, "Mexico's Difficult Democracy: Grassroots Movements, NGOs, and Local Government," *Alternatives* 17:2 (Spring 1992): 188.

⁶Samuel Schmidt, "Lo tortuoso de la democratización mexicana," *E.I.A.L.* 4:1 (1993): 95; Roderic Ai Camp, 119; Lorenzo Meyer, *Liberalismo Autoritario* (Oceano: Mexico, 1995), 102; Luis Medina Peza, *Hacia el nuevo Estado, México: 1920-1994* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), 260-5.

toward civic matters and democratization.

It was in the shadow of the 1988 elections that the civic NGO movement began, when NGOs of various ilks united in reaction to the 1990 legal reforms, which made unwelcome changes to the legal status and tax obligations of *Asociaciones Civiles*, the common legal designation for NGOs. A handful of well-educated and politically conscious NGO activists brought together by mutual grievances formed the *Convergencia de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia*, which started a wave of coalitions, networks, and individual NGOs to view democracy and political reform as a proactive solution to many of the nation's, and the sector's, problems.⁷

The bulk of this paper will deal with what is theoretically referred to as collective action, the set of mechanisms, activities, and strategies used by the civic NGO movement to achieve its goals. Many of its activities are based on three at times overlapping objectives: the elimination of authoritarian tendencies in the government, the strengthening of its democratic institutions, and the creation of a participatory culture within the burgeoning civil society. Following is an account of the means they adopted, as well as the results each prompted.

1. Elimination of Authoritarian Tendencies in the Government

To many, the objectionable characteristics of the Mexican government in the late '80s were those associated with authoritarianism: officials were corrupt, they were elected fraudulently, there was no way to hold them accountable to their constituencies and prevent abuses, and there were no plausible alternatives to the PRI. Furthermore there existed no separation of powers between the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of government; all three were under the control of the Mexican president himself.⁸

Electoral fraud was at the forefront of political panorama, and its eradication provided an obvious starting place in the struggle to combat authoritarianism but retain

⁷*Anteproyecto de Ley de Fomento a las Actividades de Bienestar y Desarrollo Social* (Mexico: CEMEFI, Convergencia, FAM, Fundaci\u00f3n Miguel Aleman, Universidad Iberoamericana, October 1995), 9-11; Eduardo Corona, *Convergencia*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 17 July 1997.

⁸For a discussion of these characteristics, see Camp.

Mexico's *de jure* political structure. This process involved collaborating on legislative reform proposals, which will be discussed in the next section, and monitoring for consistent implementation of existing laws.

Although ANCIFEM and other organizations had informally observed elections since the 1980s, the recent and most visible wave of election monitoring began in 1991 in San Luis Potosí where the AMDH and the *Centro Potosino de Derechos Humanos* monitored polling places for irregular or suspicious behavior, and the *Fundación Arturo Rosenblueth* and the *Consejo para la Democracia* organized a "quick count" in Mexico City, an independent tally of election results to make sure the government's pronouncement of the winners was accurate.⁹

These groups were among the founders of the *Alianza Cívica* in 1994, which soon became the foremost civic NGO network in Mexico, and along with other social and political actors, managed to lobby successfully for electoral reforms that legalized official observers in Mexican elections. In August of the same year, 81,620 Mexican and 934 foreign observers, organized by 15 NGOs with United Nations financing and training, were present in polling places all over the country to watch for and hoping to prevent irregular practices. Many of these participants had been recruited by civic NGOs.¹⁰

While most reports hailed the 1994 elections as clean and legitimate, the *Alianza Cívica* and its member NGOs also cited irregularities and only partial compliance with the recent reforms.¹¹ Furthermore, unequal and slanted press coverage, and huge disparities in campaign finances from one party to the next created a distorted playing field, which could only lead to unfair elections, no matter how clean they looked on election day.¹²

⁹Sergio Aguayo, *Alianza Cívica*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 16 July 1997; Sergio Aguayo Quezada, "A Mexican Milestone," *Journal of Democracy* 6:2 (April, 1995): 158; and Tere Aguilar, ANCIFEM, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 17 June 1997.

¹⁰See Article 5, Number 3 of the COFIPE which allows for electoral observation. *Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales, 1997* (Mexico: Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, 1997), 5; Rolando Martínez Murcio, "La sociedad civil: las ONG y las elecciones de 1994," in *México: El voto por la democracia*, eds. Antonio Argüelles y Manuel Villa (Mexico: Grupo Editorial Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 1994): 92; and Medina, 293-4.

¹¹ Aguayo Quezada, "The Mexican Milestone," 165-166.

¹² The study analyzed the content of six television and two radio newscasts, and four newspapers in Mexico City, and sixty-five other news sources throughout the country. Miguel Acosta Valverde, Manuel Martínez Torres, and Luz Paula Parra Rosales, *Las elecciones de 1994 en México vistas por los medios de comunicación* (Mexico: AMDH, 1995), 5, 26, 56.

In the 1997 elections, only 32,854 Mexicans and 135 foreign visitors observed the elections, with almost 5,000 of them remaining in Mexico City and the rest traveling to “high risk” zones as designated by the *Alianza Cívica*, to observe polling practices alone. Again, civic NGO members were active as observers, as well as in other capacities. For example, the MLD hosted some of the international observers in their rounds, and volunteers for the *Alianza Cívica* carried out another quick count. This time the findings were heartening. Activists noted a great improvement in the transparency of elections, despite some anomalous irregularities.¹³

Observation in 1997 went beyond just election day monitoring. As it had in 1994, the AMDH scrutinized the print and electronic media in the Federal District, watching for paid advertisements, amount of news time devoted to each candidate, and any apparent bias, and this time amazingly found more PRD publicity than publicity for the PRI. All three major parties received relatively equitable amounts of news coverage, albeit subjective. Finally, gauging each party’s budget by its advertising presence, vast improvements were made from the days when the PRI was the only visible party and outspent its opponents by a ratio of 100 to 1. It has improved throughout the country but especially in Mexico City, where this ratio in 1997 was less than 2 to 1.¹⁴

In 1994 and 1997 the CMDH contributed a posterior observation to the effort, investigating what attention cases of electoral complaints received in the then Federal Electoral Tribunal (now the Electoral Tribunal of Judicial Power of the Federation), how they were followed up, and how they ended. Finding most of the electoral complaints thrown out on technicalities, the CMDH submitted a proposal to the Congress to facilitate a more transparent trial of electoral crimes. Several of their suggestions were considered, but the results of these changes will only be known in years to come, after complaints from the 1997 elections are processed.¹⁵

¹³ “Informe de la jornada electoral 97: Irregularidades” [Web page] (Mexico: Alianza Cívica, 1997; accessed February 1998), 12; available from <http://www.laneta.apc.org/alianza>; Internet. Aguayo, interview by author.

¹⁴ During the week of June 22, 36.59% of all publicity belonged to the PRD, while only 27.89% was of the PRI, and 10.55% for the PAN. *Observación de Gastos de Campaña para Jefe de Gobierno del Distrito Federal* (Mexico: AMDH, 1997), 40-44.

¹⁵ José de Jesús Castellanos, CMDH, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 25 June 1997; José J. Castellanos, *La Observación Electoral en el contexto del Derecho a la Participación Política* (Mexico:

Generally speaking, 1994 was a boom year for election observation, but three years later these activities declined greatly. This can be attributed to three possible factors. First, 1994 was a year for presidential elections, and was the first to follow the 1988 presidential debacle. All eyes were on electoral practice, nationally and internationally. This was not the case for 1997, the first year for Mexico City to elect its own mayor, but otherwise just a midterm election three years after a set of clean elections. Second, as Sergio Aguayo suggests, people were getting tired after years of observing elections and sensed diminishing returns on their effort. Third, State attempts to restrict foreign funding, publicly denigrate the NGOs, refuse to modify the tax laws prejudicial to them, and seemingly attack certain civic NGOs such as *Equipo Pueblo*, all indicate a governmental will to impede the work of the movement.¹⁶

Election observation is the most visible of the civic NGOs' watch-dog activities, but it is not the only area. Many of the civic NGOs are geared toward the protection of human rights, which for many means cleaning up the government and forcing accountability by denouncing abuses, a practice begun decades before and strengthened by the support of international watch-dog groups in the 1980s. By the end of 1994 the AMDH found 250 human rights NGOs in existence in Mexico, who used print and telecommunications media to denounce the modern Mexican government before its citizens and the world.¹⁷

Along the same lines the *Alianza CRica* conceived of a project in 1995 designed to test the constitutional Right to Information, called the "Adopt an Official" program. The group first adopted President Ernesto Zedillo, a symbolic choice, and demanded that he divulge the amount of his salary, which he did only one year and one lawsuit later. This bold but simple gesture challenged both the legal system and presidential authority with

CMDH, 1997), 7.

¹⁶Julia Preston, "Opposition Leader Declares Victory in Mexico Election," *New York Times*, 7 July 1997, 1, A6; Sergio Aguayo, *Alianza CRica*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 16 July 1997. Constantino Casasbuenas, *Equipo Pueblo*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 23 June 1997; and Víctor Chávez, "Secuestran y golpean al diputado del PRD, Víctor Quintana S." *El Financiero*, 20 June 1997, 42

¹⁷ Aguayo Quezada and Parra Rosales, 12; and Rafael Alvarez, *Centro Prodh*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 15 July 1997.

the law itself, and was begrudgingly respected by Zedillo, Mexico's supposed reformer.¹⁸

Lastly, civic NGOs are not beyond using more traditional forms of collective action, as is the case of the AMDEC. This group, constituted by upper class ladies from Las Lomas, anxious that their voice was not being heard in national matters, marched on the President's residence at Los Pinos in 1995. A core group of 8 to 15 ladies still carries out a dignified sit-in on the lawn every Thursday morning, still awaiting the audience of President Zedillo, and pressuring him to become more inclusive in his decision-making.¹⁹

2. Strengthening of the Government's Democratic Institutions

Not all of the civic NGOs' techniques are argumentative or characterized by a negative stance toward the government. While collaboration with the government has historically been problematic and interspersed with the threat of co-optation, many civic NGOs have encouraged some degree of partnership with the State in order to reform, validate, and strengthen the democratic institutions that already exist in Mexico, and create new ones.²⁰

The highest level example of NGO-governmental collaboration is the *Comisi n de Participaci n Ciudadana*, within the Chamber of Deputies. Within this commission, NGO leaders have become active members of a congressional committee, acting as consultants and coworkers in order to foster a participatory democracy. Whether this committee is a result of governmental or NGO initiative is unclear, as it credits its inception to then Deputy Jos  Natividad Gonz lez Par s in 1994 as well as to the hard work of Civil Society's actors.²¹ The committee is composed of approximately 30 Deputies and a Consultative Council of around 80 of civil society leaders. The Council is intended to represent citizens and Civil Society in the legislative process and foster a closer relationship between Civil Society and the State.²²

¹⁸Alianza CRica, *Las violaciones al Derecho a la Informaci n de los Mexicanos* (Mexico: Alianza CRica, 1996), 5, 9.

¹⁹Magdalena Garc a, AMDEC, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 24 July 1997.

²⁰Hern ndez Navarro, 11.

²¹Comisi n de Participaci n Ciudadana, *Consulta Nacional* (Mexico: CPC, LVI Legislatura, 1996): 16.

²²*Informe de Actividades de 1996* (Mexico: AMDEC, 1996), 5; Comisi n de Participaci n Ciudadana, C mara de Diputados LVI Legislatura, *Bolet n informativo* 1:3 (May 1, 1996), 1.

Other positive works which civic NGOs may carry out to strengthen a democratic government do not necessarily involve interaction with members of the government, but a focus on institutional structures. The most obvious example deals with legislative reform, making or improving laws to set a groundwork for democratic behavior. I have already mentioned one reform backed by opposition parties and civil society which provided for legal election observation to be regulated by the IFE in 1994.²³ NGOs also participated in the reform proposal process in 1996, formulating proposals, presenting them to the Chamber of Deputies with social organizations, social movements, academics, and opposition parties in the *Propuesta Ciudadana sobre la Reforma Electoral*, though they eventually saw the fruit of years of labor disregarded altogether by the PRI in favor of a lesser reform.²⁴

Improving the voting process is more than changing the rules of the game. For example, NGOs have designed campaigns not just to amend electoral laws, but to relegitimize the electoral process. The MCD, AMDEC, and ANCIFEM are among the organizations that have distributed posters and fliers to make citizens aware that now, unlike in previous years, their vote will count. They thereby encourage the use of this fundamental democratic mechanism to improve the quality of government.²⁵

Another example of the will to use legal channels for the very sake of doing so can be seen in the case of the proposed *Ley de Fomento a las Actividades de Bienestar y Desarrollo Social*, a bill drafted by members of the *Convergencia* and other organizations, to augment the institutionalization of NGOs in Mexican society. This project demonstrated the civic NGOs' desire to adopt a more horizontal, stable relationship to the State. They suggested providing legal foundation for the government to contract projects to the NGOs, and involve them as official consultants on a variety of issues. The NGOs would provide greater transparency in their own management in exchange for more favorable taxation policies.²⁶

²³Martínez Murcio, "La sociedad civil: las ONG y las elecciones de 1994," 92.

²⁴*Informe de Actividades de 1996*, 3-5.

²⁵Aguilar, interview by author; García, interview by author; Tania Molina, MCD, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 14 July 1997; and *Campaña: ¡Ahora! Sí Piensa...Luego Vota: Hojas informativas para la ciudadanía* (Mexico: MCD, 1997).

²⁶Corona, interview by author.

The bill was submitted directly to the Chamber of Deputies in 1995. Although there is more hope for the bill now since the PRI lost its majority and its hegemony in the Chamber in 1997, in 1995 bypassing the President and sending the bill directly to the Congress was tantamount to consigning the bill to “the freezer.”²⁷ Thus the civic NGOs made the statement of respect for the integrity and the potential utility of *de jure* institutions like an independent legislature at the cost of “freezing” their own bill.²⁸

The civic NGOs did not stop with trying to improve traditional democratic structures, however. The *Alianza CRica* and its member organizations have pioneered a new program of NGO-sponsored national plebiscites or referendums, which allows the Mexican people to express itself on various issues through this form of direct democracy. Whether demanding investigation of Salinas or deciding what path the EZLN should pursue, each of these activities has attracted between 415,700 to 1,236,000 respondents. Though neither plebiscite nor referendum exists in the Constitution, they have at times goaded the government to take action on these issues, though their advice is not always heeded.²⁹

3. Creation of a Participatory Culture

A major civic NGO goal is the fostering of a citizenship culture among individual Mexicans, based on awareness and understanding of current events and the importance of their own participation. The value of participation is a difficult one to instill in a national psyche, when the model up until now has been one of “*Callar y Obedecer*,” present in every Mexican society from the Aztec’s rule to the PRI’s.³⁰ Civic NGOs believe that urging citizens to assume an active role in their country’s political transition will result in the formation of a strong Civil Society. Regardless of legislative reform or opposition wins, nothing will guarantee the continued pursuit of democracy more than a

²⁷Any bill proposed in the Chamber of Deputies by anyone other than the President has traditionally been ignored by PRI Deputies who until the 1997 elections constituted the majority. The bill is said to be frozen, or placed in the freezer, never to be seen again. Corona, interview by author.

²⁸Enrique Brito, FAM, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 6 June 1997.

²⁹Enrique Calderón Alzati, “El Programa Nacional de Consultas de Alianza CRica,” *Boletín Alianza CRica* 1:1 (May-June, 1996): 8-9.

³⁰Enrique Brito, “Consulta Civil a NiZos y NiZas de M.Jxico” (press conference at FAM offices, Mexico City, 20 June 1997).

conscientious, participatory populace with democratic values.³¹

To construct this popular base, civic NGOs have developed campaigns to engage the populace, to educate them about the political system and its recent changes, teach them how they can be a part of it, and make them want to stay involved. The first step is learning; the second step is doing.³²

Reminiscent of Gilberto Freire, civic NGO activists began to raise consciousness and a working knowledge of the Mexican system, teaching citizens about civics, citizenship, and politics, in a country where these subjects had been conspicuously absent from the public school curriculum for years. Organizations such as *Mujeres y Punto*, ANCIFEM, RMALC, and the MCD have used pamphlets, posters, websites, and workshops specifically targeted at different groups of citizens to promote citizen awareness and basic civic understanding.³³ They had a new ally in these activities, too, the newly citizenized IFE, which for the first time ever was made completely autonomous by the 1996 reforms, and collaborated with the NGOs in some of these educational activities.³⁴

This focus of the educational programs was to explain not only how the political system worked, but how it did not work as well. Prior to election day *Alianza Cívica* and AMDH distributed pamphlets and videos educating citizens about electoral crimes, such as vote buying and co-optation, hoping to minimize that kind of invisible fraud on voting day. When voters were assured their vote was theirs alone, free and secret, they were more

³¹ Brito, interview by author.

³² *Declaración Política de la Asamblea Nacional de Mujeres para la Transición a la Democracia* (Mexico: Asamblea Nacional de Mujeres para la Transición a la Democracia, 1996), 1; *Estrategia de la Asociación de Mujeres para la Defensa de los Derechos Civiles, AMDEC, A.C.* (Mexico: AMDEC, n/d), 1; “¿Quiénes somos?” [Web Page] (Mexico: MLD, accessed April 1997); available from <http://www.laneta.apc.org/mld/quienes.html>; Internet; “RMALC: The Mexican Network for Action on Free Trade” [Web Page] (Mexico: RMALC, accessed April 1997); available from <http://www.laneta.apc.org/rmalc/rmalcing.htm#principio>; Internet; *Detrás del éxito o del fracaso de las naciones se yerge la vitalidad o la indiferencia de sus mujeres* (Mexico: ANCIFEM, n/d).

³³ Aguilar, interview by author; Maria Eugenia López Brun, MLD, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 16 July 1997; Carolina Nieto de Medina Mora, *Mujeres y Punto*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 27 June 1997; and for the MCD’s Web pages for participative citizenship and younger voters see “Hacia una cultura ciudadana” [Web page] (Mexico: MCD, accessed April 1997); available from <http://www.laneta.apc.org/mcd/cultciud.htm>; Internet; and “Los 18... Espacio para jóvenes” [Web Page] (Mexico: MCD, accessed April 1997); available from <http://www.laneta.apc.org/mcd/joven.htm>; Internet.

³⁴ Miguel Acosta, AMDH, interview by author; tape recording, New Orleans, 26 January 1998.

likely to exercise it thoughtfully.³⁵ Organizations such as the MCD, *Mujeres y Punto*, and ANCIFEM produced pamphlets, posters, and radio slots with summaries of different parties' platforms, helping to make sense of the confusing onslaught of campaign advertisements, and furthering "*el voto ConSentido*."³⁶

Another common form of education takes a different approach. Many NGOs have chosen to organize forums in which invited guests, usually political party representatives or candidates, present their philosophies or platforms with NGO members or the general public. This system allows citizens to learn about the politicians and their stances, in order to cast a thoughtful vote at election time, keep tabs on officials during their terms, or weigh the merits of one party over another.³⁷

A very important component of these forums is the time allotted for questions and discussion between the audience and panelists. Civic NGOs hope that not just the exchange of information, but the act of entering into dialogue, will serve as participation training, teaching citizens more interactive and proactive behavior. These initial discussions serve as a the first step in what will later become broader citizen-government dialogue. The same effect comes from participating in any of the civic NGO events, whether partaking in the discussion of one of the forums, answering questions in a plebiscite, or becoming an election observer.³⁸

Finally, MLD also carried out education and training programs in anticipation of the 1997 elections, but theirs were geared not toward citizens at large but toward women who were even more involved in the proceedings: polling place officials and candidates.

³⁵ Hugo Armenta, "Superciudadano contra La Banda de Los Malosos Electorales" (Mexico: Alianza CRica, 1997).

Other pamphlets are "Porque tu dignidad vale m<s: vota libre y en secreto" and "El AVC de las Elecciones (A Votar Conscientemente)." "Porque tu dignidad vale m<s: vota libre y en secreto" (Mexico: Alianza CRica, 1997); and Rogelio G\mez-Hermosillo MarR, "El AVC de las Elecciones (A Votar Conscientemente)" (Mexico: Alianza CRica, 1997); *Libre y Secreto DefiJndelo!*, prod. AMDH, 16 min., 1997, videocassette; "Porque tu dignidad vale m<s," 5.

³⁶"(Vota, tu voto ahora sR cuenta!" (Mexico, AMDEC, 1997); *Manual ciudadano*, De Ciudadano a Ciudadano, 1 (Mexico: MCD, 1997); *Mi voto conSentido*, De Ciudadano a Ciudadano, 2 (Mexico: MCD, 1997); and Molina, interview by author.

³⁷Civic NGOs which have held such forums include GIMTRAP, *Centro CRico*, ANCIFEM, AMDEC, and *Mujeres y Punto*. Aguilar, interview by author; Paloma Bonfil, GIMTRAP, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 17 June 1997; GarcR, Interview by author; Gustavo Garrido, *Centro CRico*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 17 July 1997; Nieto de Medina Mora, interview by author.

The workshop for the latter was the greater production, lasting a week and training women candidates in the areas of feminine identity, effective use of the media, and strategic planning in their campaigns and careers.³⁹

Democratization

The intention of this work is to show not only a case study of how various NGOs have maneuvered in the political transition, but to attempt to define their role in it. In other words, what part do the civic NGOs play in Mexican democratization? Have their presence and their actions actually had an impact on the way politics and daily life in Mexico are carried out? I will attempt to answer these questions below, based on the attitudes of the study's respondents, and structuring my analysis according to Camp's model of democratic requisites, including policy debates and political competition, citizen participation, official accountability, citizen control over the military, and respect for others.

1. Policy Debates and Political Competition.

It is undeniable that political competition and policy debates have increased in recent years, both as the result of voluntary governmental opening and in response to public pressure. Whether the State has lost control of the liberalization process is impossible to say at this point, but it is clear that the PRI can no longer take its hegemony for granted.⁴⁰

The role of civic NGOs in political competition and policy debate is most directly connected to electoral observation. Their monitoring of campaign finances and media coverage has forced the parties and media to be more accountable for their behavior during the campaigns, and reduced the unfair advantage of one party over others. The civic NGOs' high visibility on election day through thousands of national and international observers has put enormous pressure on the government to follow the rules and accept the

³⁸ Garrido, interview by author.

³⁹Note MLD's preference for the word "feminine" over "feminist" due to the latter's radical, negative connotation. López Brun, interview by author.

⁴⁰Acosta Silva, III; and Wayne Cornelius, "Mexico's Delayed Democracy," *Foreign Policy* 95 (Summer

outcome of the vote. Civic NGOs and opposition parties were even involved in successful negotiations to legally recognize those observers and grant autonomy to the IFE, two great gains for producing reliable elections.⁴¹

NGO observation also lends legitimacy to a democratic institution that had rightfully lost the public trust during the unchallenged PRI reign. It is impossible to know based on this data how many people voted in the 1997 elections because they viewed them with new optimism, and how much of that stemmed from the assurance they felt as watchful NGO eyes warded off fraud. Indeed pamphlets, forums, and word of mouth from a variety of civic NGOs urged citizens to vote and vote thoughtfully. Some NGOs preached casting an informed vote, and while this was not directly equivalent to voting for the opposition, it must be remembered that the PRI had long retained power through uninformed votes.

Civic NGOs were therefore at least partially responsible for rejuvenating and legitimizing the corrupted institution of elections, promoting voting and voter awareness, and therefore increasing political competition. Civic NGOs did not act alone in promoting a meaningful vote. They were only part of a collective effort on the part of the strengthened opposition parties, reformists within the government, and the newly autonomous IFE. Perhaps the biggest reason for increased political competition is increased political alternatives. That is, for ten years Mexicans have voted because they have had realistic opposition candidates and parties to vote for.⁴² What civic NGOs have provided is transparency, without which the elections would likely still be fraudulent and definitely not trusted.

A meaningful electoral apparatus, including informed voters and viable choices are the reason for Mexico's new political competition, which has in turn given rise to increased policy debate. Civic NGOs have played another role in strengthening this debate, and I have alluded to it above. Through their own coalitions and alliances they have formulated proposals, declared priorities, and offered their own voices in public

1994): 58.

⁴¹*Observaci\u00f3n de Gastos de Campa\u00f1a para Jefe de Gobierno del Distrito Federal*, 40-44.

⁴²Joseph Klesner, "Changing Patterns of Electoral Participation and Official Party Support in Mexico," in *Mexican Politics in Transition*, ed. Judith Gentleman (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

debate. Their articulate presence has earned them invitations to work with the IFE, opposition parties, EZLN, and even the national legislature on new policies and stances.

The work of civic NGOs in this aspect of democratization has therefore been crucial. Their participation has expanded the policy debate and increased people's awareness that the issues they discuss are not to be left solely to Los Pinos. After all, only by fostering an active policy debate will the debate become institutionalized.

2. Citizen Participation

Mexican citizens have historically been quite active in compulsory PRI-sponsored groups and activities, but rarely in independent organizations. Popular movements began to gain strength in the 1960s, but in the 1990s these activists were joined by hosts of allies, including the independent trade unions, NGOs, and EZLN supporters, and most visibly, political opposition parties.⁴³

The emergence of these organizations has offered citizens a vehicle for protest and involvement, increased their awareness of the possibility of change, and finally, provided the government with a set of judges and public advocates ready to cry out against the least indication of unfairness or offer alternative solutions to problems. Most importantly, public opinion has helped to keep the government in check.⁴⁴

Civic NGOs have contributed to this increased activity by organizing election observation programs, plebiscites, and other high-profile events that assert a strong presence palpable at both the local and national levels. This presence serves the purpose of pressuring the government and spurring even more participation by example.

A show of force is only one benefit of participation, though it is the easier to measure. The other is a psychological change within citizens themselves. The campaigns to stimulate public participation help Mexicans develop an awareness of current events and the civic and political systems, a feeling of individual responsibility for local and national issues, and a sense that each citizen can and should make a difference. That civic

⁴³Ibid.; Luis Gutiérrez, *El Barzón*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 10 June 1997; "Official and Independent Unions Angle for Power in Mexico," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, XXVIII:1 (July/August 1994): 44-45; and Superbarrio Gómez, *Asamblea de Barrios Patria Nueva*, interview by author, tape recording, Mexico City, 9 July 1997.

NGOs have stimulated thousands of citizens of many social strata to participate in one form or another is beyond doubt.⁴⁵ How far they have come in instilling a participatory culture in the heart of all Mexicans is still unknown. By opening up a range of options and demonstrating their effectiveness, though, they must surely have had some effect on the national psyche.

3. Governmental Accountability

Politics and politicians in Mexico have traditionally not been accountable to anything but the PRI and the president. In recent years this has been changing, however. Since the electoral process has been opened to scrutiny by PRI and opposition members alike, civic NGOs and other actors have been able to educate many citizens about the issue, mobilize them as watch-dogs, and place elections on the international stage. Under these conditions the PRI is under great pressure to make the proceedings accountable to law, and the country as a whole has made enormous strides since 1988.⁴⁶ This has been a triumph for the civic NGOs, who pioneered election observation and were themselves responsible for much of the diffusion of information and rallying of volunteers.

In other areas adherence to law falls very short. In many ways governmental activities continue to be a mystery to outsiders, a collection of closely guarded secrets regarding decision-making, discretionary funds, and personal politics. Projects to force transparency, such as the *Alianza CRica's* Adopt an Official program, have only been partially successful, and any small victories along those lines are far from generalizable.⁴⁷

In terms of accountability to the constituency, Mexican officials are notoriously bad. Since there is no re-election for most offices, officials largely have a *carte blanche* to do as they please with no fear of reproach from the populace, nor concern with fulfilling their campaign promises. NGOs have attempted to bridge the resulting gap by

⁴⁴Molina, interview by author.

⁴⁵Increased participation from 1988 to the present can be illustrated by numbers of election observers, increases in civic NGOs, and numbers of voters in plebiscites. See, for example, Aguayo Quezada and Parra Rosales; Armijo and Garcia; and Enrique Calderín Alzati, "El Programa Nacional de Consultas de Alianza CRica," *Boletín Alianza CRica* 1:1 (May-June, 1996): 8-9.

⁴⁶Every respondent emphasized the improvements the system has seen since 1988.

⁴⁷Alianza CRica, *Las violaciones al Derecho a la Información de los Mexicanos* (Mexico: Alianza CRica, 1996).

encouraging citizens to take the initiative. By spreading information regarding the candidates' and parties' platforms on certain issues, beginning a dialogue between voters and politicians, and merely planting the idea that functionaries have duties they must perform, the NGOs are building an accountability mechanism into the participatory citizenry. Here again there is no data to attest to their success or failure because of the newness of their efforts.⁴⁸

4. Civilian Control over the Military

Unlike in other countries in Latin America, military control in Mexico has not been a major issue since the 1930s. After the Revolution the power and size of the Army diminished and, it came under civilian leadership without incident.⁴⁹ Because of this singular situation the military itself has presented no obvious barriers to democratization, and if it has acted in an undemocratic way, abusing human rights for example, it is at the behest of the government. Though the inner workings of the military system are rarely discussed or probed, the popularly held belief in Mexico is that the civilian control of the military. Civic NGOs have not regarded this as one of their priorities.

5. Respect for Others

Respect for the views and rights of others is a difficult concept in a culture that emphasizes the nation over the citizen, the whole over the parts, and has never attached much importance to the individual. From the PRI's perspective, the pursuit of individual rights and freedoms has always been a significant challenge. Recently, however, governmental tolerance has increased as opposition parties become stronger and more groups join in the public dialogue, though the government's patience is not equally distributed among parties or groups, as evidenced by the inordinate attacks on members of the PRD and *Equipo Pueblo*.⁵⁰ That parts of the government do not respect the views and

⁴⁸Tere Aguilar, interview by author; Gustavo Garrido, interview by author; RMALC: "RMALC: The Mexican Network for Action on Free Trade."

⁴⁹Camp, 129.

⁵⁰Mariclaire Acosta Urquidi, "Under the Volcano: Human Rights, Official Torture, and the Future of Mexican Democracy," *The Humanist* 54 (November-December 1994): 27; Medina, 281; and Schmidt, 103.

rights of the civic NGOs is obvious in their attempts to cut off their funding and reduce them in size and power.

Respect, if not in attitude at least in behavior, may be forced. Besides acting in a manner deserving of respect and promoting tolerance by example, forcing open a nominally respectful environment is an important part of the civic NGOs' struggle. The hundreds of human rights NGOs in Mexico have acted as watch-dogs since the 1980s, reacting to abuses, reporting them to a broad international audience and denouncing them to the incipient National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH). By showing that the government may not continue its repressive actions with impunity they hope to discourage further misconduct.⁵¹

Change in this area is hard to see, for one reason because there is no way of measuring such crimes with certainty, especially because until the creation of the CNDH there was no agency keeping count at all, much less uncovering institutionalized violence. What is obvious is that no matter how tolerant the government really is, citizens obviously now perceive it as lenient enough to let them to participate confidently in great numbers in many organizations outside the corporatist structure. Whether the opening that allows them to participate actively represents a government that has been constrained and feels unable to repress dissidents, or one that is genuinely more relaxed and chooses not to, the end result is greater participation.

A more open atmosphere combined with strong political competition and increased citizen participation are crucial to teaching tolerance. Only by acting tolerant over time can society truly internalize a new respect for the ideas and rights of others. This is a long term task. Civic NGO watch-dogs are only the beginning but they have made a noticeable difference.

Conclusion

For the last ten years the Mexican political sphere has undergone great changes. The one-party system has expanded to include three major parties and a host of smaller ones, and though PRI influence is still quite pervasive in many parts of the country, in

⁵¹See Aguayo Quezada and Parra Rosales.

others it has been challenged to the extent that this once omnipotent power has itself become the opposition. The country once reliant on fraudulent elections has made great strides to make them fair and impartial, using negotiation, legislation, and citizen vigilance to create and enforce changes.

The Chamber of Deputies has begun to serve as a channel of communication between society and government, and now that it is free from PRI majority may cease to function solely as a rubber stamp to presidential initiatives, initiating a real balance of powers at the national level. Meanwhile, a society trained for years to act only within the corporatist structure of the PRI has expanded its participation in opposition parties, independent unions, social movements, and civic NGO operations and special projects.

These accomplishments are cause for celebration, but they are not the end of the story. Repression remains a part of the government's political repertoire, and though officials may tolerate dissent in many camps they will not do so in all. Human rights violations and attempts to intimidate dissidents or thwart their efforts are still more common than they should be. In other areas there is evidence that government or PRI members are uncomfortable giving up their power, and though it may hurt Mexico's democratic image they are willing in extreme situations to take drastic action, as PRI Deputies did when they suddenly substituted their own election reform bill for Zedillo's radical one in 1996. Nevertheless, there is hope that abuses of power will be curbed as democratic changes become institutionalized, in new agencies such as Salinas's National Commission for Human Rights and the newly independent IFE.

No matter how much Mexico has improved, there are no guarantees that it will continue in its democratic trajectory. Institutions may be eradicated and changes withdrawn. Advocates of democracy hope that by strengthening democratic government and constructing a citizenship culture in Mexicans throughout the country they may safeguard against deeply-rooted authoritarian traditions and keep the country moving forward. How their efforts play out in Mexico's future is unknown; how they have affected the country so far is a question I will answer now.

The strength of the NGOs lies partially in their existence in a historical juncture that would allow them to operate and in which they would be taken seriously. Without

the strength of the opposition parties and the weakness of the PRI there would be no discussion for them to take part in, and tasks like election improvement would be meaningless.

At the same time, as a movement they owe their effectiveness to an internal structure comprised of small, community-based, local NGOs with tremendous capacity to mobilize volunteers, and a communications network that aligned groups and support from across the country. As opponents they were omnipresent, and to some extent innocuous enough not to offer the government a legitimate reason to repress them. At the same time they were sagacious enough to wedge themselves into political opportunities where they could be effective.

As I have outlined above, civic NGOs have been most successful in concrete tasks that involved mobilizing people. This included the high-profile job of cleaning up elections through citizen vigilance, encouraging voting, expressing a popular voice through plebiscite and referendum projects, and gaining strength themselves by wielding the sword of public opinion.

As watch-dogs their role has also been clear. Without civic NGO initiative the elections would not be either as clean or as confidence-inspiring as they are now. They therefore share great responsibility in getting opposition parties into office, at the local and national levels. The importance of that change is monumental, and it will have untold ramifications. As monitors of human rights abuses NGOs have also done thorough work, and though results are still hard to see they are coming to light.

Civic NGOs have also enhanced political dialogue, not only because their election projects facilitated plurality, but also because in coalitions or informal alliances they have added their own suggestions and proposals for election reforms and changes in NGO legal status to the discussion. They have collaborated with their peers, political parties, elected officials, the EZLN, and foreign NGOs to identify problems and solutions, and have become commonplace in national debate. Their determination to provide a communications channel from society to the State even won them a special committee within the Chamber of Deputies, a recognition of their importance as representatives of society with valuable insights to express. Even without this trophy within a once-guarded

PRI institution, the civic NGOs have clearly been a large factor in promoting policy debate, if solely for their own participation in it. The more discussion there is, the more democratic potential the country has.

One of the biggest ways in which civic NGOs could change the country is cultural. Those that aim to make society more independently participatory must cut through inertia, fear, feelings of impotence, and an over 500 year history of subservience. This goes far beyond mobilizing citizens for elections in a very exciting time. Democracy must be perennial, consistent, and not contingent upon Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's heroism or feelings of outrage at particular authoritarian events. Civic NGOs have attempted to foster a citizen awareness, a desire for democracy and a habit of expressing their expectations to the government. Though these NGOs should be lauded for their ability to rouse the masses from their slumber, many of the changes achieved over the last few years could easily be reversed if this process does not continue.

Unfortunately the building of a citizenship culture takes a long time. If it happens, though, it may be able to topple the authoritarian traditions that remain staunch in Mexican politics, such as the extreme centralization of power and the lack of accountability of politicians both to the law and to their constituencies. It would also foster not just tolerance but true respect for the views and rights of all citizens.

If civic NGO initiatives continue to enjoy the same success in the future as in the present, there is no reason to think they could not reach this goal. The movement as a whole and as individual parts has devoted considerable effort to producing educational materials, staging consciousness-raising debates and dialogues with politicians, and showing by example that individuals working together can make a difference. The road is paved with obstacles, though. The civic NGO movement is greatly threatened by attempts to cut its foreign funding, and while these organizations are renowned for their ability to run on idealism instead of money, even the most idealistic are likely to get tired if their hands get tied any tighter. Furthermore, the movement might lose steam after achieving its short term goals like increased governmental transparency, especially as opposition parties increase their wins and the legislature begins to function as an independent body. In effect, the more democratization that occurs, the less pressing a need the civic NGOs

might feel to continue working toward long range goals.

For the moment there is hope. Civic NGOs have been influential in opening the political system, increasing political competition, making the government more transparent, increasing citizen participation and awareness, expanding the democratic discourse, and reducing the level of governmental impunity. For the time being there is also a strong and widespread commitment to building a democratic culture, and thousands of capable NGOs ready to do just that. As a movement they have resisted co-optation but embraced collaboration, and have survived the blows of repression in numerous forms.

Mexico is unquestionably a more democratic place than it was ten years ago, and among other actors it may thank the civic NGO movement. Whether Mexico actually reaches a state of full democracy is a question for future political scientists, and future sociologists must determine the far reaching effects of the civic NGO movement on society at large. It is impossible to adequately analyze a social movement, or history itself, without a time lapse to put it into perspective. Only years from now will we know whether civic NGOs were a flash in the pan or the start of a generalized movement that toppled the old authoritarians for good. What we do know is that they have been an important force in the transition, and while they have not guaranteed a democratic conclusion they have very definitely helped create the conditions that would make one possible.

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