

*Why is the presidential election of 1988 a benchmark for democracy in Mexico?*

To many analysts and students of Mexican politics, 1988 will remain a significant starting point in Mexico's transition to electoral democracy. That year is significant to the PRI itself because it was the first presidential election year since 1952 that a prominent individual active in the party became a significant opposition party candidate. By 1986, leading politicians within the PRI who held ambitions to become their party's presidential candidate realized that President Miguel de la Madrid was going to pursue a neo-liberal economic strategy that was opposed by the traditional wing of the party. This wing included Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the former governor of Michoacán and son of Mexico's most popular president, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, a former president of the PRI. These two figures, along with other leading members of the party, formed a "Democratic Current" within the party and ultimately were forced out of the PRI, taking a number of prominent politicians with them. When Carlos Salinas de Gortari was designated the PRI candidate, a number of smaller leftist parties obtained recognition and ran against him, as did the National Action Party, the most popular opposition party until 1988. Although Cárdenas formed his own party, the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction, to support his candidacy, he was eventually listed on the ballot under four different parties.

Salinas was not a popular choice among many PRI faithful, thus giving Cárdenas a more viable opportunity as an opposition candidate. He campaigned vigorously, having widespread name recognition because of his father's reputation. When the election was held, the PRI resorted to outright fraud to alter the vote totals for the three leading candidates after discovering that Salinas was not obtaining even a simple majority of votes. Although some observers believe that Cárdenas won the election, the polling data suggest that

Salinas likely won with a much smaller margin of votes. What is most important about the results, however, is that for the first time since the 1930s, Mexican voters could understand that it actually might be possible to defeat the PRI. In short, the 1988 election became a victory for all opposition parties, strengthening increased political opposition at the state and local levels. One year later, the PAN won the first gubernatorial race since the PRI came to power. The 1988 election also led to the formation of a third significant party in Mexican politics, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which nearly won the presidency in the 2006 elections. Through the PRD, the 1988 election strengthened the Mexican left, and in spite of continuous divisions within the PRD, increased the left's unity in the electoral arena.

*Who is Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and what is the PRD?*

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano is a Mexican politician who comes from an influential political family, beginning with his father, General Lázaro Cárdenas, president of Mexico from 1934–40. To many Mexicans, his father symbolized a defender of Mexican sovereignty, after nationalizing foreign oil companies in 1939. He also symbolized agrarian reform, after distributing more land to peasants than any previous president. Cuauhtémoc began his political career as a student supporter of General Miguel Henríquez Guzmán's presidential campaign in 1951 and helped support his father's leadership of the National Liberation Movement in the 1960s. He was elected senator from his home state of Michoacán before becoming governor, following in the footsteps of his father and uncle. After leaving office, he joined other prominent PRI politicians in founding the Democratic Current in 1986, a faction within the party which supported the anti-neo-liberal economic strategy being pursued by President de la Madrid as well as increased political pluralism. When Carlos Salinas de Gortari was selected as the PRI's candidate, it became clear

that the neo-liberal policies would be continued. Cárdenas and other leading members of the Democratic Current left the PRI and formed their own small party, and Cárdenas became the party's presidential candidate in 1988. Eventually he was supported by four small parties. In the hard-fought campaign that ensued, Cárdenas officially won 37 percent of the vote to Salinas' 51 percent, and the National Action Party candidate obtained 17 percent in an election marred by fraud. (See other entry in Chapter 9.)

Most observers believe that Cárdenas won a larger percentage of the vote, and some believe he possibly may have defeated Salinas. Nevertheless, even though Cárdenas lost, his electoral success gave birth in 1989 to a new, influential opposition party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution. Cárdenas presided over the party from 1989 to 1993, when he became the party's candidate a second time in the 1994 election, losing against the PRI candidate Ernesto Zedillo. The PRD was an amalgam of left-of-center parties and numerous defectors from the PRI who favored increased pluralization, fair elections, and a return to a state-supported system of increased social expenditures. Cárdenas' success also increased opposition party representation in congress. The establishment of the PRD encouraged alliances between it and the PAN on the state level, leading to successful gubernatorial campaigns which continue to the present. The strength of the PRD and PAN in Congress forced significant changes in the electoral process instituted in 1996, contributing to an independent institution, the Federal Electoral Institute, exercising complete control over the elections and providing public funding for all parties. Although Cárdenas unsuccessfully ran a third time for president in 2000, placing a distant third behind the PAN and PRI candidates, the party recovered its strength through the leadership of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who presided over the PRD and the Mexico City government before narrowly losing against Felipe Calderón in the 2006 presidential race.