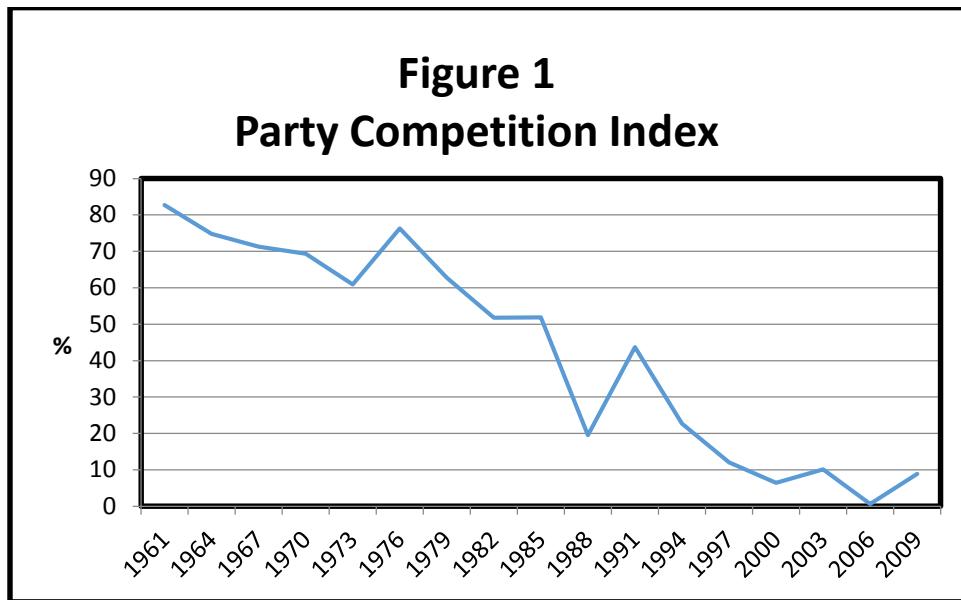


## **The 1988 Election and the Onset of Democratization.**

Contrary to the “perfect storm” perspective of the very rapid (if not revolutionary) onset of democracy in Mexico, the thesis in this paper is that the process of democratization had been evolving and percolating for well over decades. The data for the electoral dominance of the PRI throughout the bulk of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is undeniable. But just as obvious is the gradual decline in the political successes of the dominant party, and conversely the rise of the opposition parties. A long-standing approach to documenting political competition has been the “party fractionalization” concept (Rae, 1971; Sartori, 2005). Essentially, this effort compares the margin of victory (or different percentages among all parties). The lower the margins, the more competitive the system. The higher the margins, the less competitive. I have created a simplified “Party Competition Index” which simply compares the percentage of the vote for the winning party to the percentage for the party in second-place. These results are summarized in Figure 1—beginning with the congressional election of 1961. This index utilizes presidential results in presidential election years, and the congressional election results in the “off-years.” With a few exceptions, the index declines continuously from 1961 until 2000. But the most significant drop occurs not with the election of 2000, but rather with the presidential election of 1988. The margin of victory for the PRI fell 30 percentage points between 1982 and 1988 (from just over 50% in 1982 to just under 20% in 1988). If a “perfect storm” election existed, it would have been the election of Carlos Salinas in 1988—not that of 2000. The PRI’s dominance did temporarily rebound in the off-year elections of 1991, but the decline of the PRI resumed after that. Still, the biggest drop-off was in the tumultuous election of 1988. Even when the PRI lost in 2000, its total percent of the national vote was not terribly different from that of the

congressional elections in 1997 (just over a 1% drop). It appears that the victory for the PAN came more from a decrease in support from the leftist PRD than from the PRI.



What happened in the 1988 election? For a few years prior to the 1988 electoral period, dissident elements within the PRI had been calling for an internal democratization of the Party—essentially demanding a free and fair direct primary for selecting the presidential candidate. While the PRI's candidate had always been rubber-stamped by the national party congress, the actual selection was done unilaterally by the incumbent president in a very secretive process. The Party's elites, however, refused to alter their authoritarian practices; and, in protest, the left-wing of the Party (led by Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas) left the PRI to form their own opposition party. Ironically, Muñoz Ledo would support the successful candidacy of the Panista Fox in 2000.

Cardenas became the presidential candidate of the new party (actually a very unstructured coalition of smaller parties), initially labeled the National Democratic Front (FDN). The FDN

evolved into the more organized Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in 1989. With Cardenas as its candidate, other prominent leftist politicians and important organized groups in support, and growing disillusionment with the PRI; the FDN performed remarkably well in the presidential contest. The greatest appeal for Cardenas was his name recognition. He was the son of the venerated President Lazaro Cardenas. And his first name was that of the admired Aztec leader, Cuauhtemoc, who fought valiantly against Cortes in the Spanish conquest of Mexico. As a member of the PRI, Cardenas had served as a senator from the state of Michoacan and also the governor of that same state. On the other hand, the PRI's candidate in 1988 was Carlos Salinas—the classical technocrat and economist who had never even run for an elected office prior to 1988. His government service had come exclusively within the bureaucracy, essentially in Budgets and Planning. Officially, Salinas won the election with 50% of the vote, versus 31% for Cardenas, and some 17% for the Panista candidate Manuel Clouthier. There were widespread impressions that Cardenas had actually won, and that the election had been stolen by the PRI. Many of the suspicions were catalyzed by the proclaimed *caida del sistema* (“crash of the system”) in which the official results were delayed a week.

In any case, the results and controversy served notice to Mexico that the PRI was truly vulnerable for the first time in its history. In many ways, the leftist split from the PRI was more significant in the evolution of “electoral democracy” than the PAN victory of 2000. In fact, the election of Fox was influenced more by a shift in votes from the PRD to the PAN.

Joseph Klesner has demonstrated two additional factors that preceded the loss of the presidency by the PRI in 2000: greater competition at the local level and increased anti-incumbency (essentially anti-PRI) behavior by the electorate (Klesner, 2005). The increase in competition at the local level began in the early-1980s and escalated in the 1990s. Most of the

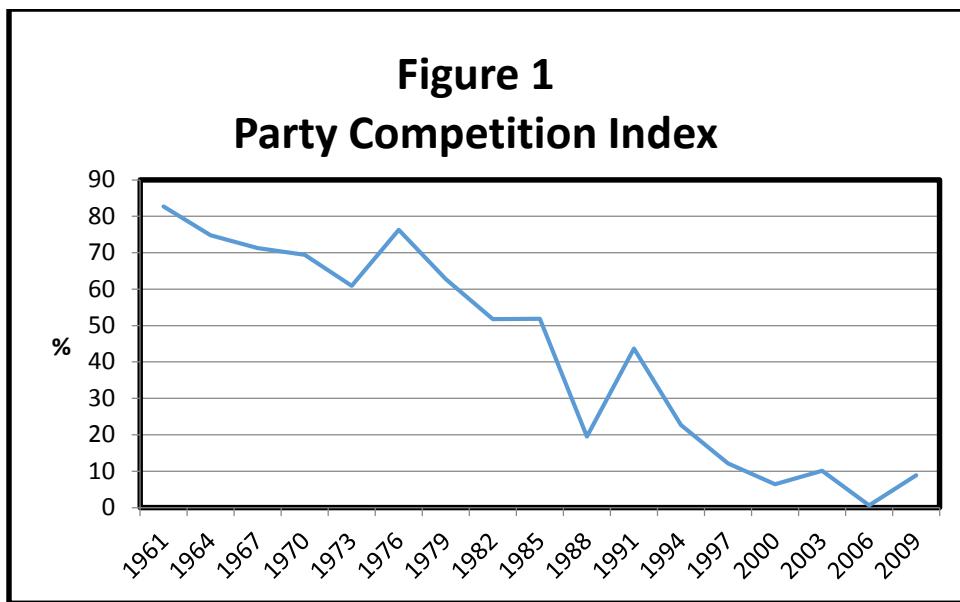
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Finally, numerous electoral reforms after the 1988 presidential election aided in transforming even the majority-rule seats into “open” (more competitive) elections. Public financing of elections helped level the field of play among the parties. The regulatory agencies responsible for elections were given more both more authority and more independence. Even the long-ignored court system was provided more power to rule on civil cases involving alleged electoral violations.

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## **Conclusion**

Was the election of Vincente Fox in 2000 a direct result of the events in the Plaza of Three Cultures in 1968? Obviously not. While there is no “smoking gun” linking Tlatelolco to the election of the first opposition President in almost a century, considerable circumstantial and corroborating evidence exists that demonstrate that Tlatelolco was a pivotal event in the slow process of democratization culminating in 2000. Rather than direct causes, we often speak of catalytic events. The Nicaraguan Revolution is an excellent example of such critical phenomena:

- The assassination of newspaper owner Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, undoubtedly by allies of Somoza;
- the seizure of the National Assembly in an essentially non-violent act in which the Sandinistas were treated as heroes; and
- the murder of an ABC news reporter by Somoza’s National Guard—caught on video.

Not unlike Tlatelolco, one cannot demonstrate a direct linkage between these events and the success of the Sandinistas. However, they are viewed by many as significant (if not necessary) factors in the eventual ousting of Somoza.

The process of democratization in Mexico had similar catalyzing occurrences:

- the earthquake of 1985, which prompted the exponential increase of community organization and participation;
- the split from the PRI of its left-wing in 1988, giving rise to the lowest support for the PRI to-date;
- NAFTA going to effect in 1994 (the argument that economic liberalization promotes political liberalization);
- the “declaration of war” by the Zapatistas on the same day as the onset of NAFTA; and even:
- the assassination of Colosio in that same year.

However, this paper has attempted to demonstrate the centrality of the Tlatelolco Massacre to all of these events—including its significance of being the first monumental exposure of the PRI and its one-party regime. To return to Steinberg’s quote opening this paper: Tlatelolco was actually a realized possibility for the birth of a new world.