Contested Compliance in a Liberal Normative Structure: The Western Hemisphere Idea and the Monitoring of the Mexican Elections

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In August 1994, a vast network of national and foreign observers and United Nations (UN) officials—over 81,000 in total—was present in the Mexican presidential elections. This throng was larger than in any previous monitoring experience. But more than the sheer number of monitors in the electoral process, what was significant was their mere presence. No observation effort at all had taken place in the previous 1988 presidential elections. Moreover, in 1990 president Carlos Salinas had declared that Mexico’s democracy was “not subject to external evaluation.” Similarly, the following year, Mexico’s representative at the Organization of American States (OAS) had made clear that “The Mexican government considers a matter of national sovereignty the organization and vigilance of its electoral processes, and is opposed to the participation of foreign observers.” Thus, when in 1992 the OAS General Assembly voted to amend the Charter so that a government which overthrows a democratic regime can be suspended from the organization, Mexico cast the only dissenting vote. As late as December 1993, Mexico expressed its opposition to foreign election monitors at the UN. Still in early in 1994, Salinas’ party turned down a U.S. proposal to send observers to the upcoming elections. As Robert Pastor has rightly noted, “There is no country in the world which is more sensitive to U.S. efforts to influence it than Mexico, and no country as successful in resisting American influence.” For Mexico, therefore, accepting foreign observers in 1994 was a major breakthrough. What accounts for this about face of one of the staunchest supporters of the traditional conception of state sovereignty?

True, during the first months of 1994, with the Zapatista uprising and the assassination the government’s party’s presidential candidate, the Mexican regime faced one of the most serious credibility crisis, and the acceptance of foreign monitors was no doubt a calculated move on the part of the Salinas government. It seemed logical for it to resort to an institutionalized network of foreign observers which could enhance its legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, by stamping its seal of approval on the impending electoral process. Interestingly, though, Mexico had consistently opposed the creation of the very network to which it was now reaching—but that is just a paradoxical anecdote. What is more intriguing is that the Mexican government was able to resort to such a network. A decade earlier that network did not exist, at least to the level it did in the mid-1990s. Likewise, the monitoring norm was not developed at the global level to the extent it was in 1994 only a few years earlier. Thus, for instance, in 1988 UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuellar noted that the UN “does not send observers to elections” in sovereign states.

That was because, in the modern state system issues of domestic governance in sovereign states have traditionally been placed out of the realm of international action. Thus, in the postwar period national elections have been considered to fall within Article 2 (7) of the UN Charter, which establishes that the organization and its member states cannot intervene “in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.” However, matters had evolved differently within the western hemisphere. Here, the OAS had started taking part in the domestic affairs its member states through the monitoring

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practice since the early 1960s. But Mexico had traditionally been one of the unaltering defenders of traditional conceptions of state sovereignty, and therefore, as noted, had opposed foreign monitoring of electoral processes. The question thus arises as to how is it that an international norm spread so quickly, coming to cover even such a difficult case?

This work focuses on a critical instance in this process: the 1994 Mexican elections. In the Mexican experience, the issue of international monitoring was framed in terms of a two-fold problematique: a protracted transition to democracy and state sovereignty. That is, in Mexico 1994—sign of the times—these two usually separate issues converged. Furthermore, the Mexican case epitomizes the complex interaction of state and nonstate actors, both at the domestic and international level, characteristic of IEM’s normalization process. I consider the case in light of the wider normative structure of the western hemisphere, which I argue played an important role both in it and in the emergence of IEM. My hypothesis is that by engaging in IEM in 1994, Mexico partially redefined its sovereignty. During this process, both state and nonstate actors engaged in a two-level game, making strategic moves in the external front to use the gains obtained there in the domestic front, and vice versa. The tactical character of the endeavor, though, was consistently framed within the normative structure of the continent. That is, actors constantly resorted to the “stock of interpretive patterns” developed in the region. It was precisely the existence of this patterned practice that made it possible for an international norm to spread to a critical case.

This paper is organized as follows. In the first section I introduce my general argument on the normative structure of the Americas as “life world,” on state sovereignty, and on IEM. In the second I look at the emergence of election monitoring in Mexico; considering the development of this practice is important for the 1994 case because it sheds light on the specificities the future experience was to acquire. In the third section I consider in more detail the 1994 electoral process, focusing on the three main actors involved in its monitoring: Alianza Cívica (Civic Alliance; henceforth AC), the UN, and the Carter Center (henceforth CC). In section four I briefly review the evolution of this practice in the three ensuing electoral processes in Mexico (1997, 2000, and 2003). I conclude by highlighting the theoretical implication of this case.

I. The Western Hemisphere’s Normative Structure, IEM, and State Sovereignty

It was the combination of a series of systemic and domestic factors in the Americas that made the environment in the hemisphere particularly conducive to the emergence of IEM. The continent’s claim to be the region where this practice emerged is noteworthy. The notion of the Americas as a region is closely related to what has come to be known as the “Western Hemisphere Idea” (WHI). As early as 1813, Thomas Jefferson wrote that the governments to be formed in the nascent states, “will be American governments, no longer to be involved in the never-ceasing broils of Europe. The European nations constitute a separate division of the globe; their localities make them a part of a distinct system... America has a hemisphere to itself. It must have a separate system of interest which must

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not be subordinated to those of Europe.”

According to Arthur P. Whitaker, Jefferson's statement was “the first flowering” of the WHI.

By WHI Whitaker refers to “the proposition that the peoples of this Hemisphere stand in a special relationship to one another which sets them apart from the rest of the world.” By producing and reproducing both the fundamental—and often contradictory—values holding the region together, and a social order among the members of the hemisphere, the interplay gave rise to a distinctive conception of state sovereignty. And it was this idea of sovereignty that allowed IEM to emerge in the Americas before anywhere else. This is so because the composite understanding of sovereignty in the Americas had two constitutive elements: representative government (and later human rights broadly speaking) and non-intervention. Thus, for instance, for all the importance Latin American and Caribbean states attached to the non-intervention principle, at the 1928 Havana Pan-American Conference the Cuban representative warned that “[if] we declare in absolute terms that intervention is under no circumstance possible, we will be sanctioning all the inhuman acts committed within determined frontiers.” In a similar vein, Uruguayan Foreign Minister Alberto Rodríguez Larreta wrote in his famous 1945 note that “The purest respect for the principle of non-intervention of one state in the affairs on another... does not protect unlimitedly the notorious and repeated violation by any republic of elementary rights of man.” Article 5 of the 1948 OAS charter makes this composite understanding of sovereignty explicit. While it notes that “The solidarity of the American States and the high aims which are sought through it require the political organization of those States on the basis of the effective exercise of representative democracy,” it also states that “International order consists essentially of respect for the personality, sovereignty and independence of States.”

Since early on the nineteenth century, the states of the Americas had been constructing what Jürgen Habermas calls a “life world.” By this the German political theorist understands “a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns.” In Habermas’ conception, the lifeworld has three structural components. The first one, culture, is “the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world.” Society, the second element, has to do with “the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their membership in social groups and thereby secure solidarity.” Personality, the third structural component of the lifeworld, refers to “the competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity.” As Thomas Risse-Kappen has noted, “the degree to which a common lifeworld exists in international relations varies considerably according to world regions and issue-areas.” I would argue that the states of the Americas have developed not only a shared stock of knowledge and distinct and recognized personalities, but also a sense of belonging to a distinct society, the one demarcated by the WHI.

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12 Ibid.: 1
15 Ibid.: 138.
It was the ever-present tension between the two components of the regional understanding of sovereignty (representative government and non-intervention), that allowed the states in the hemisphere to embark in IEM as early as 1962 in ground-breaking OAS missions to Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic (even if, by current standards, the observation carried out back then was more symbolic than real). The monitoring practice continued sporadically in the following years, with the regional body having undertaken over 20 missions by the mid 1980s. It was this tradition of continental engagement on issues of democratic governance that allowed the regional organization to establish the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD) in 1990. Among the UPD tasks is the monitoring of elections in member-states that request it. Furthermore, the following year, at the 21st regular session of its General Assembly, the foreign ministers of the OAS adopted a declaration entitled the “Santiago Commitment to Democracy and the Renewal of the Interamerican System.” Noting that the end of the Cold War had brought “new opportunities and responsibilities,” the member states declared their renewed and expanded commitment to the promotion and defense of representative democracy and human rights. Going further, the next day the organization passed Resolution 1080, which creates a mechanism to react to “the sudden or irregular interruption of the democratic political institutional process” in any member state.

With the 1991 Santiago Commitment and Resolution 1080, as Domingo Acevedo has noted, “For the first time, an international organization has explicitly ruled that governments should be held internationally accountable to the regional community for the means by which they have taken and secure power.” Among other things, the new institutional setting reinforced the underlying rationale for observing election: issues of democratic governance are part and parcel of the continental understanding of state sovereignty.

Taking a moderate constructivist stance, I conceive of sovereignty as a structural component of the international system, one that has been produced and reproduced in tandem by the practice of state and nonstate actors. As a structural element, sovereignty does not dictate behavior, but rather shapes their identity and interests. Furthermore, sovereignty has no grounding in itself. It is what the constitutional structure underpinning the existence of the states makes of it; without this grounding, sovereignty is an empty vessel, incapable of providing a basis for state interaction. As Christian Reuss-Smit has put it, “Unless embedded within a larger complex of values, the principle of sovereignty cannot alone provide that state with a coherent social identity... sovereignty has no purposive content... Furthermore, it provides an inadequate justificatory basis for action.” That is why at bottom, sovereignty is about legitimacy—legitimacy understood as “the normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed.” But sovereignty is also

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17 http://upd.oas.org/lab/special/eoms62_89.html
18 AG/RES. 1080; XXI-0/91.
19 Acevedo 1993: 141. Emphasizing this trend, in December 1992 the OAS General Assembly approved the “Protocol of Washington,” an amendment to the OAS Charter. The Protocol provides that a state “whose democratically constituted government has been overthrown by force may be suspended” from participation in the regional organization by a two-thirds votes of the member States. It entered into force in October 1997. Schnably 2000: 163.
22 Hurd 1999: 381.
partially malleable. I say partially because, being a structural element, it is by definition not completely malleable—at least within certain periods. Being a social construct, though, it remains plastic by definition. Thus, as Cynthia Weber has put it, “The legitimate privileges and competencies of states are markedly different in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.”

From this viewpoint, IEM’s effect in the construction of sovereignty is indeed straightforward: the recognized rights of states are now explicitly delimited by an international element. As UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali put it in 1992: “The sovereignty of states must be considered under the sovereignty of human rights.”

The question of theoretical interest is how this particular norm spread. As Jeffrey Checkel, Martha Finemore, Margaret Keck, Jeffrey Legro, Thomas Risse-Kappen, Kathryn Sikkink, and others have shown, there are several paths to norm diffusion. Broadly speaking, there are two perspectives on this matter. The first one has to do with “moral cosmopolitanism,” in which norms are held as universal, and spread mainly through transnational movements which engage in moral proselytism. The second perspective on norm diffusion emphasizes the role of domestic variables such as organizational culture or legal statutes. It then looks at the “fit” between international and domestic norms. Thus, for instance, in an approach that draws on both perspectives, Finnemore and Sikkink have developed a synthetic, persuasive paradigm of norm diffusion: the “life cycle model.” This model has three phases: emergence, cascade, and internalization. In the first phase, norm entrepreneurs “create” issues by “framing” them. This process might take place at the domestic level. The crucial link comes in the second phase, for it is necessary for the emergent norm to reach a threshold, and then “become institutionalized in specific sets of international rules and organizations.” Without institutionalization, norm diffusion from the bottom-up becomes more difficult. Finnemore and Sikkink pose two ways norms might reach a tipping point. The first is when the emergent norm reaches a critical mass. That is, as more states adopt the norm, there comes a moment when “norm cascade” begins (they suggest this usually happens only after one-third of the total states have adopted the norm). The second way an emergent norm can reach a tipping point is when critical states adopt it (critical sates are “those without which the achievement of the substantive norm goal is compromised”). Finally, in the third, “internalization” phase, norms work down from the international to the domestic level.

Here I advance a constitutive path to norm diffusion. In my account, norms “cascade” simply by “expressing” a foundational element of the international cum domestic system. Since the element in question, for instance, popular sovereignty, is so deeply embedded into our understanding of what a polity ought to be (from a domestic and international point of view), it is very difficult for state leaders to ignore it. As R. B. J. Walkers has observed, “sovereignty expresses and works to reproduce a specific relation between claims to difference and claims about the forms of commonality and structure that

28 Ibid.: 901.
permit claims to monopoly [to legitimate authority] to have any meaning at all.”

Hence, state leaders, willingly or not, talk-the-talk of the norm at stake in order to “secure solidarity” in the society of states. It might then be possible for a few states to instantiate and thus catapult the emergent norm—making it reach a tipping point. In a sense, then, it can be said that the emergent norm was always there: both in the outside (the international system) and in the inside (the domestic structure) in a latent state. It is thus the nature of the emergent norm that is critical in this path. Once a norm is realized in this way, it spreads out quickly. This approach should be useful when considering the emergence and development of norms in regional settings.

In the case under consideration, the right to free and fair elections was widely recognized by the early 1990s as a human right. As noted, this change in the system-wide understanding of human rights and sovereignty had its origins in the Americas, where IEM resonated with the normative structure of the continent: the WHI. Furthermore, it was in the Americas where NGOs started to systematically monitor elections. Thus, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) began watching elections in 1978, sending observers to Bolivia. Two years later it observed the Guyana elections; in 1981 the electoral process in Honduras, and in 1983 WOLA observers monitored the 1983 elections in Argentina. That same year the International Human Rights Law Group (henceforth Law Group) established its Election Observer Project, working with activists of the target states. In 1984 WOLA and the Law Group jointly observed the elections in Nicaragua, and Uruguay.

The Law Group also observed the elections in Grenada that year, and in 1985 the ones that took place in El Salvador and Guatemala. These organizations pioneering work was partly made possible by the continental discourse on human rights and democracy.

And it was only after the entrance of NGOs into IEM, often interacting with intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), that this practice became “real” (in the sense of being performed thoroughly), that sovereignty was partially redefined by making of electoral processes international events, and that an IEM Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) emerged. Three monitoring instances are particularly relevant for the consolidation of IEM—and, more importantly here, for the case at hand: the 1988 Chilean plebiscite, and the 1990 Nicaraguan and Haitian elections. These cases paved the way for the Mexican experience both by consolidating the IEM TAN to which the Mexican government was subsequently going to resort, and more fundamentally, by moving forward the monitoring norm to the international arena. For reasons of space, I only review the first two cases here.

II. The Origins of Election Monitoring in Mexico

Election monitoring got to a rough start in 1991. That year, the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) invited four members of Canada’s New Democracy Party to observe the February 1991 elections in the southern state of Morelos. But the experience was hardly a success. The observers did not speak Spanish, their arrival to Morelos took place two days before the elections, and they did not even visit the polling sites.

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32 Keck and Sikkink 1998.
33 In the next two cases I draw on Santa-Cruz 2004a and Santa-Cruz 2004b.
Nonetheless, the observers’ presence caused strong adverse reactions. Alfonso Martínez Domínguez, a Senator of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and former party leader said the observers were “unacceptable;” Antonio de Icaza, who had just left his position as Mexico’s representative at the OAS declared: “we do not have anything to hide, but we are not going to submit to anybody nor do we accept any kind of tutelage.” Manuel Barquín, a magistrate counselor at the Electoral Federal Institute (IFE) went further, arguing that “their [the observers’] presence can even be dangerous for the political process.” After that first experience, the PRD—as well as other opposition parties—forgot about inviting foreign observers. But Mexican NGOs did not.

Later that year, a group of NGOs started election monitoring in a more consistent fashion. The Democratic Assembly for Effective Suffrage, the National Accord for Democracy, the Study Center for a National Project, and the Mexican Academy of Human Rights (AMDH), observed the 1991 electoral processes. Some of these organizations were inspired by the civic undertaking the Chileans conducted in three years earlier. As two leaders of the Mexican monitoring efforts put it: “The success achieved by the Chilean civil society [in the 1988 plebiscite] contrasted with the experience of Mexican society, which in 1988 was subjected to the most incredible and huge vacuum of information decreed by the government… Following the steps of the Chilean effort, several not-party affiliated citizen groups started to organize monitoring efforts” in 1991.

Of the organizations just mentioned, the AMDH would constitute itself into one of the leading actors in the 1994 monitoring exercise within the umbrella organization AC, having observed 15 local elections between 1991 and 1993. In its foundational experience as an election-watch organization in the state of San Luis Potosí, the AMDH joined forces with a local NGO, the Potosino Center for Human Rights. Three were the main reasons behind the first election monitoring experience of the human rights organization, according to Aguayo, then president of the AMDH. As he recalls,

One [reason] had to do with the electoral fraud of 1988, I was really impressed by the fact that the [computing] system [on election night, at the electoral body] went down and there were no alternative mechanisms of information. Indeed during all the 1980s, I was already involved in development and human rights NGOs, and the idea of elections was not taken into account... Second, the creation [by the Salinas administration] of the National Human Rights Commission which, for me, allowed the broadening of the NGOs’ agenda... and then a merely contingent factor... the invitation I received [from the CC] to go to Haiti to observe the 1990 elections.

As Aguayo has put it, “Monitoring by outside observers seemed to me an effective way to promote fair elections, but I found that exercise expensive, and not enough in any case to consolidate a culture of democracy. The logical alternative for Mexico was electoral

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34 All cited in Proceso 23 March 1991, No. 751.
37 Aguayo Quezada 1995: 159.
38 Interview with Sergio Aguayo, Mexico City, 8 may 2002. The mission was organized jointly by the CC’s Council of Freely-Elected Heads of Government and NDI.
observation by the country's own citizens.”

Thus, more than 300 domestic observers monitored the San Luis Potosí gubernatorial elections the next year. Interestingly, part of the funding for the 1991 drive came from the Canadian International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, in which Elizabeth Spehar, later head of the OAS’ UPD, was involved. But perhaps more significant is the way the human rights agenda was expanded so as to include the electoral aspect. As Aguayo recollects,

I had been candidate to the presidency [of the AMDH] with a platform in which I had spell out very clearly that I wanted to be president to include the issue of civil rights, electoral rights, political rights. And that is the way I won. So I arrived [to the presidency] with the clarity that I was going to do something. Now, I did not have any idea of how I was going to push the agenda.

Then came the CC’s invitation to go to Haiti. By then, the main rationale for election monitoring had settled in: “the idea that elections could be an instrument for change.”

And in the process of recognizing the importance of elections as a means for change, according to Aguayo, the experiences of other countries was fundamental.

Thus, the next year Aguayo, on behalf of eight Mexican observer groups, invited the CC, through Robert Pastor, to accompany them in observing the state elections in the states of Chihuahua and Michoacán. But the CC also wanted a government invitation. Pastor tried to convince Salinas, whom he had met in Harvard when both were graduate students, to extend them one, but Salinas wouldn’t accept foreign observers in a Mexican electoral process. Pastor suggested a compromise: the CC’s group would simply “witness the observation of the elections in Michoacán and Chihuahua” in July 1992, but it would not comment on the elections.

By that time, the Mexican government was well aware that IEM was hovering around Mexico. In February 1990, President Salinas had declared that “[A] Country that leaves the organization and sanction of its internal political processes to foreign forces, is giving away its sovereignty.” More to the point, the day after Salinas’ declaration appeared, the head of the IFE (the electoral body) asserted that “nobody certifies Mexicans.”

It was, as Jorge Chabat put it at the time “as though the Mexican states's [sic] traditional concept of sovereignty has found its last refuge in the ballot box.” Still in October 1990, foreign minister Fernando Solana declared that the country's problems regarding democracy would need to be solved by Mexicans “and not by importing specialized observers from Atlanta or Milwaukee who tell us how to do things.”

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Interview with Sergio Aguayo, Mexico City, 16 August 2000.
44 Interestingly, Genaro Arriagada, who played a crucial role both in the 1988 Chilean plebiscite in general and in its international monitoring in particular, was a mission-member. As he recalls, “there were op-eds in the newspapers asking that we be expelled… Salinas’ advisors met with us [but] it was a drag, with people following us, with guards at the hotel.” Interview with Arriagada, Santiago, 9 August 2001.
46 Quoted in Vera 1994: 11.
47 Quoted in Delgado 1994: 130.
49 Quoted in Ibid.: 14.
Nevertheless, people from Atlanta were present in Chihuahua and Michoacán two years later. Trying to persuade his former graduate fellow to let foreign observers in for future occasions, Pastor went back to Mexico City after the elections, and told Salinas that although in his judgment the elections had gone reasonably well, “I can’t say anything about the elections because you told me [not to comment on them], so all we can do is talk about the election observers, and that’s what we are going to do.” Salinas was not moved. His government continued to refuse foreign observers in Mexico. Thus, an electoral reform passed in 1993 did not even mention foreign observers.

But it wasn’t just the government that wasn’t interested in receiving foreign observers. In a pioneering study, “International Observers: The Citizenry’s Perception,” José Antonio Crespo found that 63 percent of those polled (in November 1990) rejected the presence of foreign observers in Mexican elections. In this sense, as Crespo observes, “the official [i.e., governmental] justification for rejecting foreign supervisors [sic] has fell in fertile soil.” As political analyst René Delgado put it in the early 1990s, “promoting the presence of foreign observers in elections, at the moment, is not completely advisable… the practice of election observing, for the moment, should be carried out by national groups.”

Furthermore, the international environment was relatively benign vis-à-vis the Mexican government’s position. It was not just the traditional benign neglect of the United States toward the state of democracy of its southern neighbor. There was a true fascination in the United States with the Salinas administration’s touted modernization of Mexico—and the Mexican president had explicitly noted that he did not want foreigner “ meddling” in Mexican politics. Thus, as Crespo pointed out, “the international pressure so that transparent electoral process in our country take place, without being nonexistent, shows a much lower intensity than the one registered in other cases, such as that of Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship or that of Sandinista Nicaragua.” Thus, in the dawn of the Salinas administration, as Crespo surmised, “neither are the pressures on the government to invite international observers so strong, nor is the internal political situation so chaotic, nor is the PRI’s confidence in winning over its competitors in a completely clean manner sufficient.”

As a matter of fact, in the early 1990s not even opposition forces were convinced about the advantages of inviting foreign observers to domestic elections. After the timid 1991 precedent in the state of Morelos, the PRD pretty much dropped the matter; hence, it did not invite foreign observers to that year’s mid-term elections. Still, in May 1992 Cárdenas traveled to Atlanta, where he talked to former president Carter about international observers. Nevertheless, inviting foreign observers was not popular in the PRD. Cárdenas did not pursue the issue further.

Similarly, the conservative National Action Party (PAN) had an ambiguous position vis-à-vis foreign observers—although in a way it was this party the one that introduced the

50 Interview with Robert Pastor, Atlanta, 5 September 2000.
52 Ibid.: 10.
56 Ibid.: 8.
issue, if indirectly. After considering that it had been the victim of electoral fraud in the 1986 gubernatorial elections in the state of Chihuahua, and in the municipal elections in the capital city of the state of Durango, the PAN had taken an unprecedented action: to take its case to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. In 1990 the Commission ruled in favor of the plaintiff, but by that time the PAN seemed to have decided not to emphasize the issue of foreign assistance anymore. Bringing electoral matters to an international forum had caused strife within the party. In 1991, Luis H. Alvarez, its national leader and one of the key figures in the 1986 Chihuahua protest movement, declared that the PAN had no official position regarding the presence of foreign observers in Mexico. He noted, however: “The issue is being amply debated by different groups, and it is understandable that it be that way, since the presence of observers in electoral processes is already a universal practice. Only very few countries are still reluctant to such vigilance.” The PAN’s ambivalence was in part due to the fact that, as a co-architect of the 1990 electoral reform, its resorting to external observers could somehow be taken as a recognition that the reform was flawed—as the PRD maintained.

In any case, Mexican NGOs continued their relationship with the CC. After Mexican observers pointed out to CC’s delegates during their 1992 visit to Mexico that although they roamed the world observing election and giving advice to others, they had never invited foreigners to do the same in their country, the CC decided to invite a Mexican delegation to observe that year’s US presidential election. The CC intended the mission to be plural, so in addition to representatives from observers groups and an independent political analyst, it also invited representatives from Mexico’s three main parties, PAN, PRD, and PRI. Significantly, the latter declined to send delegates.

But even for the Mexicans who agreed to participate in the observation, it was not an easy decision to make. As they noted in their report, “Accepting this invitation in a country like Mexico is not exempt from complications.” That was not an overstatement. One of them was advised by a high Mexican government official not to take part in the monitoring effort because his presence in the mission was “contrary to the [Mexican] national interest.” Similarly, the government-owned newspaper El Nacional ran an article criticizing what “our naïve observers” whose “protagonic aim will not contribute at all to improve the quality of the electoral process in that country [the United States].” It was clear that the government didn’t want the delegation to be used as a stepping stone by their hosts to make inroads in Mexico.

And that exactly had been the CC’s intention. As Pastor recalls, inviting the Mexicans to observe elections in the U.S. was the second step in a strategy he had devised to be able to observe elections in Mexico. The first step had been to invite them to observe elections somewhere else (e.g., AMDH’s Sergio Aguayo to Haiti in 1990, PAN’s 1988 presidential candidate Manuel Clouthier to Panama in 1990), in order to get an invitation to go to Mexico. At least some of the Mexican observers were well aware of the way their

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60 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
63 Ibid.: 55.
64 Ibid.: 48.
65 Interview with Pastor, 5 September 2000.
visit could be constructed. Thus, for instance, before departing for Atlanta, Aguayo told a Mexican newspaper that the AMDH’s position was “not to invite international observers to elections, because democracy [in Mexico] is fundamentally a task for Mexicans.” And once in Atlanta, he wrote an op-ed for another Mexican newspaper in which he rhetorically asked: “Could this observation trip be used in the future by the Americans for interfering in our electoral affairs? The answer is negative, because one of the criteria to carry out electoral observation in other countries is that there has to exist an invitation from the parties and the government.” And in a later article Aguayo openly stated his opposition to having foreign observers in Mexican elections.

In any case, when the time came to make an official pronouncement on the U.S. presidential elections, at the end of their brief (2-4 November) monitoring exercise, the Mexican observers were rather reluctant to express their opinion. Pastor had to insist, telling them that the CC would feel insulted if they didn’t present a report on the U.S. election. In their report, the observers were careful to point out that “We have no interest in interfering in the American political system. We offer these criticisms and suggestions in the same spirit of friendship and openness with which we were invited and with a strong belief that all sides benefit from the free flow of ideas and information.”

A few months later, there was a failed attempt by a group of academics and politicians to organize an international forum on international electoral assistance in Mexico. In February 1993, PRI’s Senator Silvia Hernández, who at the time was the president of Parliamentarians for Global Action, attended a meeting in Stockholm on IEM organized by the Swedish government. Senator Hernández then proposed holding another meeting on the same matter in Mexico. Back home, she contacted the Study Center for a National Project (one of the NGOs which monitored the 1991 elections), as well as some cabinet members. The reactions were varied. Luis Donaldo Colosio, secretary of social development and later the PRI’s presidential candidate, was sympathetic to the idea. Interior Minister Patrocinio González refused to even emit an opinion, deferring to the foreign minister. And foreign minister Fernando Solana flatly rejected the idea. According to Jorge Alcocer, then head of the Study Center and now former senator Hernández’s husband, the foreign minister “clearly said no. ‘This can’t be, it is a violation of national sovereignty, we are not going to accept foreign observers in our elections’ [Alcocer said paraphrasing the foreign minister], and that was the opinion Salinas finally settled on.”

The international electoral assistance meeting did take place in the end—but in Caracas, Venezuela.

The government was adamant in its position regarding foreign observers. In October 1993, on the eve of the formal start of the 1994 presidential race, Foreign Minister Fernando Solana declared: “the Mexican government will not allow foreign observers in the electoral processes, only Mexican ones. The most fundamental exercise of sovereignty are the elections, which should always be in the hands of the citizens of Mexico.” But the

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66 Aguayo declared this to El Universal; reproduced in Carter Center 1992: 46.
67 Carter Center 1992: 49.
68 Ibid: 50.
69 Interview with Pastor, Atlanta, 4 December 2001. Interestingly, Pastor notes that the observations the Mexicans made “presage all the problems that occurred in 2000,” in the U.S. presidential elections.
70 Carter Center 1992: 33.
71 Interview with Jorge Alcocer, Mexico City, 12 November 2001.
72 Quoted in Benitez Manaut 1996: 539.
momentum gained by IEM since the 1990 Nicaraguan elections was palpable. Thus, Rosario Green, a Mexican career diplomat at the UN at the time, recognized: “Even though Mexico has always been opposed to international organisms having the capacity to intervene on issues that are of the exclusive domain of states, it is a fact that the recent evolution of these fora tends to consolidate such tendency.”

International pressure on the Mexican government was thus increasing. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), on which Salinas had staked out its presidency, was going to be voted in the US Congress in November. Moreover, by that time the bifurcated political economy of the Salinas administration (in which economic openness went hand in hand political closeness) was flagrant, thus creating problems for the Mexican government. As the IFE’s director for international affairs remarked, around 1994 “we seemed very open in the economic aspect, very open in trade matters, but a dike in political-electoral matters.” Nevertheless, as Monica Serrano has noted, “In spite of Salinas’ efforts to administer and control political change, the opening and internationalization of domestic politics undermined the capacity of the system to respond, simultaneously, both to the demands by new actors as well as those of the priista family who had been affected by the new dynamics.”

On the internal front, Salinas faced pressures to designate the PRI’s candidate. But he did not want to do it before the fate of NAFTA was decided in the United States. The president’s heir apparent was traditionally announced during September or October before the election year (presidential elections take place during the Summer). But Salinas wanted to wait for Congress to vote on NAFTA. It was widely rumored in high political circles that the name of the candidate depended on NAFTA’s fate: if it was approved, Luis Donaldo Colosio, Salinas’ social development minister, would be the chosen one; but if the proposed agreement didn’t pass, then the more politically skilled and conciliatory Manuel Camacho, who had served as the appointed Mayor of Mexico City since Salinas’ inauguration, would be the PRI’s candidate.

The House of Representatives voted in favor of NAFTA on 17 November. 10 days later, Salinas invited Colosio to the presidential house and told him that “the party was decisively inclined in his favor.” The next day, Colosio’s nomination was announced. Everything was going well for Salinas: with NAFTA scheduled to go into effect on 1 January 1994, and Colosio as his very likely successor, the permanence of the political system—and of Salinas’ legacy—seemed secured. On 20 December 1993, as noted, Mexico expressed its opposition to foreign electoral assistance in UN resolution 48/124.

III. The Road to the 1994 Elections

Mexico’s political environment was totally altered as election year opened. On January first 1994, the same day NAFTA went into effect, an armed uprising broke out in the southern state of Chiapas. As the Zapatista Front of National Liberation, named after 1910 revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, gained popular sympathy throughout the country, the Salinas administration was led not only to initiate peace talks with the guerrillas, but also to

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74 Interview with Manuel Carrillo, Mexico City, 30 October 2001.
75 Serrano Carreto 1996: 453.
77 Salinas in Castañeda 1999: 288.
78 Benitez Manaut 1996: 541.
restructure his cabinet and eventually to offer a new electoral reform. Thus, on 10 January Salinas removed Interior Minister Patrocinio González, a hard-liner, and replaced him with Jorge Carpizo, a widely respected lawyer and human rights advocate who had no party affiliation. At the same time, Salinas brought Manuel Camacho, whom after being passed for the PRI’s presidential candidacy had been appointed as foreign minister, and designated him commissioner for peace negotiations with the rebels. In his place at the foreign ministry he appointed a career diplomat, Manuel Tello. Along with the cabinet reshuffle, Salinas also declared a unilateral cease-fire.

That same month, the main political forces and the government signed what came to be known as the Barcelona Agreements, in which they agreed to change the structure of the electoral bodies at the federal, state, and district level. The third electoral reform during Salinas’ administration was coming up. Since the political campaigns had already started, this meant that the rules would be changed in the middle of the game.

The rationale for such an extemporaneous initiative was clear: the government wanted to restore the legitimacy of non-violent means for political contestation. As Jorge Alcocer, then adviser to Interior Minister Carpizo, put it: “If the PRD, in its most radical wing, moved to positions openly supporting the Zapatistas, the August 1994 election could get enormously complicated. In those conditions… one of the first issues that Dr. Carpizo posses is how to achieve an accord with the PRD and with the PAN without the PRI opposing it.” The electoral process needed to be presented as the only viable and acceptable way of gaining power. Hence, in the next four months a constitutional amendment and 41 changes to the electoral law were passed. Thanks to the former, the IFE was to be formed by six “citizens counselors” (approved by consensus among the PRI, PAN, and PRD), two representatives from each house of Congress, and the Interior Minister. Neither the government or his party controlled the electoral body anymore. Furthermore, the Interior Minister could not use his vote to break a tie. The electoral institution had thus become a different body, one in which independent citizens played a cardinal role. As a WOLA-AMDH joint report on the 1994 Mexican elections put it, “The ‘citizenization’ of the IFE is the most important reform of all.”

But the changes introduced to the electoral law were significant too. It improved the status of national observers and allowed the presence of foreign observers under the semantic guise of “international visitors.” At this point, both NGOs and the Mexican government were deeply engaged in their respective two-level games. The rarefied political environment had made the potential validation of the August electoral process provided by observers a highly valued item for the government. Thus, for instance, Salinas, through an intermediary, sought the leadership of AC in order to make sure that their organization was going to monitor the elections. According to Aguayo, “it is not that they [high governmental officials] were pleased with us, but they said, ‘well, there they are.’” Furthermore, in order to insure that domestic monitoring actually took place, the government set up public funding for it (more on this below), and allowed foreign financing of Mexican NGOs. As Aguayo recalls, “in 94 the issue of foreign financing changes completely because the government stops worrying about it. There is a

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79 Here and in section four I draw on Santa Cruz 2002.
80 Interview with Alcocer.
82 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
fundamental turn because of the Zapatista rebellion... and because of the appointment of Carpizo as interior minister.”

Thus, in February the IFE approved the “Guidelines for the Accreditation and development of the Activities of the Mexican Citizens who will act as Observers during the Electoral Process of 1994,” and in May Article 5 of the electoral law was amended, thus extending the observing period from election day to the electoral campaign.

Regarding “international visitors,” the issue was more complicated. Although the change in the government’s position seemed unavoidable, there was no consensus among high government officials and PRI leaders. Salinas’ cabinet indeed debated the issue several times. The eventual acceptance of foreign observers was not immediate. Thus, for instance, in January Santiago Oñate, secretary of international affairs of the PRI, was approached by US government officials regarding the possibility of Mexico accepting OAS electoral monitors, but he refused. “Sovereignty” remained a principled issue for most of the Mexican political class. As Pastor notes, “the Mexicans had always constructed an elaborate philosophical and legalistic basis” of national sovereignty; “only the Mexicans do this kind of thing.”

But the topic of foreign observers got in the agenda right from the start of the new negotiations. According to Alcocer, “what triggers the need for international observation is the EZ [Zapatista Army]. That is what triggers it.” As a matter of fact, the issue of foreign observers was in the front burner of Carpizo’s agenda—even though he was personally was reluctant to it. As Alcocer recalls, it was one of the issues to which he devoted more attention... he knew that there was a strong resistance in government circles, not only in government circles, but also among the public opinion and political parties, to allow the presence of international observers, due to the [prevailing] notion of national sovereignty, and in particular the rigidity of constitutional article 33, which explicitly prohibits the intervention of foreigners in political matters... it was a vision of national sovereignty widely shared by the population and the political class.

But there were segments both within the opposition parties, particularly the PRD, and the government, which favored the IEM of Mexican elections. Interestingly, the single PRD member who most strongly pushed for international observers, and indeed the one who came up with the idea of calling them “international visitors” in order to get around constitutional article 33, was Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, a former PRI president who had left the party with Cárdenas back in 1987. As Alcocer, who actively participated in the 1994 negotiations acknowledges, “the one who most insisted on the topic, and it needs to be said in recognition of his tenacity, was Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. He is the one who brings the issue to the table... toward the end of January.”

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83 Ibid.
85 Interview with Pastor, who debriefed several cabinet members on the issue. 5 September 2000.
87 Interview with Pastor, 4 December 2001.
88 Interview with Alcocer.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
Concurrently, there was a team within the IFE that had been advocating a change of policy regarding IEM since late 1993. Nevertheless, as Manuel Carrillo, head of IFE’s international affairs office and a member of that team put it, Carpizo’s predecessor, Patrocinio González Garrido, on whose ministry the IFE still depended, “had a vision, let’s say strict, orthodox, of sovereignty.” But with the 1994 electoral reforms things begin to change for this group of people, headed by IFE’s director Arturo Nuñez. During the IFE’s internal debate in late January, still in the midst of the political upheaval brought about by the Zapatistas, recalls Carrillo, “somebody comes and says: ‘look at this video, from El Salvador. Can you see that [foreign] observers are substituting the people at the [voting] tables. They say that is observation.’ The reasoning was devastating.”

But by that time it was not really up to Salinas, i.e. to the government, to decide on the issue. Alcocer, who was also a friend of and advisor to Colosio recalls: “the decision wasn’t Salinas’ anymore, Salinas was operating under the presidential logic: once the candidate is designated, it was him who made the decisions regarding the electoral process… and the logic was this: this is your election, not mine; if you want observers, I am not opposed.” As Alcocer has written, “Knowing that the eyes of the international community would continue to be focused on Mexico, and that the August elections had provided the impetus for the EZLN [the Zapatista Army] rebellion, Colosio recognized that it would be foolish to employ Mexico’s traditional attitude rejecting international election observers.”

Colosio had already sent some signals that he was more open to electoral observation than Salinas had been, at least regarding domestic observers. Thus, for instance, on 8 December Colosio said: “I am in favor of a plural group of impartial and prestigious national observers, made up by citizens proposed by all parties.” Nevertheless, international observers were not even mentioned. But with the political environment brought in by the new year, Colosio (and Salinas) perceived the need to count with international observers. Furthermore, by inviting observers rather late in the electoral process, as Jennifer McCoy, who headed the CC’s team for the 1994 elections has noted, the government “had the positive thing of getting international legitimacy, having observers coming to election day, and saying, well election day looked very good. I think… there was a emerging norm, and recognizing the practice…. it was a recalculation of interests, of national interests.”

Colosio seemed to have made up his mind on the issue around February. Interestingly, during the negotiations held during that month between the PAN, PRD, and PRD with the Interior Minister, only the second, through its representative Porfirio Muñoz Ledo openly favored the presence of international observers in the August elections. The

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91 Interview with Manuel Carrillo.
92 Ibid.
93 According to Jorge Castañeda, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes convinced Salinas to accept foreign observers on 23 December 1993. But subsequently, when Fuentes tried to arrange a meeting between Cárdenas and Colosio to talk about the issue, Cárdenas showed some resistance to meet with his counterpart, and the issue fell apart. Salinas did not pursue it further. Castañeda 1994: 30-35.
94 Interview with Alcocer.
95 Alcocer 1997: 696.
96 Ibid.: 696.
97 Interview with Jennifer McCoy, Atlanta, 8 September 2000.
PAN had no official position yet, whereas the PRI was still against it. Toward the end of February or early March, though, Colosio went to Washington, where he met with NDI leaders. As Patrick Merloe, who participated in the meeting with Colosio recalls, “he told us, please come, be involved, we want you in Mexico, we want you to help the Civic Alliance, we want you to come as international observers… he reiterated that it was his view that there should be international observers in Mexico’s elections.”

Around that time, on 6 March, Colosio said in a campaign rally: '[The elections’] transparency demands the participation of observers, and it does not exclude the possibility that anybody gives an extensive testimony about it, not only on the part of our citizens but also on the part of international visitors. By no means should we regard with fear those whom wish to learn about the nature of our democratic processes. Our elections, and I say this with full conviction, will have no shame to conceal.'

From then on, there was a noticeable change in the government’s position on foreign observers. A week after Colosio’s speech, Mexico’s ambassador to the UN declared that accepting foreign observers “does not mean abandonment of sovereignty, but declaring that there is nothing to hide and that electoral processes in Mexico can be observed freely.” Nevertheless, not everybody within the government was equally convinced. Foreign Minister Tello declared in early April: “I have yet to be persuaded about the necessity of having people from abroad coming to observe the [electoral] process.” In the end, the foreign minister did not need to be convinced. As he told me, he was not involved in negotiating the issue of foreign observers, his role being limited to issuing the invitations. As Tello put it, “The one who negotiated everything was Carpizo.” The Interior Minister certainly played a key role in bringing about the acceptance of foreign observers—although he accepted the presence of international observers (international visitors), “not without sadness.” But even Carpizo’s pragmatic position could have not materialized had Colosio not agreed to it. For Alcocer: “If the PRI candidate had said no, not even Carpizo would have been able to pull the [international] observers issue off.”

By March, the political environment started to acquire a relative sense of restfulness again. During the first week, Peace Commissioner Camacho signed a preliminary peace agreement with the Zapatistas, and on the 23 the constitutional reforms that came out of the negotiations among the main three parties and the government were approved by Congress. But just then Mexico entered again in a state of commotion, as Colosio was assassinated that same day. This was a most extraordinary event in Mexico, where the last time something equivalent had happened was about seven decades before. As a result of the rarefied political environment, the rebels suspended peace talks. Furthermore, in the midst of internal strife, Salinas had to hurriedly designate a second PRI candidate: Ernesto Zedillo, a former cabinet member who had quit to become Colosio’s campaign manager.

100 Quoted in Benitez Manaut 1996: 547.
102 La Jornada, 10 April 1994.
103 Interview with Manuel Tello, Mexico City, 12 November 2001.
105 Interview with Alcocer.
Nevertheless, the agreements regarding foreign observers remained untouched. Furthermore, in April the Mexican government officially approached the UN, inviting it to play a role in the forthcoming electoral process (more on this below). Regarding the broader issue of foreign observers, the reformed IFE decided to leave the drafting of the official invitation to the six citizen counselors, who took their seats on 3 June. Twenty days later, and only two months before election day, the IFE issued the guidelines for “international visitors.” As José Woldenberg, then one of the six citizen counselors and later counselor president of the IFE recalls, the counselors decided to issue a “generic” invitation (i.e., not to make a list or invited organizations) so as not to offend any one; political parties and NGOs could then issue particular invitations.\(^{106}\) The guidelines of course kept the term “international visitor,” which for Woldenberg was “an intermediate formulation” between the closeness mandated by constitutional article 33 and a complete opening. Nevertheless, Woldenberg recognizes that “once groups or individuals from abroad come to follow the elections, what are they? Observers. They are international observers, there is no way around it.”\(^{107}\)

Interestingly, although it was the PRD the party which, as noted, pushed the most to include foreign observers in the agenda, this was not a pervasive position within it. Thus, for instance, in mid-March Amalia García, the PRD’s secretary for international affairs, downplayed the importance of international observers. She declared that in the negotiations to the electoral law then underway, “We do not consider this change [allowing foreign observers] a priority. We only stressed electoral impartiality, which is what really matters.”\(^{108}\) It seemed that, as Aguayo has argued, “opposition parties never finished digesting the presence… of electoral observers. They saw [electoral observation] as an intrusion.”\(^{109}\)

I now turn to consider in detail the work of the three most prominent organizations in the monitoring of the 1994 Mexican elections: AC, the UN, and the CC.

**Alianza Cívica**

AC was established in April 1994 as an umbrella organization formed by more than 300 NGOs. But the decision to embark on an observation project had been taken months before, in November 1993, when the AMDH and other six organizations (Citizen Movement for Democracy, Convergence of Civil Organizations for Democracy, National Accord for Democracy, Council for Democracy, and the Arturo Rosenblueth Foundation) first had the idea to launch a monitoring effort for the August 1994 elections.\(^{110}\) As Aguayo recalls,

we decided to monitor the 1994 elections in Yucatan. We were observing the [state] elections… it was the day Colosio was destapado [unveiled, i.e., nominated]… those of us who would later form Alianza Cívica were talking and decided to do the observation of the presidential election. Knowing that we would not have money, we said, ‘we have to do it, even if it is symbolic,

\(^{106}\) The IFE was reformed again in the 1996. Quote from interview with José Woldenberg, Mexico City, 30 October 2001.

\(^{107}\) Interview with Woldenberg.


\(^{109}\) Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2001.

\(^{110}\) Calderon Alzati and Cazes 1996: 146.
even if Colosio is going to win, even if... it doesn’t matter, let’s do it anyway.111

The founding NGOs were still trying to reach a consensus on a myriad of issues, such as whether or not to accept foreign funding, when the Zapatista rebellion broke out. Everything changed for the nascent monitoring project from then on. As noted earlier, president Salinas decided to get in touch with its leaders to make sure that they would carry out their monitoring project, to set up public funding for observation efforts, and to relax restrictions on foreign financing. Furthermore, the amendments to the electoral laws enhanced both the legitimacy and the opportunities to carry out observation activities. Suddenly, the long neglected and despised observer organizations seemed to have become the government’s darlings. Whereas counting with an enhanced legal status and more open access to external sources made the work of the still nascent AC and other monitoring organizations easier, the sudden change in the government’s attitude toward them also entailed risks. Governmental attempts at interfering in what had been conceived of as an independent citizen effort was the most obvious danger.

But the leaders of the seven organization continued to work on their own, building a consensus plan for the August elections. By the end of February 1994, the preliminary project was concluded, and then presented for discussion in several states. AC’s legal establishment and a national meeting in Mexico City to approve the final scheme took place subsequently, in April 1994.

In the meantime, AC’s project was also taken to Washington D.C., in order to request funds from sympathetic foundations and NGOs.112 Thus, AC received a $820,000 grant from NDI.113 That NDI gave financial aid to AC was rather unusual, since NDI usually provided technical assistance, not cash. But the case of AC was different. As Aguayo recalls his organization’s dealing with NDI: “I told them: we need support in cash, not in kind, we don’t need training nor technical assistance, nor that you tell us how to observe elections. We know how to do that. What we need is that you support us financially…. NDI understood that [and] they even provided us with resources without providing technical assistance. I don’t know how they managed [to do this] with their board of directors.”114 The decision to provide funds to AC through NDI seems to actually had come from higher up, from the State Department.115

AC’s relationship with NDI was completely different from the one it had with the UN. For Enrique Calderón and Daniel Cazés, two of AC’s leaders, the UN envos “thought they could manipulate” AC. Calderón and Cazés charge the UN with trying to make AC “give[ ] up on any serious observation effort.”116 Similarly, according to Aguayo, “the relationship with the UN was my nightmare, our nightmare. Only that I had a good deal of the burden in the relationship with them. It was a nightmare... [this kind of problem] did not happen even with the gringos [people from the U.S.], nor with anybody

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111 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2001.
112 Calderon Alzati and Cazes 1996: 147.
114 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
else; it was only with the UN. That indeed was a nightmare.”

The root cause of the problem, according to Aguayo, was that the world organization “wanted to have a place under the universe of Mexico’s democratization, and that we [AC] had taken that place that they, in a natural manner, should have had.”

The difficulties arose because the assistance the government had requested the UN provide put the international organization in a position of power vis-à-vis domestic NGOs (more on this below). AC resented this. Aguayo recollects there was a terrible struggle over the methodology [AC wanted to use for its monitoring efforts], and in a meeting we [AC] had [with UN personnel], there was a moment in which I told them, ‘listen,’ or we told them, it is not important who said it but it was said, on the part of Alianza Cívica, ‘listen, at this table—they were five or six, we were six—four of us hold Ph. D.’s from various universities from abroad’ … the installed capacity at the table sitting in front of them was impressive.

Nguyen Huu-Dong, who coordinated the 1994 UN mission, recognizes the problems his team had with AC. According to him, two factors underlaid the heated discussions over methodological issues: the “lack of communication and lack of trust” between AC and the UN mission, and the fact that national observers tend to be, inherently, more aggressive or suspicious of the government’s intention in the electoral process than international observers are. For Huu-Dong, it is a normal difference, between national and foreign observers. Regarding the code of conduct, for instance, speaking about foreigners, I do not have the same responsibility, I have a different responsibility, from the national observer. The national observer has more pronounced the reaction of someone who can fix the mistakes [of the electoral process], and the foreign observer does not have such capacity; he has a much more passive role… [if this difference] is not well presented, it can generate a certain difference in conception between the two [kinds of observers]. That was, I would say, the problem in 94 with Alianza Cívica.

Nevertheless, working with the UN was important for AC, for two reasons. The most obvious one was the financial support it would receive from the international organization. As noted, the government had set up a fund to be distributed among monitoring organizations—and the UN was in charge of managing the resources (more on this below). But arguably more important than the fund was the legitimacy the UN could invest AC with. The neutrality of AC had become an issue from early on; it was constantly accused of being partial to the PRD. This kind of criticism made Aguayo realize that the legitimacy of the organization was at stake. As he put it, “I said [to his fellow activists]: ‘this is the battle for legitimacy. Therefore we are going to fight for international legitimacy’… when the internal discussion [within AC] comes about why we had to accept someone from the UN… [I] use to tell them, ‘that is the way it is, tough luck. We have no option; that is the game, there has to be someone from the UN.’” It was clear for Aguayo that the UN could

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117 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Interview with Nguyen Huu-Dong, Mexico City, 22 November 2001.
121 Ibid.
provide them, more than with anything else, with “the political legitimacy.” AC was playing a two-level game.

Thus, AC focused its effort in putting together a comprehensive monitoring effort of the whole electoral project, which included the establishment of a media-watchdog project, opinion polls, a study of Mexican electoral laws, as well as a program to denounce illegal electoral activities (such as the use of government funds in political campaigns). AC actually mounted the largest organized, independent citizen effort in Mexico’s history. The consolidation of Mexico’s civil society since the late 1980s was crucial in this respect. It was the firmness of Mexican civil society which made the monitoring effort in Mexico different from those carried previously, such as the Nicaraguan experience in 1990. As Aguayo put it, “Insofar as Mexico had a stronger civil society [than countries such as Haiti], foreign monitoring was less aggressive.” Without a doubt. As Jennifer McCoy, the CC’s mission chief to Mexico in 1994 put it, “the international observers didn't play a crucial role, it was domestic observers… Alianza Cívica.” Similarly, Pastor notes that in the 1994 electoral process, “what was critical was civil society.”

The fact that Mexicans had the leading role in the monitoring effort was important for AC. As Aguayo explains, “we had very clear that as long as we had the support of the [Mexican] community of NGOs, and of the citizenship we worked with, the international observation was complementary. That was the thesis. Right from the start: [foreign observers] are going to complement our work, and they are going to do what we decide. Period. Or they can come on their own.” This is not to say that AC was closed to foreign observers—only that it wanted to coordinate the activities of foreign NGOs which had offered to work with it, such as WOLA. In fact, AC invited about half of the 777 foreign observers present on election day. The profusion of invitations issued by AC was not fortuitous. It had to do with the work many of the NGOs which composed it had been doing to establish links with sister organizations abroad. Absent this previous relationship, AC would have not invited foreigners to monitor the elections. “If the 94 observation had taken place in 82, we would never had invited foreigners… it was unthinkable,” notes Aguayo.

On 21 August, AC had 18,280 Mexican observers, and 450 “foreign visitors” distributed throughout the country. Based on a 2168-polling places sample, before midnight AC put out its first report, which questioned the cleanliness of the election. An hour after midnight, and based on a smaller sample, AC released the results of its quick count: Ernesto Zedillo, the PRI’s candidate, was well ahead in the electoral race, with a 20-point difference from his closest competitor, the PAN’s candidate. Although the election was certainly far from being a model one, it was the cleanest Mexico had ever had. Tellingly, there was no widespread post-election mobilization, as had happened six years before. Furthermore, on this occasion the irregularities did not seem to have affected the outcome of the presidential election. The results for the presidential election were: 48.7 percent for Zedillo (PRI), 25.9 percent for Fernández de Cevallos (PAN), and 16.6 percent

122 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
123 Interview with Aguayo, 16 August 2000.
124 Interview with McCoy.
125 Interview with Pastor, 5 September 2000.
126 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
127 Ibid.
for Cárdenas (PRD). As AC’s report put it: “The quantitative impact of [the documented irregularities] cannot be calculated with certainty and precision. It is likely that they did not alter the outcome of the presidential election. Nevertheless, they did alter the correlation of the national forces at the national, regional, and local levels, the composition of the Chamber of Deputies, and possibly that of the Senate, generating an overall impression of governing-party predominance.”

Even though Aguayo recognizes that he “would’ve liked a different outcome” of the electoral process, he thinks that with the 1994 monitoring effort “we, collectively, delivered a hard blow to the authoritarian regime that year.”

They certainly did—and Aguayo received the National Endowment for Democracy’s “Democracy Award” the following year.

**The United Nations**

Around February 1994, the Mexican government, through the IFE, furtively approached the UN with something in view for the August general elections. As Manuel Carrillo, since that time head of IFE’s international affairs office recalls, “We got in touch with the United Nations around February 94, in order to have a first approach… [in which] we arranged a visit by a UN team to Mexico… we were having meetings. Imagine, in February and March [1994] I was having breakfast with somebody at the United Nations in order to talk about the monitoring issue; I mean, I was not going to do it just like that. I had to have important [political] support.”

Nguyen Huu-Dong, then director of the UN Electoral Assistance Division, subsequently visited Mexico. As he remembers, “I talked with the authorities at the Interior Ministry… because at that time IFE’s president was the Interior Minister.”

According to Carrillo, by mid-March negotiations with the UN were going well, if slowly. The UN’s reaction when the Mexican government first approached it was one of caution, if not reluctance. As the PRI’s foreign affairs secretary would say in a forum Washington two months before the elections, the UN had advised Mexico not to present a formal request for electoral support, citing bureaucratic reasons. The UN, to be sure, stated that it would not consider sending an observation delegation to Mexico because it was too late, because the country was too big, and because it was not clear that Mexico met the criteria required by the UN for countries to receive observer missions.

Similarly, according to Jorge Alcocer, who along with Interior Minister Carpizo wrote the letter asking for UN’s assistance in the electoral process, when the Mexican ambassador to the UN presented the letter to Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, he asked: “Are you sure you want to do this? We don’t really want to be in Mexico.”

Huu-Dong confirms this account:

Jorge Alcocer is right: that is, finally when the request for an observation [sic] was presented, the first reaction is: hey, why does the current situation justifies an observation in Mexico, since it is a constitutional election, it is a country without a

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129 Ibid: 166.
130 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002. For a description of the environment that transpired at AC’s headquarters on election night see Armendares 1994.
131 Interview with Carrillo.
132 Interview with Nguyen.
134 Carter Center 1994: 32.
135 Interview with Alcocer.
major problem. There is the problem of distrust, but that is not a problem the UN
can solve. So, the first reaction was that, and we know the nationalistic
sensitivities of all countries, Mexico included, then the reaction was not one of
rejection, but one of caution.\textsuperscript{136}

Nevertheless, the assassination on 23 March of the PRI’s candidate hastened the
negotiating process. According to Carrillo, it “initiate[d] a process of acceleration… by
that time [Interior Minister] Carpizo was much more flexible.”\textsuperscript{137} In a preliminary visit to
Mexico, Horacio Boneo, from the UN’s Electoral Assistance Office, had pointed out to
Carrillo that UN observation of the Mexican elections was out of the question, since the
country was very large. “So I asked him, then what do we do with so many NGOs and
national observers, here they are, what do we do with them? And what do we do with the
international ones.”\textsuperscript{138} Thus, in its 10 May letter to the UN Secretary-General, Carpizo
requested the UN 1) “to send a mission of experts in electoral matters so that it can know
the Mexican electoral system, and it can put out a technical report” on the matter, and 2) “to
collaborate by providing technical assistance to the groups of national observers that
request it… in order to ensure their professionalism, independence, and impartiality.”\textsuperscript{139}
Thus, Mexico ended up not requesting the UN to send a monitoring mission to the Mexican
elections. Nevertheless, the mere act of contacting the world organization in order to
request its assistance in an electoral matter was a turning point in Mexico’s foreign
policy.\textsuperscript{140} Manuel Tello, foreign minister at the time, accepts that inviting the UN was a
qualitative change for Mexico.\textsuperscript{141} Without approval from the General Assembly, the UN
accepted Mexico’s request.\textsuperscript{142}

The UN’s five-member technical mission started its activities on 28 June, and
concluded them on 9 July. In its report, it stated that “Mexico has lived in a permanent
reform on electoral matters” since the late 1970s, and noted that only the last electoral
reform—the one carried out as a result of the Zapatista uprising—“has been the only one of
the three [during the Salinas administration] approved with the support of the [political]
forces with the greatest electoral power.”\textsuperscript{143} The evaluation of the Mexican electoral
system, in which the latest electoral reform weighed heavily, was positive. Thus, the
technical mission concluded that “the structure of the electoral system is able to carry out
free and fair elections” in August 1994.\textsuperscript{144} This view obviously irritated opposition parties
and some observer groups. But as Horacio Boneo, co-leader of the UN mission noted
before the elections, there was no way to prevent the Mexican government from using the
report from the UN experts to legitimize the electoral process.\textsuperscript{145} Nevertheless, the UN

\textsuperscript{136} Interview with Nguyen.
\textsuperscript{137} Interview with Carrillo, Mexico City.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} As the \textit{New York Times} put it: “Trampling an ancient political taboo in pursuit of new legitimacy, for
Mexico’s coming presidential vote, the Government has invited the United Nations to evaluate its electoral
system and help organize independent groups of election observers.” Tim Golden, “Mexico Invites U.N. to
Attend Election to Observe the Observers,” 13 May 1994, A9.
\textsuperscript{141} Interview with Manuel Tello.
\textsuperscript{142} No General Assembly authorization was required because no electoral observers were being sent.
\textsuperscript{143} United Nations 1994: 38.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.: 60.
\textsuperscript{145} Benitez Manaut 1996: 559.
technical mission was careful to point out that although the Mexican electoral system possessed a rather complex and well articulated legal structure, “it has to be taken into account that the norm, by itself, does not presuppose that the situation which it aims to regulate and the objective it pursues will take place by the established and desired means.”

More conspicuous than the UN’s technical team, though, was ETONU-MEX, the intergovernmental organization’s team set up in early June to provide assistance to domestic observers. With a staff of about 50, ETONU-MEX provided assistance to 16 organizations—the most important of which was AC. Other monitoring groups included Coparmex, an umbrella business organization, the Teachers National Organization for Electoral Observation, of the Education Workers’ National Union, an organization closely associated with the PRI, and the Institute for Democratic Transition Studies, an independent think tank. As noted, the government entrusted a fund it created to assist monitoring groups to the UN mission. Thus, ETONU-MEX managed about $3 million, of which AC received half. The UN sent an expert to each state of Mexico in order to serve as a representative of the organization with local and electoral authorities, and as a liaison with local NGOs—the expert whose presence caused irritation among AC activists, as Aguayo noted. On election day, UN representatives did not visit the polling places; instead they visited the offices of the domestic observers.

With the exception of AC, the relationship between the UN mission and Mexican monitoring NGOs was smooth. The performance of the UN mission was generally considered a success, with many people within and without the organization talking about the birth of a “Mexican model.” Thus, ETONU-MEX co-leader Huu-Dong recognizes that “this was a new experience” for the UN, while his partner Boneo pointed out that the UN’s Electoral Assistance Unit would be able “to use [the kind of tasks assigned to it in Mexico] in the future as one of our tools.” Similarly, Alcocer notes that after the 1994 electoral process in Mexico, “a new model emerges [for the UN]... I think it was a very successful experience for everybody, and it allowed the United Nations... to reevaluate its concept of observation and monitoring.”

The Mexican experience thus had a qualitative impact on the nature of IEM. Paradoxically, though, the success of the UN effort was directly related to the success of the organization it had more trouble with: AC. Talking about the effectiveness and legitimacy of AC, Vikram Chand notes: “Had Mexican civil society not been as developed, it is unlikely that [the UN] mission would have been as successful.”

As a matter of fact, thanks to the existence of AC and other domestic monitoring groups, ETONU-MEX became a prominent actor in the Mexican electoral process. That is, by putting the intergovernmental organization between the state and civil society, the Mexican government turned the by 1994 customary role of the UN as an external judge, into one of being one more player in the elections. This is not to suggest that the UN mission played a leading role in the electoral process—far from that. But it ended up being an actor alongside the government, the political parties, and civil society. The center that held the relationship among the domestic actors in 1994 was, of course, the deep suspicious

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147 Benitez Manaut 1996: 559; Chand 1997: 553.
149 Interview with Alcocer.
150 Chand 1997: 553.
on the fairness of the electoral process. And it was that center which pulled the UN into Mexico. As Huu-Dong said at the time: “The fraud hypothesis is the basic reason of electoral observation.”

The UN was in Mexico to vouch for the fairness of the electoral process. That is why it became another political actor, although of a peculiar nature, in the electoral process. This was certainly not an easy job for ETONU-MEX. On the one hand, it had to deal with leaders of NGOs such as AC claiming that it had an ignoble pact with the government, or that the fairness of the election was not its main concern, and on the other it had to be ever careful so as not to offend the Mexican government. As Huu-Dong later commented, “The relationship with each of the governments represents... a problem: how to convince them that we work for them.” In the final analysis, according to Huu-Dong, “I would say that our contribution [was] not to improve the Mexican system at all, but to shed a little bit of light into the system.” That “little bit of light,” regardless of how much agreement and discord might have created in the Mexican actors, ended up nevertheless lighting Mexico’s dim conception of its sovereignty.

**The Carter Center**

The CC’s involvement in the 1994 Mexican electoral process was very different from other experiences the semi-official organization had had, or at least from that one could have expected at the time. On the one hand, the prestige and international authority of its head, Jimmy Carter, as well as the impressive record the CC had built by 1994 in the field of election monitoring suggested the organization would play an important role in Mexico during that momentous year. Furthermore, the personal relationship between Carter’s chief aide on election monitoring matters, Robert Pastor, and Mexico’s president Carlos Salinas, as well as the vast network of contacts Pastor had with academics, activists, and political leaders from the opposition parties reinforced the expectation of a leading role for the CC in the monitoring of the 1994 elections.

But on the other hand the CC had an indelible mark that made its playing of a visible role in any Mexican elections extremely unlikely: Carter himself. When he was president, he had a few unfortunate experiences, and a series of disaccords on a number of issues with his Mexican counterpart, that made the bilateral relationship with his homologue López Portillo rather sour. From then on, as Aguayo, a specialist on U.S.-Mexican relations, put it, Carter “produced urticaria” in the ruling party. Furthermore, Aguayo notes that Pastor was part of the problem as well: he was not particularly appreciated by many in the NGO community, perhaps because of his closeness to Salinas: “He caused animadversion in some people; I knew him and I know the kind of character he is, so he did not cause me problems, but he did indeed generate tensions.”

Immersed in this contradictory environment, the CC ended up playing a relatively discreet role in the Mexican 1994 elections. As Vikram Chand, a member of the CC delegation to Mexico that year, has put it, “[The CC’s] council’s approach was low-key...”

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154 Interview with Nguyen.
155 See Aguayo Quezada 1998.
156 Interview with Aguayo, 8 May 2002.
[it] chose not to bring Carter to Mexico at all. Of all the three major political parties, only the PRD was willing to consider inviting Carter… Mexican political actors… were simply unwilling to turn to an ex-US President to sort out their differences. What was possible in Nicaragua was impossible in Mexico; and the Council had to adjust its strategy accordingly.\(^{157}\)

The CC started its involvement in light of the August 1994 elections almost a year in advance. In September 1993, a four-person team visited Mexico in order to analyze the electoral reforms being discussed at the time. Two months later, it published a report, “Electoral Reform in Mexico.” The document included specific recommendations, some of which were later enacted. By the end of 1993, the CC was thus already involved, if more as a bona fide consulting firm or a think tank than as a monitoring organization, in the Mexican electoral process. But then came the Zapatista uprising in January 1994, which pulled the CC closer to the action. Salinas himself contacted his former graduate fellow to request the presence of the CC in the electoral process. As Pastor recollects, about March or April Salinas called him up and, repeating by heart an argument Pastor had used (unsuccessfully) in the past to convince him to invite foreign observers to Mexican elections, told him: “I think you have a point, but you know we can’t invite international observers because the Mexican people won’t accept it, you know it will offend their nationality [sic], but what we’ll do we’ll permit international visitors.” With that decision, as Pastor notes, Salinas had “obviously crossed the threshold.”\(^{158}\)

At that time, though, it was too late for the CC to form a large monitoring team, as the Mexican case would have required, so it did not properly monitor the elections—at least not to the extent the organization had grown used to. Instead, it sent “study missions,” produced four reports on “Elections in Mexico,” and carried out a reduced monitoring effort. For this, the CC joined forces with NDI and the International Republican Institute (IRI), “because we knew we would be too small for a big country like Mexico to have the same effect that we had in Nicaragua or Panama,” recalls Jennifer McCoy, who headed the CC’s team during the whole 11-month process.\(^{159}\) Part of the strategy of the combined mission was to work in tandem with Mexican observers. As NDI’s Merloe, a 1994 delegation-member, puts it:

> if you were concerned about promoting democracy in the world, you had somehow to have some role in helping Mexican reformers. And at that point we had learned a very good lesson from Chile… we knew that if we were going to be involved in a country, that international observers to be effective had to connect with the domestic political reformers… When we engage in a country like Chile or a country like Mexico… where civil society is extraordinarily well organized [NDI just offers its assistance] on any terms, whatever the terms.\(^{160}\)

The joint CC/NDI/IRI delegation totaled 80 members from 17 countries.

Interestingly, although the IFE was supposed to issue only a “generic” invitation and not individual ones, NDI was specifically invited by the electoral organization to attend the general elections. As Merloe recalls, Carrillo called them up to tell them the IFE would

\(^{157}\) Chand 1997: 555.

\(^{158}\) Interview with Pastor, 5 September 2000.

\(^{159}\) Interview with McCoy.

\(^{160}\) Interview with Merloe.
appreciate their presence in Mexico, and then faxed the invitation.161 The CC team was composed of 11 members, among whom were former Costa Rican president Rodrigo Carazo, former Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo, former Canadian prime minister Joseph Clark, and Harry Barnes, the former ambassador to Chile at the time of the 1988 plebiscite. It arrived in Mexico City four days before the election, and then joined with NDI/IRI mission-members to travel, in pairs, to 25 states (and some stayed in the Federal District). In total, the combined delegation visited about 500 polling places, and witnessed the vote count in 34 polling sites.162 Two days later, it issued a favorable preliminary report, noting: “This election represents a significant step forward for the Mexican democratic process.”163

Five months later, the CC issued its own detailed report on the Mexican elections.164 Although mostly approving of the way the electoral process had been conducted, the CC’s report was guarded in its endorsement of the Mexican political system. Referring to AC’s electoral report on the election, the CC’s one notes that, “a number of irregularities were observed which may have had an effect on congressional or local races, and which continue to raise questions about the legitimacy of the outcome.” Nevertheless, and also in keeping with the tone of AC’s report, the CC’s account recognizes that “Our delegation received no evidence that irregularities were sufficiently serious or widespread to have affected the outcome of the presidential race.” The report states that “further reforms were needed to raise credibility and address the inordinately unequal campaign conditions in the future,” and it underscores “the active and effective role played by civic groups in election-monitoring.”165 Regardless of the specific weight of the CC or any other foreign mission in Mexico, the important part was that they were involved in the monitoring effort at all. As McCoy notices, “For Mexico [the electoral process of] 94 was landmark... in terms of Mexico inviting observers .... the international observers didn’t play a crucial role... but for Mexico, one of the most nationalistic states, to allow what they call visitors, to witness the election” was what made it a milestone.166

IV. IEM in Mexico after 1994

Although the watershed for electoral observation in Mexico was the 1994 electoral process, election monitoring also figured prominently in the congressional mid-term elections, and particularly in the inaugural (and concurrent) election for the mayorship of Mexico city in 1997. In order to monitor the electoral process in the capital city, Civic Alliance obtained a $300,000 grant from the European Union. Significantly, after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to prevent the funds from reaching the NGO, the IFE was able to assert its autonomy (see below) and jurisdiction over electoral observation, thus allowing the funds to flow.167 In any case, the overall 1997 electoral process involved 391 accredited “international visitors” from 33 countries, and 24,291 national observers registered at the IFE—considerable less than in 1994.168

161 Ibid.
164 The NDI-IRI delegation, on the other hand, did not deliver its final report. Mazza 2001: 122.
165 Carter Center 1995: 11-12.
166 Interview with McCoy.
167 Prud'horne 1998: 153-4
168 Parraguez 1997: 27.
But before the mid-term elections took place, the manufacturing of another electoral reform had been necessary. After August 1994, there was still a widespread perception that the electoral process had not been fair. Thus, Ernesto Zedillo suggested in his 1 December 1994 inaugural address the need for yet another electoral reform. Less than two months into his administration, and less than a month after the devaluation of the peso had sparked the worst economic crisis in post-revolutionary Mexico, a document called “Commitments for a National Political Accord” was signed by the political parties and the government.

Nineteen months later, all political parties represented in Congress passed by consensus an initiative amending the constitution in order to make possible the most far-reaching electoral reform ever. Among the most significant changes of this amendment was the exclusion of the executive branch of government from the IFE. Thus, the IFE's governing body, the General Council, would be formed by eight “citizen counselors,” a president (who would be also an independent citizen approved by two-thirds vote of the lower house), and two representatives from the legislative power, one from each house. The 1996 constitutional amendments also established that for the first time in the 1997 elections the mayor of Mexico City would be chosen by the people, rather than appointed by the president.

The mid-term elections that took place on 6 July 1997 completely transformed the political landscape of Mexico, arguably closing the country’s protracted transition to democracy. With 39 percent of the congressional vote, for the first time the PRI no longer held an absolute majority in the lower house: it has only 239 of the 500 seats. The PAN obtained 121 seats, the PRD 125, and the recently created Green Party 8. Thus, by making a congressional alliance, these three parties were able to effectively prevent the PRI from taking control of the government bodies of the lower chamber, and to vote as a bloc on some issues. With the principle of proportional representation having been introduced in the Senate in the last reform, the opposition came to control 53 of its 128 seats. Furthermore, Cárdenas won the election in Mexico City with more than 40 percent of the votes, and its party (the PRD) 38 of the 40 plurality-winner seats in the city council.

It has been widely recognized that the IFE organized its first elections as an autonomous body elections successfully. 85 percent of those polled days after the 1997 elections expressed their satisfaction with the performance of the IFE. Furthermore, cleaner electoral processes have effectively served to bring out Mexico's plurality. Whereas in 1982 the PRI controlled 91 percent of elected positions (including the presidency, seats in congress, governorships, local congresses, and mayoralities), in 1997 it controlled only 54 percent. Thus, as John Bailey and Arturo Valenzuela pointed out shortly after the mid-term elections,

Mexico, in contrast to the transitional regimes of Eastern and Central Europe and South American countries such as Brazil and Peru, is experiencing a democratic opening that features fairly coherent parties. The three largest parties--the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD--combined for more than 80 percent of the vote in July 1997,

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169 President Zedillo himself would later recognize that the 1994 electoral process had been clean but not fair.
170 Santa Cruz 2002.
171 From IFE’s poll in *Voz y Voto* September 1997: 35.
172 Casar and Raphael in Begne 1999.
heralding the emergence of a 'three-plus' party system that will serve as a stabilizer of political expression.\footnote{173}

This emergent plurality and consolidation was corroborated in the 2 July 2000 elections. Not only did Vicente Fox, as the candidate of the "Alianza por el Cambio," formed by his PAN and the Green Party, win the presidency with only a plurality of the votes (42.5 percent, vs. 36.1 percent of the PRI's candidate Francisco Labastida, and 16.6 percent of Cárdenas, running as the candidate of the "Alianza por México," formed by the PRD and four small parties); no party emerged as the absolute winner in Congress either. In the lower chamber the PRI ended up with 211 seats, the PAN with 207, the PRD with 50, and the Green Party with 17 (the other four small parties that supported Cárdenas got 15 seats all together). In the Senate, the PRI received 59 seats, the PAN 45, the PRD 17, and the Green Party five (two of the small parties that joined the PRD got one seat each). Similarly, the PAN won the two governorships that were at play on July 2 (Guanajuato and Morelos), and the PRD kept Mexico City (although it lost the majority in the legislative body).

Lending credibility to this process were again a myriad of national and international observers. Over 30,000 national and 862 international observers distributed all over the country monitored the elections. By this time the government’s attitude vis-à-vis foreign observers had changed substantially. Thus, for instance, the Zedillo administration explicitly requested the presence of Carter himself in the electoral process.\footnote{174} Thus, leading the CC’s mission, Carter met in the days previous to the elections with the three main contenders to the presidency, who assured him that they would respect the election results.\footnote{175} This time the CC developed a new monitoring strategy, working closely with the three main political parties.\footnote{176} Global Exchange and WOLA, among other international NGOs, on the other hand, did engage in a comprehensive effort to monitor the presidential elections.\footnote{177}

But by this time the Mexican understanding of sovereignty had also changed. As Shelly McConnell, assistant Director of the CC’s Latin American Program, and a member of the CC’s 2000 delegation put it referring to that electoral process: “the elections are only a signal of what taken place between 94 and 2000, which is a reformulation of what is Mexican sovereignty… Mexico’s sovereignty today is so strong that they can have a former US president show up and render an opinion about a sovereign process, an election, symbolic of sovereignty in a sense, and they are glad to have him there.”\footnote{178}

Accordingly, by the end of the twentieth century the fact that foreign monitors were present at an electoral process did not steer passions anymore. As Merloe noted, We went back in 2000, and again, everything was totally open. There was again no question whatsoever by the IFE, by the parties, by government officials, complete access, and Civic Alliance, which by then of course was very well established, very mature social force in Mexico […] but the beauty of the 2000 elections in Mexico, was that the internationals were superfluous. The public confidence in the IFE was very, very [sic] strong, the public confidence in the role of Civic Alliance was very

\footnote{173}{Bailey and Valenzuela 1997: 47.}
\footnote{174}{Interview with Shelly McConnell, Atlanta, 4 December 2001.}
\footnote{175}{Público 2 July 2000: 18.}
\footnote{176}{Pastor 2000: 21.}
\footnote{177}{See www.globalexchange.org/campaigns.mexico/ and www.wola.org.}
\footnote{178}{Interview with McConnell.}
strong, confidence in the media, and in what the media was doing was also strong. So, in effect our decision was that there was little for us to do or to say here, because the process seemed clean, confidence in the results was high, people were very pleased with this, generally speaking, we, it was a rare occasion where we decided that even the day after the election we could make a statement, without details, but in general saying what I just said, and thank you very much, and we’ll go home and issue a more detailed report […] if this process continues, we will probably decline to go in the future.179

Pastor concurs: “You don’t need to observe elections everywhere, you just need the right to do so ... I dare say Mexico is not going to need international observers in six years... because people trust the system, IFE passed the test, the PRI passed the test.”180 As Woldenberg notes: “It is likely that the day when we normalize elections in Mexico, there will be less monitoring, and it will be less spectacular. When ones lives in a democratic routine, observers are superfluous... They might nor might not be there. Now, [the IFE] will surely continue issuing generic invitations, we will not go back to the past in which this matter was confined, but it is very likely that attention will decrease.”181

It surely did. In the recent 2003 midterm (lower house) elections, only a few foreign observers were present on election day, and their being there was hardly noticed. The IFE did issue a call for “foreign visitors” since November 2002, having asserted in a previous resolution that it “values, in all its extension, the interests of representatives of diverse institutions and foreign organizations in knowing and learning” about the 2003 elections.182 But not many foreign observers showed up. Thus, for instance, the CC and NDI did not send missions, nor did the OAS, and the UN played only a limited role in coordinating registered observers (as it had done in 2000). The work of domestic observers was also rather modest. AC, for instance, did not mount a comprehensive network of observers, as it had done in the past. It monitored elections in only 10 states and Mexico City.183 The electoral results confirmed once again both the plurality of Mexican electorate and the consolidation of a three-party system: the PRI won 222 seats, the PAN 151, and the PRD, with 96; that is, these three parties won 94 percent of the seats.184 But most importantly for my argument here, the 2003 electoral process shows that Mexico has “graduated” from IEM.

Conclusions
The 1994 Mexican elections epitomize the nature of IEM. State and nonstate actors engaged in a two-level game interacted intensively to make the monitoring of the electoral process possible. The most interesting part of their interaction, though, was the novel normative structure in which it was inscribed. Only six years before, this structure was not present—and no interaction leading to a monitoring effort took place. There was no UN

179 Interview with Merloz.
180 Interview with Pastor, Atlanta, 5 September 2000.
181 Interview with Woldenberg.
182 See “Convocatoria,” and “Acuerdo del Consejo General del Instituto Federal Electoral, por el que se establecen las bases y criterios con que habrá de atender e informar a los visitantes extranjeros que acudan a conocer las modalidades del proceso electoral federal de 2003,” at www.ife.org
184 The Green Party got 17 seats, whereas Labour and Democratic Convergence received 5 seats each. Four seats were not assigned, since the elections in two districts were annulled (which affected also the distribution of proportional represenations seats).
Electoral Assistance Office for the de la Madrid’s administration to resort to, for instance. Furthermore, the Mexican experience is interesting not only because domestic observers took the leading role in the monitoring of the electoral process, but precisely because, despite their late entrance into electoral monitoring, they were able to play such a prominent role. But again: it was the international structure that made the entrance of Mexican NGOs into monitoring activities attractive possible in the first place.

The Chiapas rebellion was certainly what triggered the monitoring of the electoral process, but the issue was already floating on the environment—and even without the uprising some independent groups would undoubtedly have monitored the process (it should be remembered that the organizations that eventually formed AC decided to watch the election in November 1993, and that the CC initiated its involvement in the 1994 electoral process in September 1993). Certainly, tough, the UN would have not been present in Mexico. But my point is precisely that it was the institutionalization of IEM at the international level what allowed the government to respond to the challenge posed by the rebels. So the trigger itself, important as it was for this and other events in the Mexican political economy, was a contingent factor.

By this time, an IEM TAN was already active, becoming an important actor in the Mexican electoral process—and in its foreign policy. That is why the international monitoring of the 1994 electoral process marked a breakthrough in Mexico’s history—and why the monitoring of its 1994 electoral process meant so much more for Mexico in 1994 than in 2000, or 2003. After 1994, as the brief review of the subsequent electoral processes showed, the Mexican state not only started to see the practice of election monitoring differently, but also came to conceive of its sovereignty as being partially defined by the international community. 1994 was the turning point. By the mid 1990s the understanding of sovereignty enshrined in the WHI had permeated the international system; Mexico simply caught up.

The constructivist argument presented here certainly lacks the parsimony favored by rationalist approaches. Thus, for instance, it could be argued that Mexico accepted massive foreign observation in 1994 simply because it was forced to. The rationale for preferring this leaner argument would apparently be consistent with “Ockham’s razor,” also known as the “law of parsimony”: non sunt multiplicanda entia praeter necessitatem (entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity). Nevertheless, the argument of the medieval monk was more subtle than “keep it simply,” the way in which it is usually interpreted. The crux of Ockham’s dictum is that any additional baggage of that required for the understanding of the issue in question should be dispensed of. That is, Ockham’s razor is not an injunction for the simplest theory, but for the one that is capable of elucidating the problem to be explained without superfluous information.

The rationalist critique of my argument would be that some of the alleged causal factors in my account are unnecessary to explain the monitoring of the Mexican electoral process and its concomitant contribution for the redefinition of state sovereignty. I offer two rejoinders: 1) The more extensive argument I present does not include unnecessary information for answering the puzzle in question: how was it that an international norm spread to cover a critical case; 2) The focus on process (as opposed to outcome) sheds more light on the complex international-domestic, state-non state actors interactions that a quick and dry neorealist-type kind of explanation would. My explanation shows how the initial conditions and the outcome are causally and discursively connected. In making sense of this process, theoretical approaches matter. Among other things, IEM is about state
sovereignty—an essentially normative attribute. Self-interest and material factors, on which rationalist accounts typically focus, do not take us very far in understanding it; taking seriously the evolving international normative structure from a constructivist stance does.
References


