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Central
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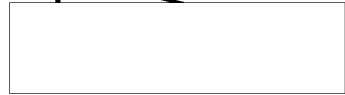


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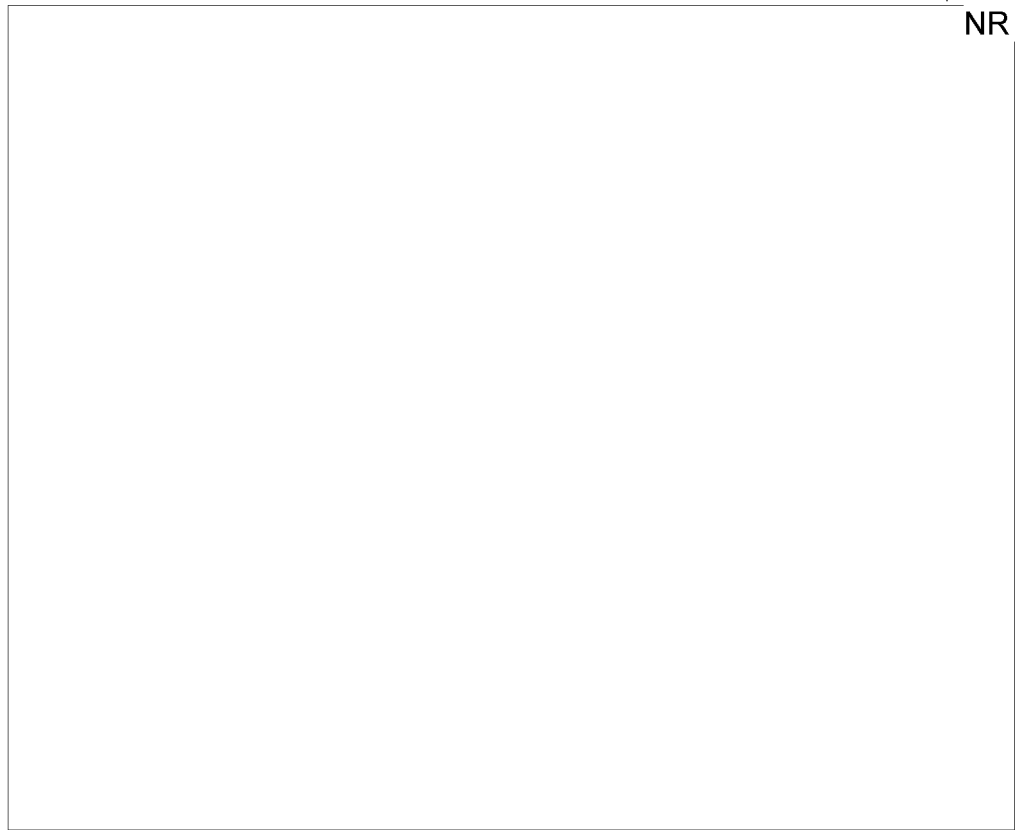
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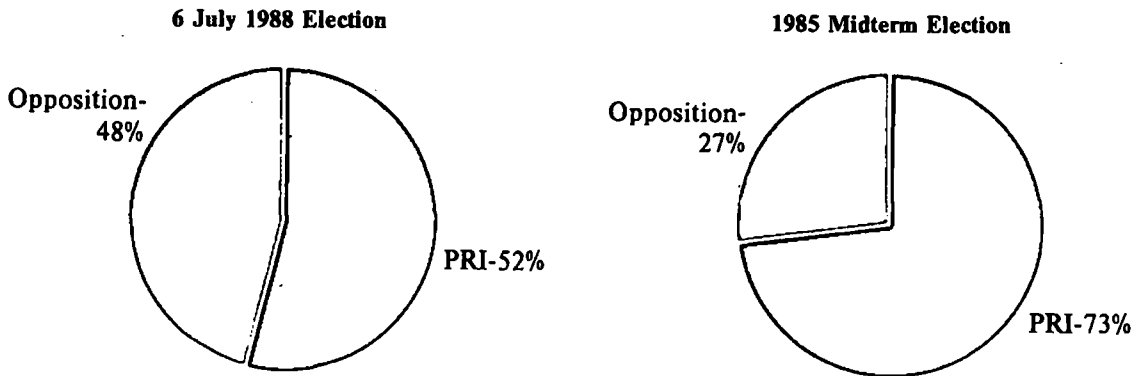
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Mexican Elections, 1988: Party Strengths



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Chamber of Deputies Makeup



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Special Analysis**MEXICO:****Impact of the Election**

The opposition's unprecedented show of strength in the Mexican election last week and the ruling party's losses mark a turning point for the entrenched political system. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has proclaimed its victory in the presidential contest but has made substantial concessions to end opposition challenges. President-elect Salinas now faces major hurdles in establishing a presidential mandate and in making the PRI adjust to a more competitive political environment.

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The players and the style of this election differed markedly from those of past contests. Salinas failed to attract popular support from the start and lacked full backing even within the party. Government austerity measures and the absence of pump priming further undermined his appeal. The opposition, for the first time, nominated a popular, nationally recognized candidate—the leftist Cuauhtemoc Cardenas—and demonstrated more unity, especially in its fight against electoral fraud.

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Tackling the Immediate Crisis

The PRI, thrown off balance by the new situation, initially wavered but now appears intent on defending the legitimacy of Salinas's victory while making concessions to the opposition in other areas. The party's early, uncharacteristic indecisiveness suggests internal debate on strategy between reformers willing to concede more losses to the opposition and party stalwarts seeking a traditional clean sweep. Although it declared Salinas the winner, the party-run electoral commission accorded him a historically low 50 percent of the vote and gave the opposition a significant share of legislative seats. The government also has been restrained in responding to protests—another apparent effort to take the edge off the opposition.

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Cardenas, by virtue of his popular following, presents the greatest immediate challenge to the PRI, and the party probably is trying to reach an accommodation with him. He no doubt recognizes the threat he poses to the party's legitimacy by refusing to acknowledge Salinas's win and probably will not be satisfied with just legislative seats. The ruling party, in turn, probably believes that Cardenas—a former PRI dissident—seeks to make the system more responsive and may offer him a say in policymaking in return for his acquiescence in Salinas's victory. It might, for example, permit a member of Cardenas's coalition to become secretary of Agrarian Reform, allowing Cardenas to promote his populist policies while keeping his distance

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The conservative opposition presents a smaller problem. Its candidate, Manuel Clouthier, has conceded the presidency—although without recognizing Salinas—and popular enthusiasm for his civil disobedience campaign appears to be waning. But the conservatives outpolled the left in legislative seats and may focus increasingly on consolidating their gains in the Chamber of Deputies.

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The PRI probably will weather the current challenges through negotiations and a continued policy of restraint in the face of protests. The opposition probably will continue to press for demonstrations, in part to gauge the depth and permanence of its popular support. Cardenas has called for a massive demonstration in Mexico City today; eventually, however, he will turn his sights to the future. He faces a formidable task in converting his loose coalition into a cohesive organization if he is to establish political staying power.

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There is a chance that confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition will escalate. If Cardenas perceives that the PRI remains badly divided in its support for Salinas, he may use popular demonstrations to press his claim to the presidency. The PRI probably would react to sustained protests with a show of force to intimidate Cardenas and his followers, potentially sparking violence that could spread to opposition strongholds nationwide.

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Implications for the System

The election has produced an opening in the system that even PRI leaders have recognized publicly, and the new competitiveness will test the party's ability to adapt to the changing situation. Salinas's campaign rhetoric calling for more open, "modern" politics indicates he is disposed to depart from traditional practices, but he still faces the tough challenge of consolidating support within the party before he moves ahead.

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Salinas will have to contend with disgruntled stalwarts who lost legislative races as well as with dissidents who sympathized with Cardenas. Rather than attempt to balance all interests, Salinas—who already has alienated many of the party's old guard with his rhetoric on the need to modernize the system—will probably shun the stalwarts in hopes of building firm backing among reformists and attracting some dissidents back into the party mainstream.

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Over the longer term, both Salinas and the PRI will have to restore their lost legitimacy or risk erosion in the government's ability to implement policy and losses in municipal and even gubernatorial elections. Salinas will assume office in December in a weaker position than any of his predecessors; he will be under pressure to compromise on his tough economic agenda as well as to foster political reform.

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