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1988-92**

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In the aftermath of the 1988 presidential election, the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática) was founded with great optimism. The vote percentages obtained by the PRD, however, fell well below the vote percentage Cárdenas was officially credited with in 1988. Of twenty-two statewide races the PRD participated in between July 1989 and March 1991, the PRD obtained only 10 percent of the vote. In the 1988 presidential elections in these same states, the FDN (Frente Democrática Nacional) obtained 24.8 percent of the vote.¹ Similarly, in the 1991 congressional elections the PRD obtained a lackluster 8.27 percent of the vote, compared to 31.12 percent in 1988.² This paper will attempt to analyze the decline in the PRD vote compared to the 1988 FDN vote.

One of the principal causes of the decline in the PRD vote could be labeled “fraud fatigue.” Without exception the PRD has been declared the loser in the elections that the PRD (and before it the FDN) felt it had the best chance to win. The PRD has blamed the losses on election fraud. These elections include the July 1988 presidential election, the November 1988 gubernatorial election in Tabasco, the July 1989 election in Michoacán, the December 1989 elections in Michoacán and Guerrero, and the November 1990 election in the State of Mexico. The 1991 congressional elections and the 1992 election in Michoacán produced additional fraud charges.

Inevitably, the confrontation of what it regards as an unending string of frauds has changed the nature of the party. As columnist José Woldenberg commented, “The government’s unscrupulous fraudulent manipulation of election returns has pushed the PRD leadership to the left and at the same time isolated it.”³ It has also provided an easy excuse for failure. PRD member Jorge Alcocer claimed charges of “fraud” are often used to cover the failings of the PRD.⁴ Finally the PRD’s preoccupation with fraud has diverted energy from other organizational tasks. As Cárdenas noted, “The government’s offensive has forced us to devote more attention to conflicts which result from electoral dishonesty, fraud, and imposition.”⁵

Another factor affecting the PRD has been violent attacks on its members. During 1989 and 1990, 73 PRD members were killed, of whom 17 were in Oaxaca, 16 in Michoacán, and 13 in Puebla.⁶ Luis Salazar C. commented on the attacks directed at PRD members: "No one can deny or even minimize the harassment and aggression that this new organization has suffered at the hands of various branches of government. Dozens of dead, arrested, kidnapped, and threatened speak clearly of the hostility with which they have viewed the formation of the PRD."⁷

The political environment in which the PRD finds itself has proved less favorable than the one the FDN faced. In 1988 Mexico was mired in a deep recession, and blame was placed on the incumbents. Several factors have changed. Economic growth resumed, and Salinas promoted the widely approved free trade agreement. Also the political reform and primary elections have improved the PRI's image. All of these have cut into the protest vote.

PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) Deputy Carlos Castillo Pérez commented on the changing political environment in a speech in the Chamber of Deputies on October 18, 1989. He addressed the PRD deputies: "You members of the PRD assumed that the men of the official party and of the government would not change. We assumed that they are indeed capable of change. You believe that reform will not occur within the executive branch and we feel it is worth attempting to reform the executive branch."⁸ The Solidarity program has been especially important, since it has tended to undermine the PRD's base among the poor. As Octavio Rodríguez Araujo noted, "In a country with great needs and inequality, heavy spending should not be minimized even though it insults recipients' dignity and is quite insufficient."⁹

One of the issues that most caught voters' imaginations in 1988 was suspending debt payments. However, the PRI effectively co-opted that issue after the debt renegotiation; its stated position now resembles the PRD position. In the Plan of Action approved after the September 1990 Assembly of the PRI, the official party declared that it proposed "struggling for the full utilization and optimal use of resources freed by foreign debt renegotiation, using them for economic growth and social development in keeping with the nation's ability to pay, and giving special priority to rural areas in reallocating resources."¹⁰

Also, the potential cost of casting a protest vote has risen. In 1988 there was little to lose by voting for, or even electing, a candidate whom the world's financiers might deem too radical. At the time, new credits and new investment had stopped, the

