

# The democratic transitions in Mexico and Latin American in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century

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## Abstract

**T**his article depicts the different roads that Latin America followed toward democratization the 1980's. According to the theoretical scheme introduced in this essay, breakdowns among the elites, pacts and political reforms are the typical forms linked with the transition processes that inaugurated democratic regimes along the continent. In this theoretical context, Mexico initiated a process of political liberalization and democratic transition mirrored in the defeat of the PRI, the hegemonic party, in the presidential elections in the year 2000. Finally this paper highlights the differences and similarities that Mexico shares with other Latin America nations in its process toward consolidation of democracy and the degree of institutionalization achieved by its party system.

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## **Introduction**

Since the mid-1980s, Mexico initiated a process of profound political change and social transformation. The increasingly competitive elections reflected a nation evolving to a more open and democratic political system.<sup>1</sup> Elections fostered a political liberalization process within this hitherto hegemonic party system.

The emergence of democratic transitions in Latin America attracted renewed attention to party politics, popular movements, and electoral processes as the main instruments of democratic change. Following this academic interest, this article seeks to respond how the process of liberalization in Mexico since the 1980s has been distinct from that of the rest of Latin America. The analysis of this issue is relevant to understanding the unique process that Mexico has followed on its road toward democratization.

Along the 1990's, a group of studies stressed the unique nature of the Mexican political system, characterized by its long-lived institutional continuity, it showed to be in clear contrast with the nations of the Southern Cone, which experienced frequent democratic breakdowns. According to these studies, the political transition in Mexico has been more gradual than other Latin American transitions in part because of (1) the degree of institutionalization achieved by the political regime, and (2) the broadly inclusive regime, which was a less severe form of authoritarian rule than the dictatorships of the southern Cone.<sup>2</sup>

This essay argues that the on-going process of democratization in Mexico has not been conducted through political pacts or breakdowns between civil and military elites, as in most of the Latin American countries in the Southern Cone; nor has it been influenced by international pressure, as in Central America; but rather the Mexican political system has experienced political change at its own pace.<sup>3</sup> The Mexican liberalization has been accelerated by social and political groups acting at the grass roots level. By mobilizing and organizing autonomously, these groups exerted pressure on the hegemonic party system and demanded more spaces of political representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria E. Rodríguez and Peter Ward (1995), p. 255.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Drake (1986) pp. 105-114

<sup>3</sup> However, some authors argue that Mexico shares similar features in its process of democratic liberalization with similar processes observed in both Brazil and Paraguay.

### Methodology

A historical overview of the authoritarian regimes prior to the 1980s in Latin America is necessary to understand their distinct process of democratization. This comparative exercise will enable us to distinguish among the different roads toward democratization followed by Latin American nations.

Subsequently, an explanatory theoretical framework will be advanced to differentiate the features of the democratization process in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. A summary will emphasize the phases, modes and degree of development of democratization in each country within Latin America. Furthermore, a theoretical approach examining political parties and social movements is advanced; these two political actors (parties and movements) appear to be the main agents fostering a democratic change in Mexico.

### **Definition of concepts**

The study of the Latin American transitions toward democracy acquired special relevance after 1980. With the emergence of democratically elected regimes, multiple analyses attempted to lay the theoretical foundations of the phenomena, and to predict the likelihood of success in the consolidation of democracy. Concomitant with this, diverse concepts such as "liberalization", "transition" and "democratization" contributed to the development of new theoretical approaches. Therefore, it is necessary to overview these concepts before to studying the particular aspects of the Latin American democratic transitions in the 1980s.

Traditionally, the term *democracy* has been the subject of an intense debate among scholars. This debate focuses on whether democracy is defined as a political regime or a type of society.<sup>4</sup> Defining democracy as a political regime is based on the procedure used to solve the dilemma of the relationship between civil society and the state. The definition of democracy as a type of society emphasizes substantive issues involving social, economic and cultural life.<sup>5</sup> This study considers democracy as narrowly as conceived by Dahl. This

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<sup>4</sup> See Manuel Garretón, "Del Autoritarismo a la Democracia Política: Una Transición a Reinventar." in Luis Albala-Bertrand ed., (1992), 22.

<sup>5</sup> See Albert O Hirschman, "La Democracia en América Latina," in *Vuelta*, 116, Julio 1986, p. 28 & Carlos Fuentes, *Nuevo Tiempo Mexicano*. (Mexico D.F.: Ed. Aguilar, 1994), p. 61.

author suggests that a democratic regime is a political system with three basic characteristics: (1) broad adult suffrage; (2) regular and fair elections with real chance for alternation to select leaders in a context of high level of political participation; and, (3) the respect for civil and political rights that enable all citizens to freely state their preferences in a context of freedom of expression, assembly and association.<sup>6</sup> Democratization thus entails a well-defined institutional agreement with clear rules, rights and obligations regarding the process of transfer of power from "a group of persons to a set of institutional rules."<sup>7</sup>

Following Dunkwart Rustow's statement, it is assumed that there exist many roads or modes in which polities undergo regime change in their process of building or re-building democracy, and that these modes take shape in several temporal periods.<sup>8</sup> These periods or temporal phases on road toward democratization are traditionally three: liberalization, transition and consolidation.

Political liberalization may be defined as the initial moment when authoritarian regimes ease up on repression and introduce some civil and political rights.<sup>9</sup> This is the first phase of the transition phase and it indicates the moment when the authoritarian regime tolerates, although with still severe restraints, the emergence of autonomous organizations within the civil society. Liberalization may be the result of either divisions within the ruling elite, popular mobilization or a combination of both.<sup>10</sup>

The transition stage may be defined as "the interval between one political regime and another."<sup>11</sup> In this interval there coexist two simultaneous and autonomous processes: the process of erosion and dissolution of the authoritarian regime and the emergence of new democratic institutions.<sup>12</sup> Transitions are characterized by their high degree of uncertainty, in "which not all significant actors of the regime have impeccable democratic credentials and where democratic rules of procedure have yet to be internalized by the society at large."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Dahl (1971), 2

<sup>7</sup> Adam Przeworski (1991), pp. 11, 14

<sup>8</sup> Terry Lynn-Karl and Philippe C. Schmitter, (May 1991): 269 and Dunkwart Rustow, (April 1970): 346.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Paul Drake, p.2

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Przeworski, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, eds., (1991), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Przeworski, "Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy," in Ibid. Guillermo O'Donnell et al., p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Whitehead, "Consolidation of Fragile Democracies," in Robert Pastor ed., (1989), 79.

Therefore, different outcomes are likely to occur: from the establishment of some form of democracy to the return to some kind of authoritarian rule, or even the emergence of a revolutionary alternative.<sup>14</sup>

The consolidation phase may be defined as the formation and maintenance of both valid democratic institutions and a democratic political culture.<sup>15</sup> This entails stability in rules and norms of electoral competition and acceptance of elections as the legitimate institution that ultimately determines who governs; as well as a party system with strong links with the most organized interests within society. On the other hand, it also entails a socialization process which pursues the extension of democratic practices and rules to all levels of society.<sup>16</sup>

The temporal periods found in the process of democratization—liberalization, transition and consolidation—are not independent of each other; rather, they may overlap in time. For example, the liberalization stage may coincide with the initial phase of the transition process. Likewise, the uncertainty that characterizes the transition phase may be present in the process of consolidation. Thus, although this paper focuses on the transition phase, it also encompasses the liberalization stage, but not the third phase at all.

Democratic transitions revolve around four categories of phenomena: (1) pacts, (2) breakdowns among elites; (3) reforms orchestrated by the ruling elite; and (4) pressure exerted by popular and social mobilization.

Pacts are “normatively inspired commitments”<sup>17</sup> to set up the rules for the establishment of a democratic regime. There are traditionally three types of pacts: those between the military and civil elites; those between entrepreneurs and labor organizations; and, those among political parties. Although these agreements ideally seek the incorporation of all the relevant actors to lay the foundations for a successor regime in which power is open to most opposition forces, in many cases, however, political actors prefer the continuation of political unrest, armed struggle and violent demonstrations. This is because pacts rarely grant optimal guarantees to all political actors.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. O'Donnell, p.6.

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Di Palma (1990), 138.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. O'Donnell, pp. 11-14.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Przeworski, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Giuseppe Di Palma (1986), 13.

Political change also may be brought about by the “breakdown of authoritarian regimes.” Conflicts within the ruling bloc and splits within the military elite that produce breakdowns in the ruling regime are common causes that accelerate political transitions.

Authoritarian rulers may promote liberalization through political reform aiming to relieve pressure on themselves by opening up certain spaces for individual or group action. By launching a re-democratization directed from within the authoritarian regime, the goal is to preserve as long as possible the elite status quo and the structure of authority.<sup>19</sup>

Although authoritarian regimes are based on their capabilities to demobilize social movements and their monopoly on instruments of organized coercion, they must maintain a minimum degree of legitimacy. Without support, these regimes are condemned to disappear.<sup>20</sup> Social and popular mobilizations play a crucial role at the moment when a former closed system begins to open. Lower costs and risks associated with the collective action promote an eruption of mass movements, strikes, unrest and disorder. In this case, the pressure to open the political system begins in the bottom of the social structure and aims to replace the power structure.

Transitions may either take a straightforward path or be a combination of modes. For example, it is possible that a transition initiated by a breakdown among elites is followed by a social and popular mobilization that leads to a pact among the diverse political actors to the establishment of a democratic regime.

With the aforementioned conceptual parameters, this study takes on the task of depicting the several roads that Latin American countries have undertaken in their building of democratic regimes. For this purpose, this analysis utilizes a general scheme aiming to theoretically encompass most of the Latin American transitions to democracy during the 1980s (see diagram 1).

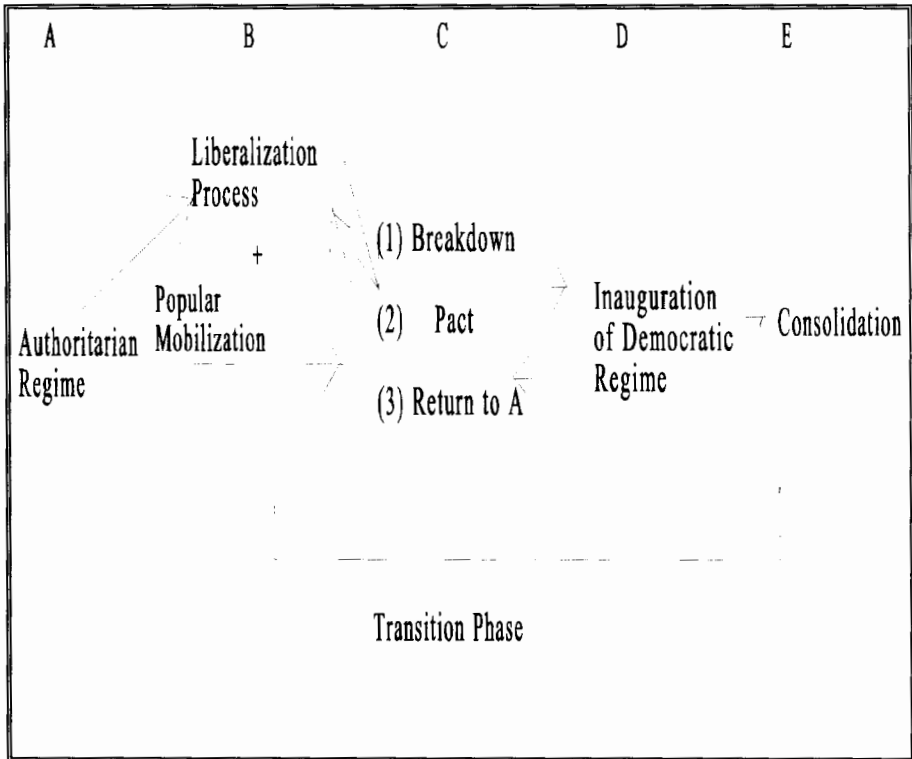
Initially, there exists an authoritarian regime (point A). From this point, the road toward democratization may take one of two forms: a gradual liberalization directed by the elite (point B), or a rapid process through a pact, breakdown or a

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<sup>19</sup> Alfred Stepan, “Paths toward Re-democratization” in Guillermo O’Donnell et al (1991), p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Juan Linz (Summer 1990), 145-146.

Diagram 1



combination of both (point C). The rapid alternative leads to the transition process which is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. Within the transition phase (point C), one of three different outcomes is likely to occur: (1) return to the authoritarian regime (point A); (2) inauguration of a new legitimate regime (point D); or, (3) a new pact or breakdown (point C). The inauguration of a new democratic government (point D) does not warrant political stability or permanence of the new regime. In fact, the uncertainty linked to the transition process is still present. The final stage, the consolidation of a democratic regime (point E) requires, as will be showed in the next section, key political requisites such as efficient institutional arrangements between the relevant political actors, and the building of democratic institutions.

## Transition processes in Latin America in the 1980s

In the last two centuries, Latin America experienced cyclical periods of democratic regimes followed by authoritarian rule that ended in subsequent returns to democracy.<sup>21</sup> Within this pattern, over the 1980s, a wave of democratization swept across Latin America. Most of countries in South America experienced a rapid process of democratic transition which installed legitimately elected civilian governments. Although most of the Latin American countries experienced a process of democratization, each country maintained its own characteristics and different pace. This was the result of the diverse nature of the authoritarian regimes that preceded the democratic transitions.

## Modes of transition democracy in the southern cone

In Uruguay, the process of restoration of democracy was an outcome of the pact known as the *Pacto Naval*, an agreement established between civilian and military parties. The pact, signed in 1984, sought the return of the earlier political model based on a two party system and the revitalization of the social pact.<sup>22</sup> However, the transition produced a division within the society because of the amnesty law which prohibited any legal action against the military for its abuse on human rights. Adopted in 1986 and ratified in 1989, this law distanced one of the most prominent existing political actors, the *Frente Amplio* party, from any political agreement.

As in Uruguay, Chile also faced a transition based on a pact between civil and military elites.<sup>23</sup> This pact was born of the victory of opposition forces to the military regime during the 1988 national consultation carried out by General Pinochet. Prior to the 1989 elections, in which a new president and Congress would be appointed by universal direct suffrage, the coalition of opposition political parties known as *Concertacion por la Democracia* discussed with the leadership of the authoritarian regime the conditions for the institutional change.<sup>24</sup> Although

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<sup>21</sup> Robert A. Pastor, ed. (1989) and Samuel Huntington (1991)

<sup>22</sup> Felipe Aguero et al., "The Role of Political Parties in the Return to Democracy in the Southern Cone: Rapporteurs' Report," *Working Papers*, 171. (Washington D.C.: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1986), 61.

<sup>23</sup> Marcelo Cavarozzi, "Patterns of Elite negotiation and confrontation in Argentina and Chile." in John Highley et al. (1992), 224.

<sup>24</sup> Cesar Caviedes, (1991), 67.



amendments to the 1980 Constitution enabled the re-installation of the civil government after sixteen years of dictatorship, nonetheless, the changing of presidential power was subordinated to conditions imposed by the army.

In Paraguay and Argentina, transitions were instigated by breakdowns within the ruling elite. In Paraguay, the longest military dictatorship in Latin America headed by General Stroessner since 1954 abruptly ended with another *coup d'état* committed in February, 1989.<sup>25</sup> This was the final outcome of a growing polarization into two antagonistic factions within the army and the ruling *Colorado* party: *militantes* backing the candidacy of Gustavo Stroessner to replace his father in power; and, *disidentes* supporting General Andrés Rodríguez. After the *coup d'état* led by Gen. Rodríguez, the transition process was launched through a limited political reform directed from the top without a precise agenda to reach a fully democratic regime. Thus, although elections were held in May 1989, the state machinery and the support of the dominant *Colorado* party were utilized by Gen. Rodríguez to win the presidential contest. In this particular case, it may be asserted that the Paraguayan elections entailed the "beginning of transition" or the liberalization-transition stage; whereas in Chile or Argentina, elections represented the end of transition: the re-establishment of the democratic regime.<sup>26</sup> In Paraguay, democratic transition continued with local electoral triumphs of the opposition *PLRA* in March, 1991 and was followed by the drafting of a new Constitution in 1992. In Argentina, the democratic transition was accelerated by the absolute lack of legitimacy of the army as a result of the defeat in the *Malvinas* war, and the deep economic crisis. An intense mobilization of society led to the breakdown of the dictatorship in 1983, and to the re-establishment of civil government under the election won by the *Union Cívica Radical* (UCR) and its candidate Raúl Alfonsín.

In the rest of the South American countries — Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia — the process toward democratization followed a more circuitous path. Whereas in most countries of the Southern Cone, the processes of transition lasted between two to four years in average, the Brazilian liberalization process was initiated and controlled through a political reform designed by the Geisel regime since 1974.<sup>27</sup> By 1985, the fall of legitimacy of the military regime

<sup>25</sup> Manuel Alcántara-Saez et al (1992), p. 665.

<sup>26</sup> Diego Abente\_Brun (1993), p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> Fernando-Henrique Cardoso, "La Contrucción de la Democracia: Desafíos y Dificultades," in Julio Cotler ed. (1990), 196.

accelerated the transition process, leading in turn to the appointment of Tancredo Neves by the General Congress. Finally, the inauguration of a civil regime legitimated in universal direct elections was not produced until 1989 with the triumph of Collor de Mello.

In both Ecuador and Peru, the year 1975 is of critical importance in the process of democratic transition. In this year, the authoritarian populist model collapsed. The division within the military bloc and a galloping economic crisis led to the failed counter *coup d'état* to the Rodriguez-Lara regime in Ecuador; and, in Peru, to the replacement of Gen. Velasco Alvarado by Gen. Morales Bermudez who directed the political reform that ended in the civil general elections in 1980.<sup>28</sup>

In Bolivia, as in other countries, the increasing popular mobilization led to the decomposition and breakdown of the military regime. With the subsequent fall of Gen. Banzer in 1978,<sup>29</sup> elections were held and a pact between the relevant political actors was established as a necessary condition to settle the bases for a *consociational* democracy in a nation historically characterized by its political instability.<sup>30</sup>

### **The mexican case**

In Mexico, for more than half a century the ruling government party (PRI) widely dominated every major electoral contest. As long as the patron-clientilistic web worked with the support of the state's economic resources, the challenges to the PRI were easily defeated. However, in the 1980s the breakdown of the economic model, an expanded urbanized and educated population, the growth of mass communication; and, a more flexible electoral framework provided the bases for a growing popular mobilization demanding more political participation.

In response to increasing social pressures, the political regime of Lopez-Portillo initiated a process of reform in 1977 which opened institutional channels of participation to traditionally excluded social sectors.<sup>31</sup> This political reform

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<sup>28</sup> Anita Issacs (1993), p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Issac Sandoval (1988), 209.

<sup>30</sup> Rene-Antonio Mayorga, "Bolivia: Democracia como Gobernabilidad?" in Julio Cotler ed., (1990), p. 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Mc Donald et al (1989), p. 58.

brought about an increase in political participation and in the desire for additional openings.<sup>32</sup> Elections became the focal-point of the clash between society and state. According to his campaign promise, in 1983 the De la Madrid regime initially recognized local opposition triumphs, but later responded by resorting to fraud.<sup>33</sup> The lack of an authentic democratic will was reflected in the 1985 and 1986 local elections in northern Mexico in which post-electoral conflict and protests of alleged PRI frauds were involved. In fact, although the new reforms promoted a more open and contested electoral scenario, the electoral control of the government imposed a limit to the liberalization process. These limits showed the capacity of the PRI to utilize government resources and the power of the executive which, as the most prominent PRI member, continued to be the supreme referee of any political dispute.<sup>34</sup>

In a comparative context, between 1980 and 2000, Mexico went through the liberalization stage and thus experienced a lag in its democratic development with respect to other Latin American countries. While between the 1950s and 1960s countries such as Colombia and Costa Rica were able to consolidate democratic regimes, in the 1980s countries such as Uruguay, Chile and Argentina ended authoritarian systems and, supported by the re-establishment of solid democratic institutions, achieved the inauguration of democratic regimes. In contrast, Mexico did not achieve complete democratic development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The process of reform and liberalization initiated by the political elite in 1977 partially concluded with the electoral triumph of the PAN, the conservative opposition party that won the presidential election in year 2000.

Although Mexico experienced a process of political liberalization with unique features, democratic transitions in both Brazil and Paraguay had elements that bear a close resemblance to the Mexican case.

In Brazil, as it was mentioned above, the origins of the liberalization process known as *abertura* are found during the Geisel government (1974-1979). Geisel was determined to begin a slow but deliberate process of re-democratization. Geisel lifted press censorship and eased electronic mass media censorship. Subsequently, *Habeas corpus* was reestablished, a political amnesty promulgated

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> See "Electoral Reform in Mexico", (Atlanta, GA: The Carter Center of Emory University, 1993.), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Soledad Loaeza, (June 1993): 53.

and, finally direct elections held for local and national offices in 1982. While the regime eased up repressive measures, new social actors such as neighborhood movements, professional associations and trade unions joined with the opposition political party (PMDB) to pressure the regime for further concessions.<sup>35</sup> The unions played an important role in the *Diretas Ja* campaign demanding free elections and a transition to a civilian government in 1985. The metalworkers' federation was especially belligerent in demanding an increase of real wages and raising the level of consciousness of the industrial working class in Brazil.

Similarly in Mexico, social actors such as local clubs, professional associations, regional movements and opposition political parties exerted pressure on the political system to promote further political openness. However, these actors possess different characteristics to the social actors that headed the process of liberalization in Brazil. For example, in Mexico, workers' unions traditionally maintained corporatist linkages with the state, while as in Brazil workers' unions maintained more autonomy especially after 1980. In addition, Brazilian businessmen played a more active role in democratization than their Mexican counterparts.<sup>36</sup>

Mexico also exhibited aspects in its democratic liberalization similar to those manifested in Paraguay after the fall of Stroessner. In both Paraguay and Mexico there existed a predominant party (PRI and *Partido Colorado*) which created a patron-clientilistic web. The corporatist linkages these parties maintained with the state and other social actors drew economic and political advantages over other political parties. Moreover, in both countries, the state aimed to control the process of political openness by implementing several political reforms. Thus, Paraguay held two general elections (May of 1989 and 1993) and elaborated a new electoral code (January, 1990); furthermore, Paraguay organized local elections (May and June, 1991); and, approved a new constitution (June, 1992).<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the liberalization in Paraguay was characterized by the emergence of trade unions and peasant movements; more freedom of the press; and, the creation of new political parties. However the corporatist links among the military, the *Colorado* party, and the economic elite imposed limits to this process of democratization. The military openly backed the *Colorado* candidates and, the

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<sup>35</sup> Margaret Keck (1992), 24.

<sup>36</sup> See Leigh Payne (1994)

<sup>37</sup> Victor Jacinto-Flecha (1993), 52.

opposition systematically denounced irregularities in elections which were exclusively organized and supervised by the military regime.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the linkage between the predominant party and the government provided both the PRI and *Partido Colorado* with clear economic and political advantages over the rest of the existing parties.

The next section discusses the role of political parties and social movements in the democratic transition in Latin America.

## Conclusions

It is necessary to draw some general conclusions about democratic transitions in Latin America during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s:

The establishment of solid democratic regimes was the result of transitions in which there existed institutional agreements or pacts among the most relevant actors of society (see table 1), i.e., Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile.

In comparative terms, Mexico's democratic development was still an unfinished process up the mid-1990s. In 1977, Mexico initiated a political reform which did not lead to a full democratic regime as in Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica. In Mexico, Paraguay, and Brazil between 1974 and 1986, the political reform was orchestrated from the top. In these countries, the goal was to direct and control the process of democratization. Nonetheless, reforms during the period between 1977 and 1997 propitiated a higher degree of political competence between the PRI and opposition political actors. Political liberalization in Mexico brought about new social actors and mobilization from the civil society. Similarly to Brazil where the transition was accelerated by the active participation of unions, entrepreneurs and church associations, in Mexico popular and social groups allied with opposition political parties promoting a higher political openness, demanding more spaces of political participation, leading to the breakdown of the authoritarian model and, accelerating the democratic transition.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 80.

**Table 1**  
**Modes of Democratic Transition of the Latin American countries.**

Countries	Mode of Transition	Institutional Strength in Party System	Phase
Colombia, Venezuela	Pact	High	Consolidation
Uruguay, Chile	Pact	High	Transition-Consolidation
Argentina	Breakdown	Medium	Transition-Consolidation
Paraguay	Breakdown + Political Reform	Medium	Liberalization-Transition
Costa Rica	Breakdown + Pact	High	Consolidation
Mexico	Political Reform + Mobilization	Medium	Liberalization-Transition
Ecuador	Breakdown + Pact	Low	Transition
Peru	Mobilization + Pact	Low	Transition
Brazil	Political Reform + Mobilization + Breakdown	Low	Transition-Consolidation
Bolivia	Mobilization + Breakdown + Pact	Low-Medium	Transition-Consolidation

According to our theoretical model, by 2005 Mexico still stands within the transition phase with serious challenges to fully achieve its democratic consolidation. Prior to the general elections to be held in 2006, the Mexican political system still lacks of the features attributed to a consolidated democratic system: i.e. (1) a party system with strong links with the most organized interests within society; (2) efficient institutional arrangements between the relevant political actors; (3) extension of democratic practices and rules to all levels of society. In this context, the return to authoritarian practices within the Mexican political system is not a remote possibility.

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