



Comparing Mexico



As social scientists we often evaluate a particular process by finding ways to measure its development over time. And, we use comparisons with other processes that are sufficiently similar. Sometimes these comparisons are extended and become formalized as periodic measurements in a kind of index. In the contemporary age of globalism, particular aspects of countries are constantly being compared.

1) The comparative study of civic culture can provide illumination.

Particularly since the publication of the seminal studies of comparative civic culture in 1963 by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba,¹ researchers have been fascinated to find perspective on Mexico by comparing elements of the civic culture here with other countries. The great value of the comparative method is in holding up one's society to various sorts of mirrors. There is little way that someone can claim a sort of "Mexican exceptionalism" to justify practices that are more generally considered undemocratic or inappropriate.²

The problem with the comparative method is that it can be vulgarized to focus on one or a limited set of measures, and even worse to project a "competition" among societies or other units where none really exists.

2) Comparative studies can slide into competitions, with the resulting "confirmations" of superiority or inferiority

There are two instances where the comparative indices are particularly compelling for media use and national promotion: in countries high up on the index as demonstrations of their superiority; and, in countries caught in the middle of the index as challenges to overcome their inferiority. Mexico is in the latter category.



¹ The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations (1963). The five nations included the US, the UK, Germany, Italy and Mexico. Since the civic culture is not static, the fact that the original survey in Mexico was long before pluralist democracy was initiated does not diminish the book's validity. Updating the civic culture model is a constant among political scientists, though of course much disputed in detail.

² In the period prior to 1988, some spokespeople for the PRI and some of their allies in policy studies were fond of arguing that democracy existed in Mexico, but that it was "directed" or particular to Mexican circumstances. Not all of contemporary "global" culture is virtuous, but it certainly does hold up a terrible light on bad practices viewed in a comparative context.



At the very beginning of his administration Vicente Fox in 2000 and 2001 focused on promoting Mexico as an attractive place for investment based on a measured improvement of the country in the international indices. One of his first travels abroad took him to a meeting of international board of Transparency International in Europe to underscore the importance of the Transparency International product called Perceptions of Corruption (based on an elite survey in each country evaluating data from markets to governance).

3) The limited value of international indices

For Mexico, the perception of corruption index never really showed improvement, and may have confirmed regression.

Index of Perception of Corruption IPC, Transparency International				
MEXICO				
Year	Country rank	CPI score	Surveys used	Confidence range
1999	58 out of 99	3.4	9	N/D
2000	59 out of 90	3.3	8	2.5 - 4.1
2001	51 out of 91	3.7	9	2.5 - 5.0
2002	57 out of 102	3.6	10	2.5 - 4.9
2003	64 out of 133	3.6	12	2.4 - 4.9
2004	64 out of 145	3.6	11	3.3 - 3.8
2005	65 out of 158	3.5	10	3.3 - 3.7
2006	70 out of 163	3.3	7	3.1 - 3.4
2007	72 out of 179	3.5	7	3.3 - 3.8
2008	72 out of 180	3.6	7	3.4 - 3.9
2009	89 out of 180	3.3	7	3.2 - 3.5

SOURCE: http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/



The indices capture that “comparison-based achievement” that some people in the US and by extension some in Mexico and elsewhere “revere – fastest, strongest...” Indices like sports statistics “fascinate us by appealing to our twin compulsions with competitive superiority and hard data.”³ Fox was desperate to show Mexico on a competitive drive toward superiority.

Perhaps even more important has been the Global Competitiveness Index produced by the World Economic Forum. For all the self-promotion of the previous and current administration (including the admonition to public servants and public figures not to speak ill of Mexico abroad), Mexico is not seen as competitive.

Global Competitiveness Index (World Economic Forum)	
MEXICO	
Year	Country rank
2001 - 2002	42 out of 75
2002 - 2003	45 out of 80
2003 - 2004	47 out of 101
2004 - 2005	48 out of 104
2005 - 2006	55 out of 117
2006 - 2007	58 out of 125
2007 - 2008	52 out of 131
2008 - 2009	60 out of 134
2009 - 2010	60 out of 133

SOURCE: <http://www.weforum.org/en/index.htm>

4) Studying Mexico in a global context, but measured by Mexico’s own goals

Centennial observances are ambiguous, as we noted in the cover letter to this bulletin. They mark a sort of beginning and provide a moment for intense review. They provide a time of celebration, irony, criticism and reflection.

³ David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (2006), “How Tracy Austin broke my heart”, p. 142.



This is the case for Mexico, and in a dramatic example was certainly the case in the United States during the formation of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The Black community in the US came out of the Second World War with renewed levels of political, social and economic aspirations – all in the shadow of the long-running centennials of the events leading to and culminating in the Civil War.

The centennials of the federal court rulings in the Dred Scott Case (denying US citizenship and constitutional protection to any person of African descent, free or slave) in the period of 1853-7/1953-7 saw the Montgomery Bus Boycott marking the route toward the end of legal segregation in the US, and the emergence of Martin Luther King as a transcendent figure of hope and change.

The centennials of the Civil War battles in 1861-65/1961-5 saw the dramatic extension of student sit-ins and mass marches for the ending of segregation throughout the South. Everyone in the US Congress was conscious of the centennial of the end of armed conflict in the Civil War in 1865/1965 as they voted passage of the most comprehensive Voting Rights legislation in US history, leading not so indirectly to the remarkable election of 2008.

In general, it is certainly not a bad thing to give space to the anniversaries of great moments, as it sometimes inspires us to create other great moments – as measured by a country's own history.

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