



Municipalities: seedbed of political alternation in Mexico



One of the values of an electoral year with 15 state and local elections in Mexico, and no single overriding national issue or personality, is that the “local” (the municipality) becomes more visible. Often overlooked in discussions of “trends” and general results, the more visible municipality can reveal elements of the emerging political culture of Mexico even in its particularity.

1) Municipalities and the democratic transition in Mexico

Municipal election results illustrate the breaking of the PRI monopolies of political power, beginning in the 1980s and early 1990s

The transforming of the PRI monopoly on political power began at the municipal level, and has continued to be nurtured locally. The “nurturing” is less a process of profound competitive party building than the reflexive process of punishing bad government and rewarding good. Nonetheless, this is the very core of the one definition of “democracy” that Mexicans since the early 1990s have agreed upon: democracy is the alternation of parties in power.¹ (See illustrative maps of four states following on pages 2, 3, 4 and 5.)

In this way the municipalities have been at the very center of the transition and not at the margins. This can be seen in the studies of the growth of the PAN as a viable electoral alternative from the early 1980s, and the growth of the PRD from the early 1990s. In fact, both the PAN and the PRD in their time have won municipalities in various parts of Mexico well before they won State or Federal offices.

The strategy of the PAN from the 1980s on was to win and hold key municipal governments, especially in urban and semi-urban areas. By the mid 1980s, the PAN won municipal presidencies in states like Michoacán, where the State Government accepted necessarily if not always gracefully their majorities in Uruapan and Zamora.

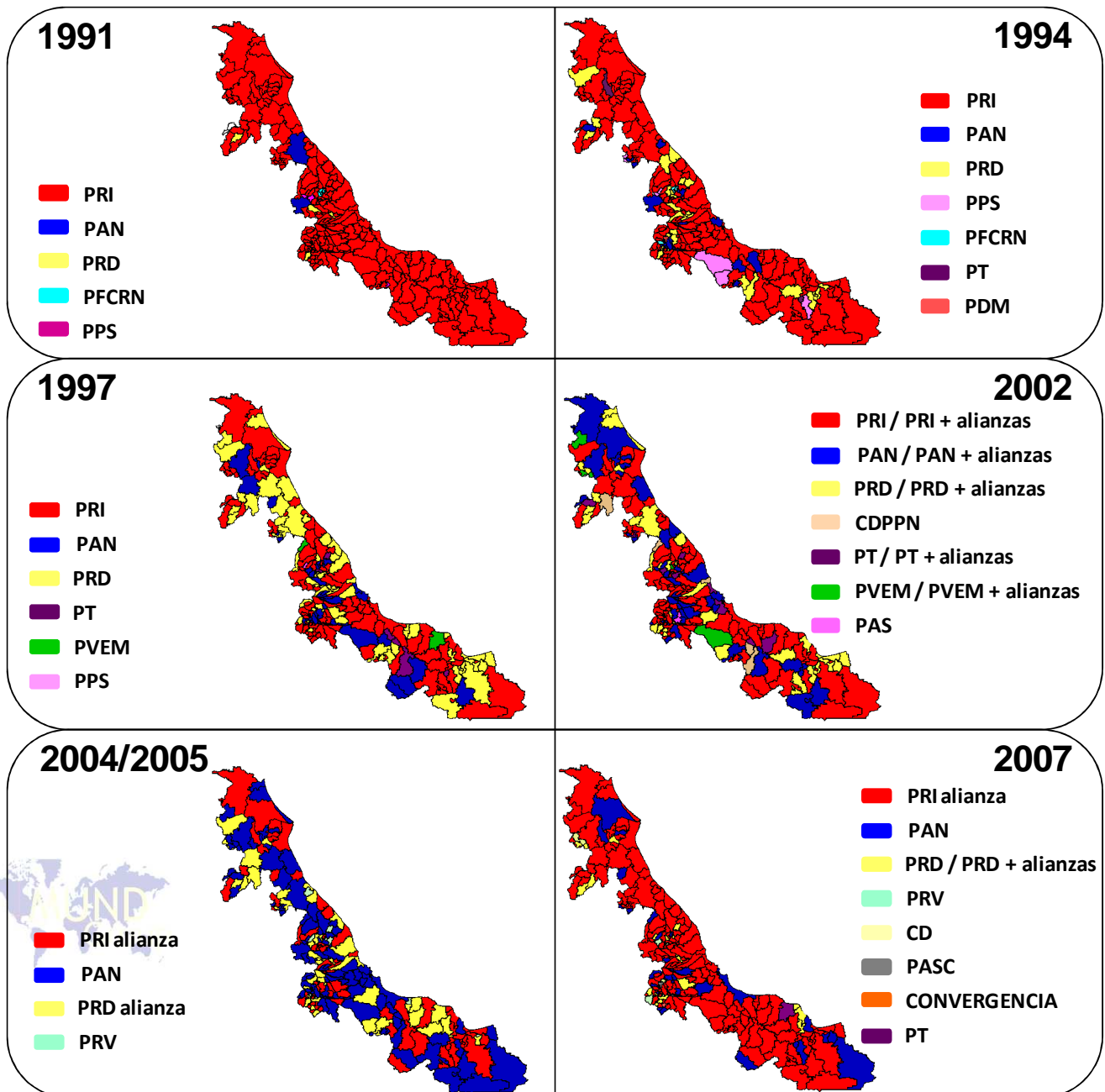
The strategy of the PRD from the early 1990s on was likewise to win key municipalities. The PRD began with some success in rural areas, but quickly came to realize more success in the new growth urban areas with major working class populations from the service industries. The historic breaking of the PRI state level monopoly of power in Guerrero, for example, came more as a result of key victories in Acapulco and Zihuatanejo, along with strong showings in Iguala and Chilpancingo, than an accumulation of rural municipality majorities.

¹ The political culture studies that the MUND team has participated in during the period of 1987 to the present confirm this consensus definition.



Summary of recent elections for Municipal Presidents in Veracruz

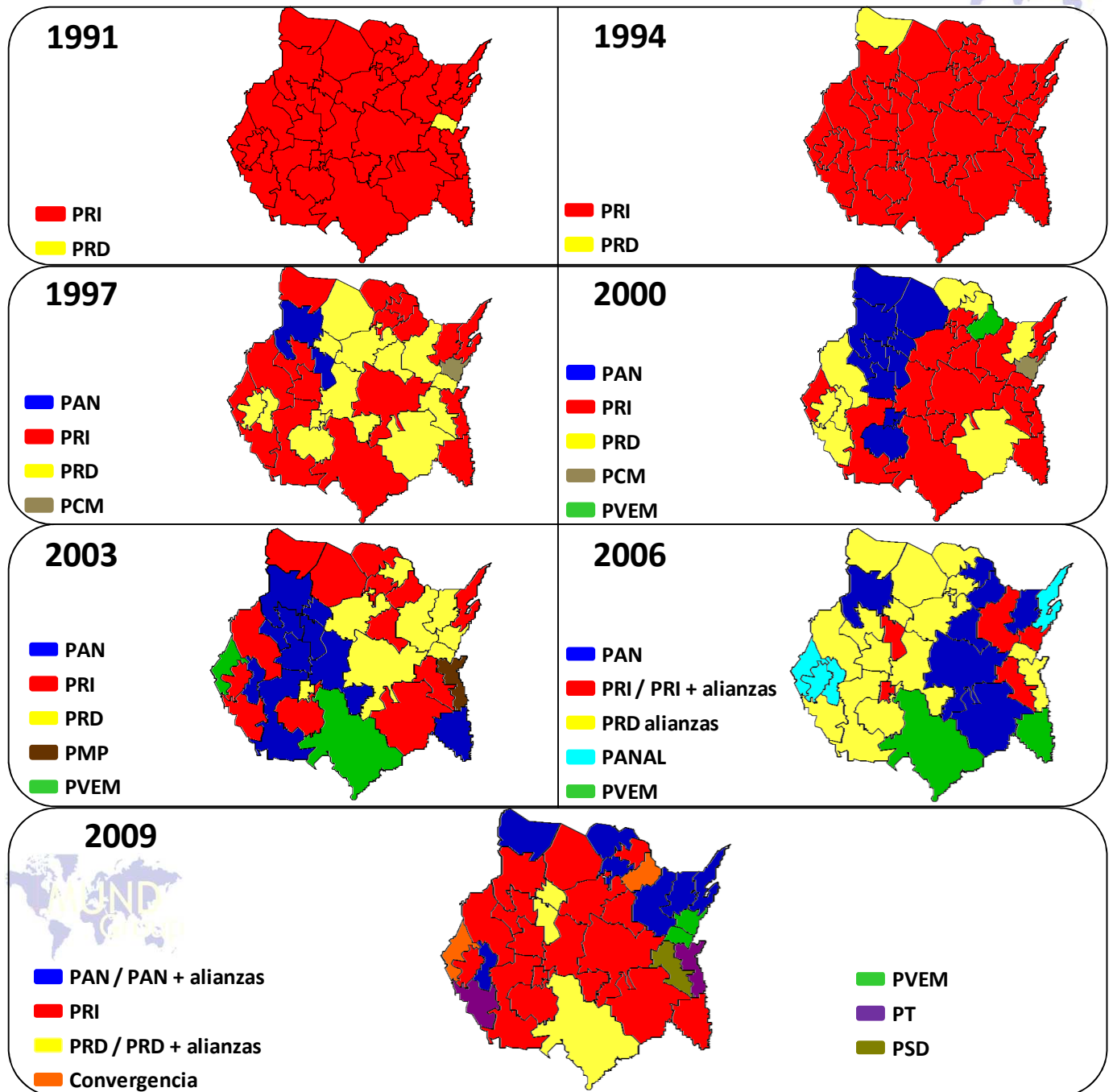
The image of Veracruz is that of an unflinching PRI-domination, but the reality has been different for some time. Admittedly, the current map for 2007 (the most recent year of municipal elections) looks a bit more like 1991 and 1994 than the interim period of 1997-2005. However, the dynamics of municipal particularity have been established and the current local polls show volatility.





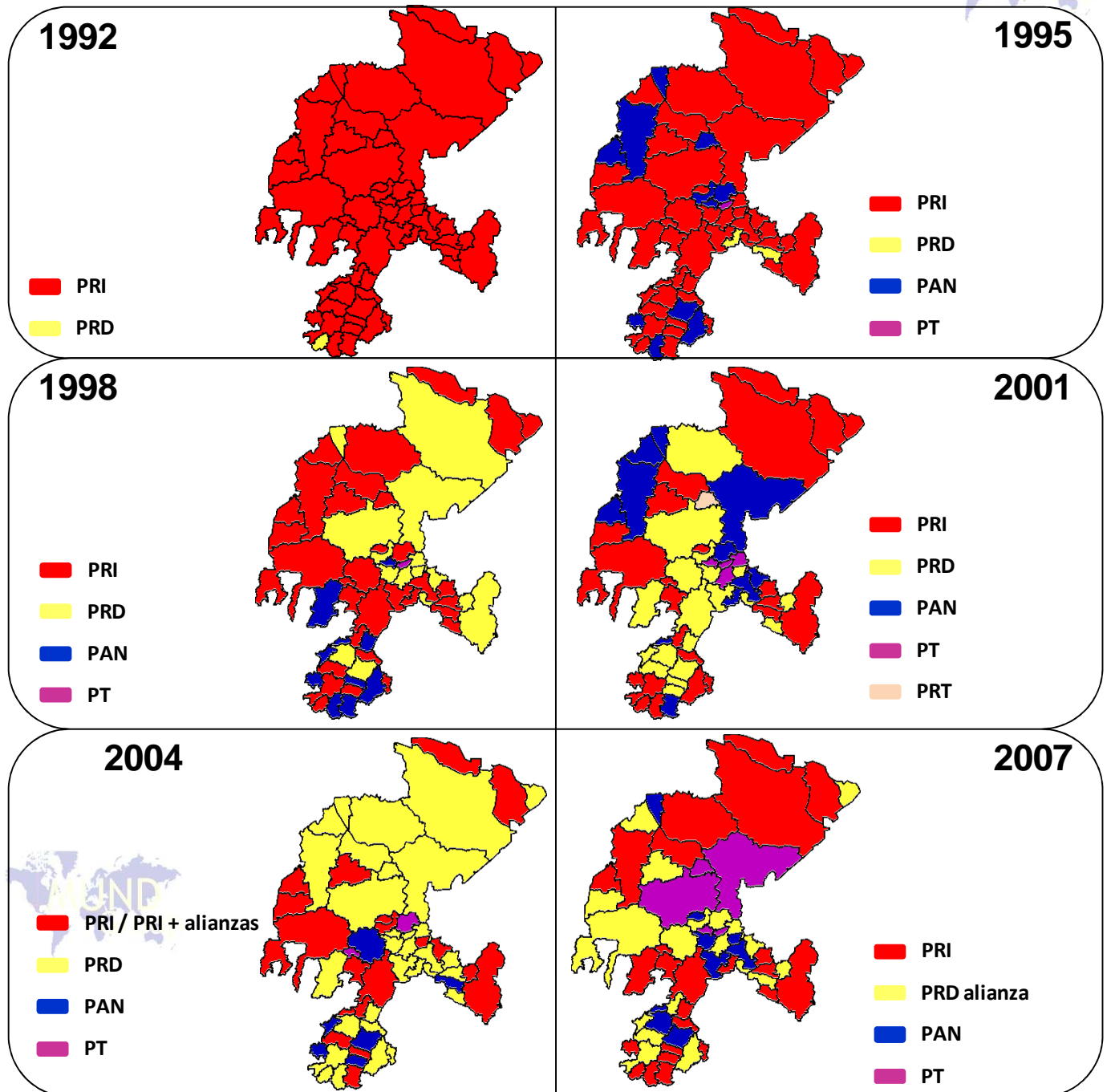
Summary of recent elections for Municipal Presidents in Morelos

Beginning in 1997, the municipal map became colorfully plural, with shifting balances of party strength. Morelos is an example of how the municipalities move frequently from one party to another, based on national electoral trends and local particularities.



Summary of recent elections for Municipal Presidents in Zacatecas

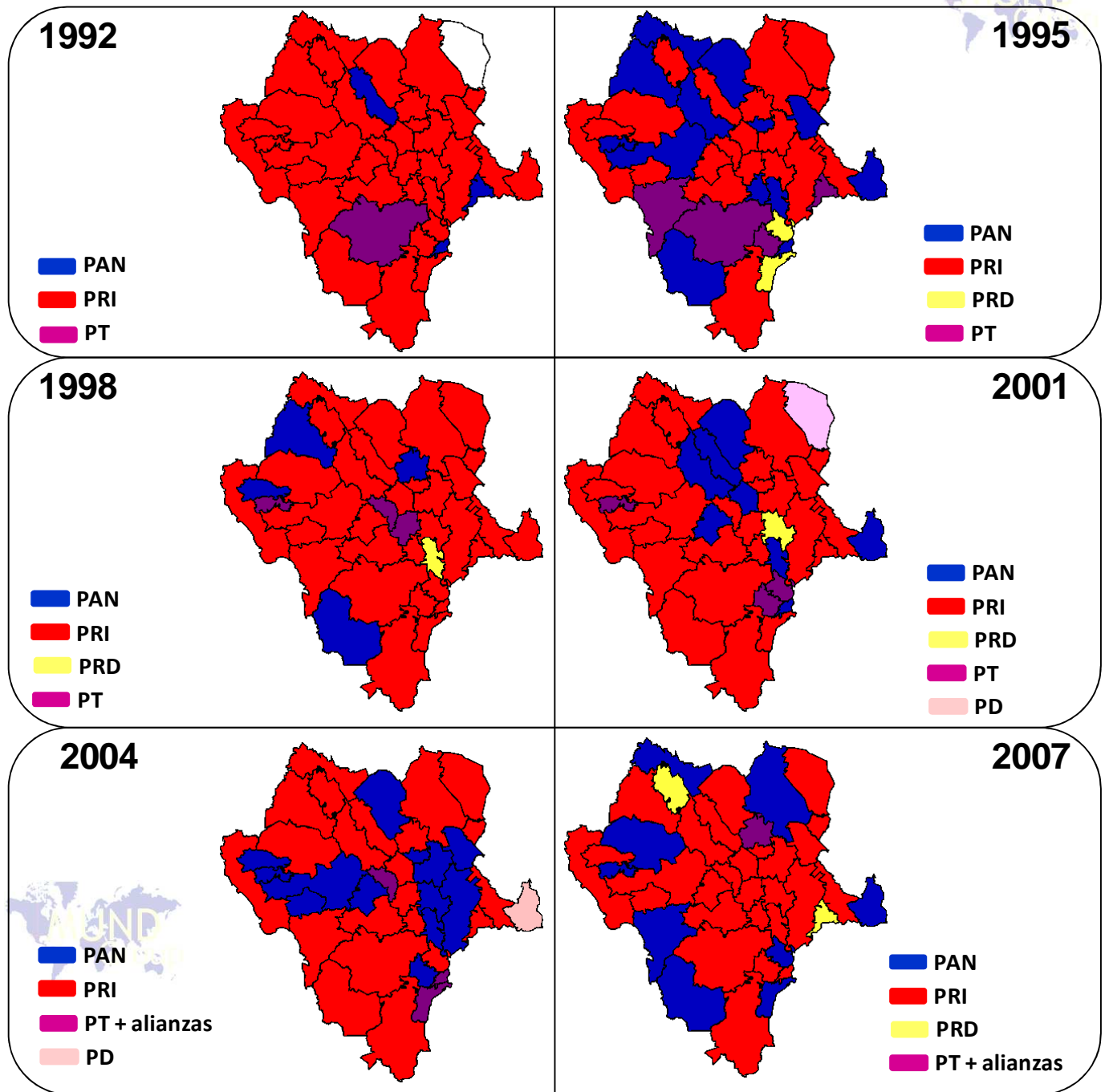
From 1992 to 2007 Zacatecas has moved from an awkward nearly all red state to a figure in a changing coat of many colors. See MUND Bulletin Series 10 Number 3 for some observations on the current dynamic around alliances as a way of securing a majority.





Summary of recent elections for Municipal Presidents in Durango

Durango is one of the classic examples of the current argument in some sectors of the PAN and PRD: unless there is an alliance of the opposition, the PRI cannot be dislodged.





2) Municipalities and the fiscal crisis of the state in Mexico

The municipalities seem to be an afterthought in terms of funding by the federal and state authorities, but in the final analysis they are a litmus test of the historic limitations of federalism in Mexico.

With the exception of the local property tax (the “predial”) and some minor fees, the municipalities depend on federal government funding. While a “federalist” reform from the sexenio of Zedillo provided for many transfers from the federal government directly to the municipalities, the states retain a kind of “sticky” hand in the process.²

The property tax is a weak reed to lean on. The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) has studied the question of the property tax as a funding source of local governments, providing a startling insight into the Mexican municipal problem. As a rule of thumb, the OECD notes that developed nations collect property taxes at a level from 3% to 4% of the GDP. This is the situation with the US and with the UK. Mexico is at the bottom of the OECD list of nations collecting less than 0.4% of GDP in its property taxes; many municipalities collect less than 0.2%. The municipal governments are perennially under-financed.

They are also woefully underrepresented in lobbying. The CONAMM (National Conference of Municipalities of Mexico) is an association of the various technical, regional-thematic and party-based municipal associations. But, the strongest political lobbying is done by the FENAMM (Federation of Municipalities of Mexico includes some 1,510 members) affiliated with the PRI.

This group is followed by the PAN affiliated ANAC (Mayors of National Action) and the PRD affiliated AALMAC (Association of Local Authorities in Mexico). Each small party, and each region, has its association. All together they are more a cacophony than a coherent force to be reckoned with.

3) Municipalities and alternation of parties in power

The political reform of re-election seems less threatening when associated with the Municipal Presidencies, and other local representation.

Re-election at the local level (whether for municipal presidents or local representation in Congress) is the focus of the current set of political reform proposals. However, given the history of local alternation of political powers this proposal probably requires some special research and discussion. Applying re-election as an experiment at the local level may be messing with the most fertile seedbed for political alternation in Mexico.

² The “sticky” state authority is especially true in states like Puebla and Quintana Roo, but the problem of federal/state/municipal coordination continues to be a persistent difficulty in administration.



4) Municipalities and media

The national media, the media of consequence, spends little effort on municipal governments and concerns.

The sensitivity to change (throwing the rascals out, welcoming in a new group) at the local level does not appear to be a dynamic stimulated by the national media. Municipal government (or the administration of government by state and federal authorities at the local level) is the level of government that is seen and felt, though not so much advertised.

Our political culture and identity studies over the years have confirmed the notion that people in Mexico describe themselves as being from a city, town or area that is related to the municipality, and only secondarily the state: "We are from Jalapa." "I am from Ixtapan" and so on.

5) Municipalities and national political trends

While it is true that municipal elections sometimes follow a national pattern, such as the election of 2006, there is a stubborn particularity in municipal politics.

The 4 state examples on previous pages underscore this observation, as will the more complete review of states summaries available on our website through the following link.

<http://www.mundgroup.com/municipales.html>

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