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RESEARCH NOTE

What Went Wrong with Mexican Liberal Democracy?

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Abstract

This research note critically examines the structural failures of Mexico's post-2000 democratic transition, arguing that the rise of illiberal populism under the National Regeneration Movement (Morena) is not the cause but the consequence of a stalled and superficial democratization process. While formal electoral procedures were strengthened, underlying issues such as state capture, elite dominance, widespread corruption, and socioeconomic exclusion remained unaddressed. By reducing democracy to procedural minimalism, political elites failed to deliver substantive democratic outcomes, eroding institutional legitimacy, and fueling public disillusionment.

Keywords: democracy; Mexico; political parties; populism; rule of law

Many political analysts express surprise at the enduring popularity of Mexico's governing party, *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* (Morena), first under Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and now under Claudia Sheinbaum, despite repeated attacks on the institutions associated with liberal democracy. Much of the public debate attributes Mexico's democratic deterioration to the so-called Fourth Transformation, treating Morena's administration as the primary cause of backsliding (Becerra 2023). Yet such accounts overlook a more fundamental question: why was Mexico's democratic order so vulnerable in the first place?

In this research note, I argue that Mexico's democratic regression is best understood as the outcome of a procedural and incomplete democratization, one that failed to establish the substantive foundations of democratic rule outlined in broader democratic theory (Bobbio 1987; Dahl 1989; O'Donnell 2007; Sartori 1987). Mexico's post-2000 transition produced regular electoral competition but did little to dismantle the authoritarian, clientelist, and corporatist structures inherited from the twentieth century. As a result, the political system remained weakly institutionalized, poorly representative, and highly vulnerable to populist capture.

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My argument advances two main factors to explain this vulnerability. First, political parties failed to internalize the norms and behaviors required of actors in a pluralistic democracy: negotiation, compromise, accountability, and internal democratic governance. Instead, parties operated chiefly as electoral machines competing for state resources, undermining the development of a democratic political culture. Second, persistent state capture and corruption, manifested in the influence of powerful economic actors, the absence of the rule of law, and pervasive clientelism, prevented the emergence of an autonomous and trustworthy state capable of representing the public interest. Together, these factors produced a democracy that was procedurally functional yet substantively hollow.

Seen from this perspective, the rise of Morena is not an aberration but the predictable culmination of a transition that became flawed. Populism could take hold because democratic institutions never achieved broad legitimacy, and citizens, confronted with inequality and ineffective governance, saw little reason to defend them. The following sections situate this argument within the literature on Mexico's democratization and examine how the failures of political parties and state institutions ultimately paved the way for today's political order.

The road for democratization in Mexico

As González Casanova (1967) observes, the revolution that toppled the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) ushered in a period of political instability and recurrent rebellions, which were not fully resolved until all political factions, many of which had previously engaged in armed conflict, were subordinated and consolidated under a single political force centered around the Executive branch. By the late 1920s, presidentialism became institutionalized, establishing itself as one of the defining features of Mexican politics. In this regard, Garrido (2005) explains that the creation of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), later renamed the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), and ultimately the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), led to the "institutionalization of the Revolution." This process entailed the formation of a singular political platform in which all sectors, both popular and agrarian, found representation. This, in turn, fostered an effective corporatist model wherein the president, as the paramount political figure, exercised strict control over the political system, while sectoral representatives were granted generous benefits by the regime (Knight, 2005).

Carbonell (2002) argues that a fundamental characteristic of this model was that political alignment did not necessarily revolve around a charismatic leader per se, but rather around the presidency as an institution: "From that moment on, power and legitimacy would belong to the presidency, rather than to the president himself" (p. 48). The consolidation of the presidency as the ultimate authority, often superseding the powers of Congress and the Supreme Court, gave rise to a distinct form of hyperpresidentialism, in which the Executive wielded extralegal powers to exert control over the political system.

This phenomenon, which Carpizo (2004) termed "meta-constitutional powers," allowed the president to serve as the head of the ruling party, appoint congressional

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representatives, select his successor, dismiss officials, and implement policies with minimal opposition or accountability. However, it is important to note that while the president wielded nearly unchecked authority, his power was constrained by the institution of the presidency itself, and his tenure was strictly limited to a single 6-year term. Carpizo contends that this near-omnipotent authority was justified by the need to balance national interests with those of the ruling elites.

In this vein, Cosío Villegas (1972) famously represented Mexico's political system as an absolute 6-year monarchy of hereditary lineage, disguised as a democracy. This characterization underscores a critical point: the necessity of maintaining a semblance of democracy to uphold public legitimacy. As González Casanova (1967) points out, despite the authoritarian nature of the system, it was imperative to uphold the supposed sovereignty of Congress and preserve the formal division of powers as a symbolic act: "This grants them a form of legitimacy and a traditional and metaphysical foundation, in which the executive's actions acquire the status of law or find justification within the legal order" (p. 32). Similarly, (non-competitive) elections were held regularly to maintain the democratic façade of the political system.

Krauze (1997) explains that while this hegemonic party presidentialist system provided political and social stability in post-revolutionary Mexico, it had profound long-term consequences. The demographic and generational shifts of the mid-twentieth century gave rise to a burgeoning middle class eager to participate in the nation's political affairs. The regime's resistance to such demands led to repression, which marked the first signs of systemic exhaustion: "The government did not know how to handle middle-class dissent other than by employing the same violent methods that had proven so effective against workers and peasants. Treating them in this manner was counterproductive. It did not break the system, but it mortally wounded its legitimacy" (p. 358). The widespread protests of the 1960s and 1970s, including student movements, urban and rural guerrilla uprisings, and growing discontent among business sectors, highlighted the deepening divide between the political elite and broader society (Vázquez Ferrel 2017).

The path toward democratic transition in Mexico thus began when society at large recognized that the political system was no longer capable of reconciling the interests and needs of an increasingly pluralistic and modern nation (Bolívar 2004). The 1976 election of José López Portillo (1976–1982), in which he ran virtually unopposed and secured nearly 100 per cent of the vote, exposed the mounting tensions within the system and the urgent need to establish new channels of political representation to alleviate societal pressures. As Bolívar (2004) recounts, this realization led to the first major electoral and political reform in 1977: "In 1977, the Federal Law on Political Organizations and Electoral Processes (LFOPPE) was enacted. This was not merely an electoral reform but a broader political reform that successfully integrated opposition parties and political actors into the electoral and parliamentary process" (p. 40).

Woldenberg (2012) regards this reform as the foundational moment of Mexico's democratic transition, as it set in motion a series of incremental changes that gradually fostered electoral competition. The reform helped the political system regain some legitimacy while simultaneously steering the regime toward opening spaces

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for political participation, a process that continued with the 1986 reform. However, the controversial victories of the ruling party throughout the 1980s, particularly the contested 1988 presidential election, revealed the inadequacy of these reforms. Public discontent accelerated the push for systemic changes, leading to further electoral rule modifications throughout the 1990s. Nonetheless, these reforms were insufficient to guarantee fully equitable electoral competition or the autonomy of electoral institutions (Rodríguez, 2009).

It was not until the 1996 reform, following the macroeconomic crisis of 1994–1995 and President Ernesto Zedillo's political decision to distance himself from the PRI, that, according to Zamitiz (1998), the foundations for genuine electoral competition were finally laid: "This new institutional electoral framework sought to ensure the efficient and impartial resolution of electoral disputes. Furthermore, it aimed to instill public confidence in the electoral process, in which, for the first time in the country's history, the federal Executive would have no influence over the planning, organization, or administration of elections" (p. 244).

The election of Vicente Fox (2000–2006), of the National Action Party (PAN), to the presidency in 2000 was widely perceived as the culmination of Mexico's democratic transition after decades of political struggle and the advent of genuine democracy. However, as Schedler (2000) argues, the transition remained incomplete, as the change in government did not translate into a profound transformation of institutions in a broader democratic sense. The persistent absence of the rule of law, social justice, effective governance, and a robust democratic culture remained constant challenges within the Mexican political system.

Loaeza (2008) contends that the political transition ultimately devolved into a struggle among political elites detached from the real problems facing society. This was further compounded by President Vicente Fox's inability to broker agreements with the opposition, resulting in serious legislative paralysis and the failure to enact major reforms (Knight 2011). According to Meyer (2010), the democratic nature of the transition was further called into question, not only due to Fox's ineffective governance but also because of his interference in the 2006 presidential elections in favor of Felipe Calderón (2006–2012). Thus, the post-2000 governments presided over a stalled transition that failed to reform the fundamental nature of Mexico's political system. While political alternation took place, institutions remained resistant to substantive change (Ávalos 2013).

As Ugalde (2015) describes, democracy succeeded in changing the party in power but it did not dismantle the entrenched clientelist, unaccountable, and corrupt system in favor of a truly liberal democratic one. As pointed out by Petersen (2021), there was a significant association between democratization in Mexico and increased corruption scandals. The subsequent political transition in 2012, which returned the PRI to power led by Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), further exposed Mexico's democratic deficit. Electoral clientelism persisted, social movements faced repression, corruption remained rampant, and the vast chasm between the political class and the electorate showed no signs of narrowing (Ackerman 2015). Although some democratic tools (e.g., a new electoral body, referendums and re-election of legislators and mayors) were introduced, the government became a tool of the ruling elites at the expense of collective interest (Zamitiz 2016).

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A democracy after all?

The preceding historical account of Mexico's democratic transition inevitably raises a fundamental question: can we say that Mexico ever became a democracy? The answer will depend on the criteria considered to address this question. Reduced to its most basic expression, the holding of regular and free elections (Schumpeter 2003), some may argue that Mexico qualifies as a democracy. However, if democracy is considered in a broader sense, the question becomes significantly more complex, as additional factors must be taken into account. These include the political culture and civic participation, the plurality of the media and the quality of information sources, the protection of civil liberties and individual rights, the rule of law, the government's political capacity to implement public policies, and the bureaucratic efficiency of the state in delivering positive economic and social outcomes, among other elements (Bobbio 1987; Dahl 1989; Ingram et al. 2016; Norris 2011; Sartori 1987; Shapiro 1999).

As Munck (2004) aptly observes, assessing a country's democracy inevitably requires an examination of the nature and functioning of its institutions:

> When addressing the issue of democratic quality, it is useful to think in terms of a chain of links connecting citizens, government decision-makers, and the bureaucracy responsible for policy implementation. This conceptual framework offers a way to understand democratic quality as revolving around the issue of citizen control over the state, while also allowing a complex problem to be broken down into distinct yet interconnected components. (pp. 335–336)

Consequently, the answer to the question posed earlier will depend on the specific criteria deemed necessary to define the democratic character of a government and its institutions.

For instance, the Economist Intelligence Unit (n. d.), in its *Democracy Index*, consistently classified Mexico as a "hybrid regime," a category encompassing states that, due to their institutional weaknesses (such as a fragile rule of law, widespread corruption, low levels of citizen participation, media co-opted by de facto powers, and an underperforming government), cannot be considered fully democratic. This classification, of course, is not without criticism, as the formulation of categories and the selection of indicators may be subject to varying standards and potentially influenced by subjective elements, including ideological biases and prejudices. Nonetheless, the rankings provided by the Economist Intelligence Unit and similar organizations offer a general overview of the state of democracy in the country.

Given that, in the broader sense of democracy, Mexico's political system has fallen significantly short over the past two decades, it is imperative to recall one of the central premises of this research note: the current state of political polarization and democratic regression stems from the failure to establish a functional democracy beyond its procedural aspects. The emergence of a populist regime that monopolizes decision-making and dismantles key achievements of the democratic transition is merely the consequence of having built a democracy upon a weak and compromised institutional basis. Thus, it is fundamental to what went wrong since Mexico transited to democracy in 2000, hence, I pay particular attention to two main factors: the responsibility of political parties and both state capture and corruption.

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The responsibility of political parties

Political parties, arguably the principal actors in a democratic system, failed to fully adapt to the new political reality. In theory, democratic parties must engage not only with one another but also with governments and non-political actors. Rather than imposing their agendas unilaterally, they must be willing to negotiate in order to achieve their objectives, even if that means making concessions. As Bardach (1977) notes, managing a plurality of interests gives rise to a "game," where actors within the political system seek compromise and cooperation to advance concrete policy goals. However, in Mexico, political parties could not respond to the demands of a pluralistic democracy.

A democratic regime is consolidated when all actors understand the norms and implications of coexisting in democracy and adjust their behavior accordingly (Bobbio 1987; Loza 2003). Unfortunately, a mindset of political realism prevailed, in which the pursuit of power outweighed the construction of agreements, even at the expense of respecting the rules of the new democratic system. This frequently resulted in political deadlock that reinforced the widespread perception that political parties were concerned solely with their own interests. Some may argue that Mexico's post-transition political and legislative processes (often characterized by chronic conflict and inefficiency) are not fundamentally different from those of other, more established democracies (Casar 2008). However, the failure to resolve differences productively and the prioritization of partisan interests over the common good illustrate that political parties were unable to fully embrace the essence of democratic governance (Ávalos 2013; Martínez 2009).

The above is exemplified by various episodes in which major reforms were stopped or severely reduced due to short-term political strategies and partisan objectives. Notoriously, Vicente Fox's term is considered a "lost term" given the profound gridlock and struggle with Congress that significantly paralyzed his legislative agenda (Pastor Jr and Wise 2005; Segovia 2008). For instance, the fiscal reform proposed to reduce dependency on oil income was vehemently opposed by the PRI and the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) and watered down significantly, rendering the package largely ineffective in achieving its original fiscal goals (Mena Aguilar 2025). Examples from following administrations include Felipe Calderón's energy initiative reform to allow more private involvement in refining, transportation, and exploration via risk contracts, which faced staunch opposition in the Congress and was severely diluted (Mendez 2017). Also, Calderón's attempt to reform the Internal Security Law (in essence, the militarization of public security) was stopped by PRI and PRD (Lajous 2011). Ironically, the mentioned reforms were later supported (and passed) by the PRI when Enrique Peña Nieto became president. To the above, the proposal for basic income should be mentioned. It was first advocated by Morena but strongly opposed by PAN, only to be later taken by the latter as their main social development proposal—and rejected by Morena—during the general election in 2018 (Zapata 2025).[1]

Some may argue that it is unfair to characterize mutual obstructionism as the defining feature of Mexican political parties, pointing to significant instances of negotiation, particularly during the Felipe Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations, which

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facilitated the passage of key reforms. To this, I would respond that while it is true that these administrations did not experience complete legislative paralysis (unlike Vicente Fox's presidency) it is essential to contextualize the conditions under which these reforms were achieved. As Velázquez (2015) highlights, from a purely quantitative perspective, Felipe Calderón's legislative agenda may appear successful, given that most of his initiatives were approved; however, the majority of these were minor reforms with limited long-term impact. Furthermore, most of the major legislative victories occurred while the PAN held a majority in Congress. Once the party lost its congressional majority in the second half of Calderón's term, its legislative success rate dropped significantly. Crucially, many of the administration's most ambitious structural reforms were either rejected outright or substantially altered, revealing the political system's limited capacity or willingness to build meaningful cross-party agreements (Velázquez 2015).

From a procedural standpoint, the above conforms to the formal rules and institutional arrangements typically associated with democracy. However, as O'Donnell (2007) rightly argues, the concept of democracy must extend beyond its procedural dimension. The assumption that a regime is democratic solely because its institutions adhere to prescribed procedures, without examining the nature of those institutions, the consequences of their practices, or the social context in which they operate, risks producing an overly narrow and impoverished understanding of what a democratic system entails. In the same vein, Morlino (2009) contends that democracy must also be evaluated in terms of its substantive content and outcomes, guided by values and principles such as equality and justice. Without this broader perspective, democracy is in danger of becoming an empty concept.

In the case of Enrique Peña Nieto's administration, some may point to the *Pacto por México* (2012–2014), which brought together the PRI, PAN, and PRD to advance structural reforms, as evidence that Mexican political parties can negotiate and find common ground. However, rather than demonstrating the strength of democratic deliberation, the *Pacto* arguably exposed the systemic inability of parties to negotiate within the legislative arena, as Loaeza (2020) explains: "The *Pacto* posed a significant problem: it was an agreement reached outside the framework of Congress—an extra-parliamentary arrangement built upon the illusion of equal standing among all participants (…) the major drawback of this strategy, however, was that it relegated the central institution of national representation to a secondary role" (p. 974). Ultimately, the *Pacto* was not a triumph of democratic negotiation but rather a pragmatic response to legislative gridlock, a workaround that underscored the weakness of Mexico's political institutions. As demonstrated by Elizondo Mayer-Serra (2017), the reforms were approved under an implicit pact of corruption in which each of the congressional representatives of the involved parties received "monetary compensations" and extra-legal favors in exchange for their vote.

Thus, I reaffirm my position that political parties, as the central actors in Mexico's new pluralistic reality, did not operate within the basic framework of democracy (i.e., dialogue, negotiation, reconciliation of differences, and consensus-building). Rather than engaging in open and inclusive deliberation, the major agreements that shaped the country's political trajectory were the result of closed-door negotiations among party elites, often detached from popular representation and, in many cases, pursued

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at the expense of public interest (Elizondo Mayer-Serra 2017; Loaeza 2020; Martínez 2009).

Additionally, it is crucial to highlight the glaring lack of internal democracy within political parties themselves. As sustained by Freidenberg (2013), undemocratic practices have characterized the internal dynamics of many parties, where decision-making processes are often shaped to benefit specific factions linked to the party's ruling elite. This reality is particularly evident in the selection of candidates for public office, where nominations were frequently decided unilaterally by party executive committees rather than through transparent and participatory mechanisms (Serra 2012). In cases where internal elections were held, they were often marred by irregularities that compromised their legitimacy from the outset (Freidenberg 2013). Such practices eroded the credibility of political parties among their own members. Unsurprisingly, according to *the National Survey of Civic Culture* of INEGI (2020), 76 per cent of citizens had low or no trust in political parties in Mexico. Accordingly, I maintain that by failing to uphold democratic standards, they contributed to a broader crisis of representation that further alienated citizens.

State capture and corruption

Considering the particularities of Mexico's political system, it is always useful to examine Dahl's (2005) inquiry: "Who governs?". Thus, to understand the reasons that impeded the country's progression toward a more substantive democracy, I argue that it is necessary to observe the phenomenon of state capture. By this, I refer to the disproportionate influence wielded by powerful de facto actors over governmental institutions, which has profoundly undermined the legitimacy of the political system. As indicated by the Organization of American States (2011), state capture distorts the expression of the popular will, compromises the integrity of political processes, and exacerbates socioeconomic inequality. It manifests in various forms such as clientelism, bribery, and the revolving door between public office and private enterprise, among others, that enable dominant economic interests to shape public decision-making processes to their advantage (Cokelet 2013).

Among the most emblematic cases of state capture in Mexico is the preferential fiscal treatment enjoyed by the country's economic elites. This is not only represented in the poor fiscal system that keeps Mexico in the lowest end of tax collection of the OECD (OECD 2025a), but also in the sweeping tax amnesties granted to a handful of major taxpayers—notoriously during Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto's administrations—without any substantive explanation from the Tax Administration Service as indicated by the policy institute Fundar (2016). The implications of such fiscal capture are far-reaching, as they deprive the state of vital resources required for effective governance and, in turn, perpetuate institutional paralysis. Furthermore, these practices entrenched public perceptions of inequality before the law, eroding public trust in the political system.

Another salient example of state capture in Mexico is the persistence of monopolistic practices. When private interests dominate the policy-making process, they frequently advocate for restrictive regulations that distort market dynamics in favor of

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monopolies, thereby generating inefficiencies and exacerbating inequality. A striking case is the telecommunications monopoly held by billionaire Carlos Slim, which, due to inefficiencies and inflated costs, is estimated to have cost the Mexican economy the equivalent of 2 per cent of GDP between 2005 and 2009 (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Such forms of state capture contributed to the unjust concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of a few, undermining the broader public interest.

The excessive influence exerted by powerful groups within political institutions obstructed the realization of genuine democracy in Mexico. The most immediate consequence was the erosion of the state's capacity to act in public interest. As De Sapelli (1998) observes, such a scenario leads to the "balkanization" of politics, whereby the state fragments its authority by ceding power to de facto actors whose interests diverge markedly from collective well-being. Furthermore, Cárdenas (2006) argues that the interference of these power groups strikes at the heart of democratic representation, entangling politics in a web of conflicts of interest and influence-peddling that calls into question the credibility of elected officials as true representatives of the people. Arguably, this is why by the final year of Enrique Peña Nieto's administration, nearly 88 per cent of Mexicans believed that the country was governed for the benefit of a select few powerful groups (Latinobarómetro 2018).

Equally critical to this diagnosis is the failure to establish a robust rule of law, understood most simply as the consistent application of the law as an expression of the general will (Rodríguez 2020). In a rule-of-law system, all individuals, including public officials and state institutions, are subject to the law and hold accountable for their actions. Regrettably, the post-transition Mexican governments failed to consolidate a functioning rule of law. As indicated by the World Justice Project (n. d.) in their Rule of Law Index, between 2015 and 2018,[2] Mexico scored significantly lower than the global average in governmental accountability, and by 2017–2018, Mexico ranked 92 across 113 countries evaluated.

Corruption permeated virtually all levels and branches of government, and no federal administration escaped its reach. The influence-peddling scandals involving the family of former First Lady Marta Sahagún, or the "*Oceanografía*" case during Vicente Fox's presidency, remain vivid in public memory (Segovia 2008). Felipe Calderón's tenure was marred by inflated contracts for flagship infrastructure projects such as the infamous "*Estela de Luz*" and allegations of corruption involving close relatives and associates (Hernández 2012; Nieto Flores 2023). The Enrique Peña Nieto administration, however, marked a new low in public perception. Scandals such as the "*Casa Blanca,*" the "*Estafa Maestra,*" and illicit dealings with Odebrecht led many to label his government the most corrupt in Mexico's modern history (Loaeza 2020; Nieto Flores 2023).

At the state level, a long list of corrupt governors continues to resonate infamously among the public for their egregious abuses of power. As Gutiérrez Sánchez (2018) notes, corruption at state level was so normalized that citizens had almost null trust in political institutions. According to Transparency International (2017) *Global Corruption Barometer*, by the end of Peña Nieto's administration the country ranked among the most corrupt nations in Latin America, with 51 per cent of

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respondents reporting they had paid at least one bribe to access basic public services. Undoubtedly, the widespread corruption profoundly undermined public esteem for democratic institutions in Mexico (Monsiváis-Carrillo 2019).

Blaming the citizen?

Some may argue that the inefficacy and lack of representativeness of political parties, the capture of the state by powerful interest groups, and the absence of a genuine rule of law are, to a great extent, the result of a passive citizenry disinterested in political affairs. However, I contend that such a view is reductionist, as it overlooks the structural conditions that have inhibited individuals from engaging in active civic life. While it is true, that according to the INE, (2015), the average Mexican exhibits attitudes that hinder democratic consolidation such as low civic participation, widespread distrust, and social disengagement, these behaviors must be understood within their broader social and economic context.

Exercising full citizenship in Mexico is profoundly challenging. According to data from the OECD (2025b), Mexico ranks second globally in the number of hours worked annually. For instance, Mexican workers logged an average of 2,226 hours per year, while their counterparts in Germany and Denmark worked only 1,341 and 1,372 hours, respectively, approximately 40 per cent less. Moreover, data from the Ministry of Economy (2025) indicate that the average monthly wage in Mexico during the third quarter of 2023 was approximately 7,480 pesos. In contrast, the civil society organization *México Digno* (2025) estimates that a typical household would require over 19,000 pesos per month to meet basic needs and live with dignity. From a broad perspective, these figures suggest that the average Mexican lacks the time or the means to participate in public affairs. It is thus unsurprising that many citizens choose to prioritize the immediate demands of daily life over civic participation.

As Doyal and Gough (1991) have argued, human behavior is structured by a hierarchy of needs that compels individuals to address primary necessities such as food, shelter, and security, before pursuing social goals like civic belonging and political participation. In this light, expecting broad civic engagement in Mexico is unrealistic when the majority of citizens lack the means to participate meaningfully in democratic life. As evidenced by del Tronco and Madrigal Ramírez (2021), only a marginal segment of the population identified with the higher-middle classes exhibits civic participatory attitudes, while the vast majority of Mexicans have much more passive attitudes. This reality is deeply troubling, since a balanced democracy requires a robust middle class, one endowed with both the time and resources necessary to participate in political life (Aristotle 1999). The limited capacity of a large segment of the population to engage civically created a profound imbalance in democratic representation. As Norris (2011) argues, when only a narrow sector of society consistently participates in public affairs, the policy agenda reflects only a fraction of societal interests.

Moreover, the persistent precariousness of much of the Mexican population makes the substantive development of democracy exceedingly difficult. According to data from the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy Development (CONEVAL 2025), general poverty levels remained largely unchanged between 1992

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and 2018, years in which the transition occurred, with approximately half the population living in conditions of socioeconomic deprivation. In this sense, when large swaths of the citizenry live in poverty, their daily concerns and structural limitations pose formidable obstacles to genuine democratic participation (Carrillo-Flores 2006).

The emergence of a populist regime

I have argued that the political transition of recent decades failed to fundamentally transform the nature of the political system and did not adequately respond to the population's economic and social expectations. Therefore, AMLO, subsequently Claudia Sheinbaum, and the Morena party are product of a longstanding disillusionment among citizens with a political system whose democracy is manifested primarily in procedural terms, yet strays markedly from the principles of equality and social justice as suggested by Morlino (2009). While it is true that the authoritarian nature of the Fourth Transformation exacerbates Mexico's democratic deficit, it is equally important to acknowledge that this deficit, both in terms of quality and public appreciation for democracy, was already severe, as previously demonstrated.

Indeed, the manner in which Morena's governments have exercised power clearly undermines the very checks and balances established over past decades to contain the excessive presidentialism characteristic of the twentieth century. Yet it is worth questioning how this new populist regime has been able to erode institutional constraints with such relative ease. The answer lies in the fact that many of these institutions lack public credibility and, consequently, enjoy only limited societal support. In this view, although AMLO and his movement capitalized on the legitimacy crisis of political institutions to their advantage, they are not directly responsible for that crisis in the first place (Castro Cornejo 2023; Monsiváis-Carrillo 2019).

For instance, the 2012 *National Survey on Political Culture and Citizen Practices* (INEGI 2012) and the 2015 *Country Report on the Quality of Citizenship in Mexico* (INE 2015) had already revealed that virtually all political institutions had failed to gain citizens' trust. In this vein, it is understandable why, according to the Latinobarómetro (2023), a majority of Mexicans (56 per cent) expressed indifference toward the possibility of a non-democratic government, so long as it effectively addressed the country's problems. Carpizo (2007) had already warned that widespread social discontent could diminish the value citizens place on democracy, particularly when it is associated with ineffectiveness and an inability to resolve core societal issues.

Thus, I reaffirm my posture that the rise to power of AMLO and Morena was the product of profound societal exhaustion with a dysfunctional system incapable of delivering effective democratic governance. Carpizo (2007) had already warned that social discontent directly affected the value citizens attributed to democracy, as many came to associate it with inability to address society's most urgent problems. As he observed:

> Electoral democracies, in general terms, have been unable to confront successfully the two great social scourges of poverty and outrageous inequality. Combined with the discredit of political parties and the political class, as well

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> as pervasive corruption and impunity, these failures have led, in several countries at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, to the return of populist governments that seemed destined for the museum of history. (p. 369)

As noted by Acemoglu and Robinson (2019), populist projects emerge when traditional political elites are openly challenged for their performance, and when existing institutions have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. At its core, populism is an anti-system movement that invokes the voice of the common citizen to denounce the failures of liberal democracy. In its quest to supplant the existing political order, it actively seeks to dismantle institutions and erode what little credibility they may still retain (Grzymala-Busse et al. 2020).

Final reflections

It is essential to acknowledge that the populism currently championed by the Morena government originates in the deep discontent of vast sectors of the population who feel marginalized, neglected, and betrayed by the traditional political system and governing elite. In this context, AMLO, Morena, and the Fourth Transformation, despite their many shortcomings and attacks against institutions that sustain liberal democracy, have been successful in channeling accumulated public anger into mobilization and support to their political agenda. This is demonstrated not only in the significant approval of AMLO's image among citizens but—ironically—in the reinforced satisfaction of Mexican democracy under his administration, which increased from 18 per cent in 2018 to 48 per cent in 2023 (Poushter and Lippert, 2023).

This reality calls for a critical reflection on the flaws of Mexico's democratic experiment. The main focus has been on developing and defending institutional and electoral procedures, yet considerably less attention has been paid to enabling citizens with the material and social conditions needed to participate meaningfully in the democratic process. Without social and economic justice, democracy in Mexico has often met its formal criteria while remaining substantively empty. It is therefore not surprising that the widespread feeling of grievance among citizens has led to active support for populist projects that promise tangible results, even if it means sacrificing democratic norms and institutional constraints.

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Notes

1. I want to clarify that, despite one's views on whether those reforms were necessary or not, what I aim to illustrate is how constant policy blocking occurred due to political sectarianism among parties.
2. Data is only available from 2015 and on.

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