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Mexico's Young Voters and the 2018 Elections

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INTRODUCTION

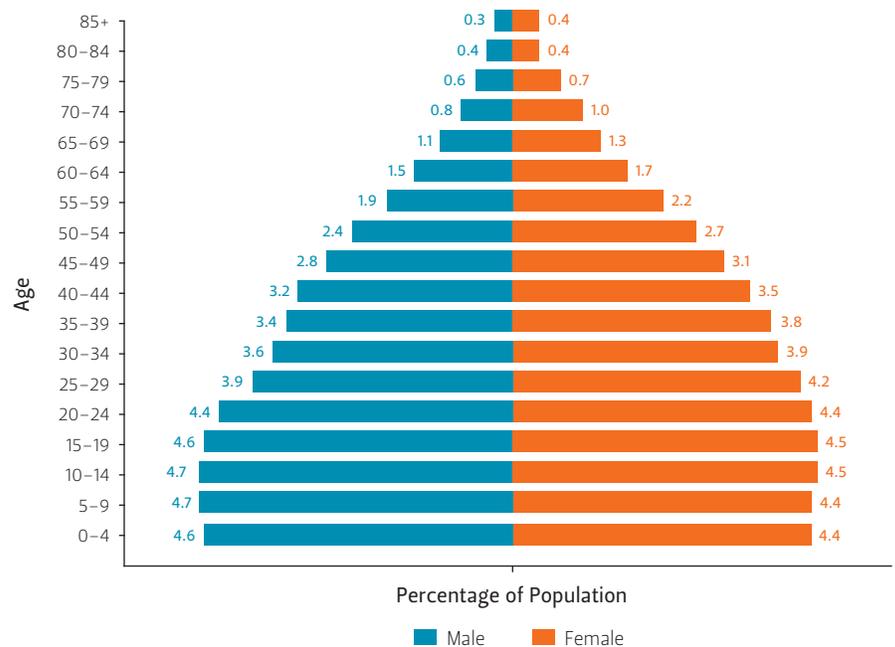
On July 1, 2018, Mexicans will go to the polls to participate in one of the most important elections in the country's modern history. They will elect a president, who will serve from 2018 to 2024; renew all members of Mexico's equivalent to the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives; pick nine out of 32 governors; and choose almost 2,800 mayors, council members, and state legislators.¹ This is the single largest election that Mexico has ever had, as the country now synchronizes all electoral contests so that a general election is held every six years and a mid-term election three years after that. Over 3,400 elected posts are up for grabs—an exceptional number that will surely reshape the country's political landscape. Citizens will be primarily concerned with the rule of law, especially corruption and impunity; crime and violence; stagnant economic growth; and their general dissatisfaction with the current political establishment.

Given that a majority of Mexico's citizens are relatively young (Figure 1), the most important bloc in this watershed election year is composed of people between the ages of 18 and 35—a population group roughly comparable to voting-age members of the so-called Generation Z and the “millennials” in the United States. In Mexico, these two groups together constitute around 45 percent of eligible voters (Table 1). Their importance as a voting bloc is even more evident if we consider that the last three presidential elections were decided by a small percentage of voters

(Table 2). However, their potential influence on the results of the election is being sharply debated. Some contend that by virtue of their numbers, the social and political agendas of young voters will decisively change the political makeup of the country. Others argue that their historically low level of electoral participation suggests Mexico's young adults will not truly matter in the election, or at least their participation will not be decisive. This brief examines the two hypotheses to explore the potential impact of Mexico's 18-to-35 demographic on the 2018 election.



FIGURE 1 — MEXICO'S POPULATION BY GENDER AND AGE (2016)



SOURCE El Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), or National Population Council, conapo.gob.mx

>3,400

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MEXICO'S YOUNG VOTERS AS A BLOC: A COMPLEX POPULATION

As Figure 1 and Table 1 show, the youngest voting bloc in Mexico, defined in this brief as individuals between 18 years and 35 years of age, represents nearly 45 percent of eligible voters. In addition to their numbers, this bloc is important due to the differences that set them apart from their parents and grandparents. Over 80 percent of them live in urban areas.² They are more educated than their parents. Tertiary education enrollment has climbed steadily in Mexico in recent decades. And today's young voters are more connected to the Internet than previous generations, and possibly more exposed to alternative political ideas and debates.³ Mexico's young adults also identify less with any one political party,⁴ as nearly half declare themselves as independents.⁵ In addition, they are more tolerant than previous

generations of differing lifestyles and life choices: nearly half support gay marriage and abortion. Only two-thirds consider religion important in their lives.⁶ They are also accustomed to greater economic freedom—marked by free trade and economic integration with the United States and Canada—and are much more familiar with how people live in other countries. All in all, Mexico's young adults tend to be somewhat like America's millennials and Generation Z.

The youth of Mexico are not a homogeneous group, however. A sizable percentage in their teens and twenties are considered “*ni-nis*” (neither-nor), as they are neither employed nor attend school. These idle young men and women, as many as 7.8 million or 20 percent of the population,⁷ tend to be more disconnected from Mexico's political, social, and economic systems,⁸ and are susceptible to the lure of organized crime.⁹ Moreover, Mexico's young adults may also live in high levels of poverty and rely on their families for economic help.¹⁰ Many came of age and matured in a country with considerably high levels of crime, violence, and corruption. They also suffer serious social problems. Mexico, for example, has the highest teenage pregnancy rates of the OECD countries, pressing many young men and women into early marriage or into raising families, which deprives them of the opportunity to return to school or prepare for a professional career.

This mosaic of social, cultural, and economic characteristics makes it difficult to discern the precise political agenda of young Mexican voters—or how they might seek to further it at the polling booths, if they do so at all. That said, in a close race, the young will likely make a difference, as their social and political preferences are distinct from those of their parents and grandparents. For instance, according to Mitofsky, a polling house in Mexico, young voters lean toward Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the leftist candidate, over the PAN and PRI candidates, who are considered to be right of center.¹¹

TABLE 1 — ELIGIBLE VOTERS IN MEXICO, ALL AGE GROUPS

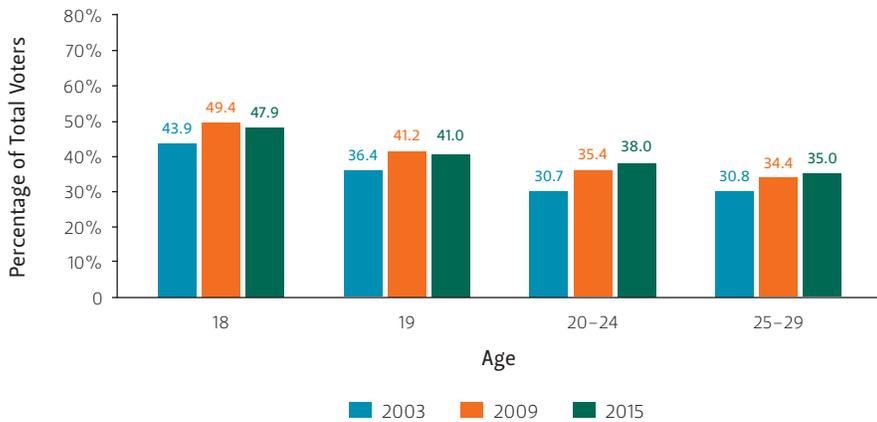
Age	Population	Percentage
18	2,209,631	2.45%
19	2,094,157	2.32%
20–24	11,176,635	12.40%
25–29	11,073,849	12.28%
30–34	9,812,478	10.88%
35–39	9,257,960	10.27%
40–44	8,987,616	9.97%
45–49	8,095,252	8.98%
50–54	6,882,236	7.63%
55–59	5,750,783	6.38%
60–64	4,601,371	5.10%
65+	10,208,730	11.32%
Total	90,150,698	100%

SOURCE Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), or National Institute of Statistics and Geography. Data as of February 16, 2018.

TABLE 2 — ELECTION RESULTS IN MEXICO (2000, 2006, 2012)

July 2, 2000 Presidential Election Results		
	Population	Percentage of Pop.
Registered Voters	58,782,737	—
Voters	37,601,618	64.0%
Invalid Ballots	788,157	2.1%
Valid Votes	36,813,461	97.9%
Candidates	Votes	Percentage of Votes
Vicente Fox Quesada — Alianza por el Cambio (PAN, PVEM)	15,989,636	42.5%
Francisco Labastida Ochoa — Partido Revolucionario Institucional	13,579,718	36.1%
Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano — Alianza por México (PRD, PT, PAS, C, PSN)	6,256,780	16.6%
Gilberto Rincón Gallardo — Democracia Social, Partido Político Nacional	592,381	1.6%
Manuel Camacho Solís — Partido de Centro Democrático	206,589	0.5%
Porfirio Muñoz Ledo — Partido Auténtico de la Revolución Mexicana	156,896	0.4%
Others	31,461	0.1%
July 2, 2006 Presidential Election Results		
	Population	Percentage of Pop.
Registered Voters	71,374,373	—
Voters	41,557,430	58.2%
Invalid Ballots	900,373	2.2%
Valid Votes	40,657,057	97.8%
Candidates	Votes	Percentage of Votes
Felipe Calderón Hinojosa — Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)	14,916,927	35.9%
Andrés Manuel López Obrador — Coalición por el Bien de Todos (PRD, PT, C)	14,683,096	35.3%
Roberto Madrazo Pintado — Alianza por México (PRI, PVEM)	9,237,000	22.2%
Patricia Mercado Castro — Partido Alternativa Socialdemócrata y Campesina (PASC)	1,124,280	2.7%
Roberto Campa Cifrián — Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)	397,550	1.0%
Others	298,204	0.7%
July 1, 2012 Presidential Election Results		
	Population	Percentage of Pop.
Registered Voters	79,492,286	—
Voters	50,143,616	63.1%
Invalid Ballots	1,236,857	2.5%
Valid Votes	48,906,759	97.5%
Candidates	Votes	Percentage of Votes
Enrique Peña Nieto — Compromiso por México (PRI, PVEM)	19,158,592	38.2%
Andrés Manuel López Obrador — Movimiento Progresista (PRD, PT, MC)	15,848,827	31.6%
Josefina Eugenia Vázquez Mota — Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)	12,732,630	25.4%
Gabriel Ricardo Quadri de la Torre — Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)	1,146,085	2.3%
Others	20,625	0.0%

SOURCE Manuel Álvarez Rivera, http://electionresources.org/mx/index_en.html

FIGURE 2 — PARTICIPATION IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS, AGES 18–29 (2003, 2009, 2015)

SOURCE El Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), or National Population Council, conapo.gob.mx

The most important bloc in this watershed election year is composed of people between the ages of 18 and 35—a population group roughly comparable to voting-age members of the so-called Generation Z and the “millennials” in the United States.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Another important factor in considering the impact of young Mexican voters is their level of political—especially electoral—participation, which is below that of older Mexicans. On average, only about one-third to one-half of Mexico’s young voters turn out at the polls on any given ballot, depending on whether it is a presidential or a mid-term election (Figure 2). Even here, however, the picture is somewhat unclear. Very young Mexicans—those casting a ballot for the first time—vote at relatively higher rates (Figure 2). This may reflect the fact that voting identification cards serve as national ID cards and nearly everyone gets one at age 18; the novelty of exercising the right to vote for the first time attracts many young people to the polls. Every year, over one million Mexicans become eligible to vote. Even if only half that number vote, it might be very important in relatively close elections, such as those in 2000, 2006, 2012—and very likely, in 2018.

Interestingly, voter turnout among Mexico’s young adults gradually declines between the ages of 18 and 30 (Figure 3), indicating a lesser influence on the electoral result, and their level of participation does not begin to rise again until after age 30

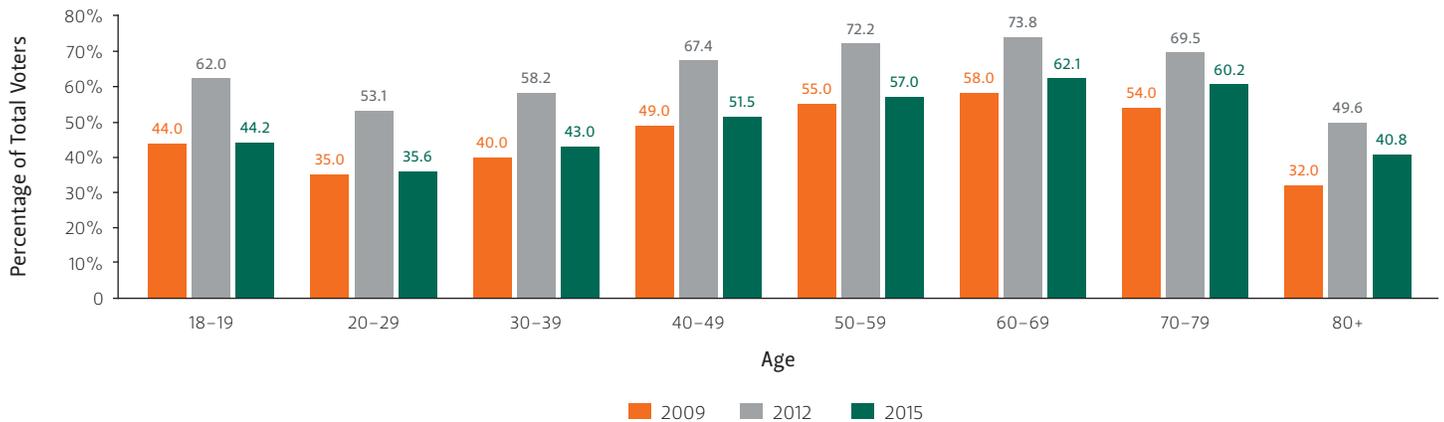
(Figure 3). Still, their numbers are sufficient to make a difference, given the relatively short distance between the first and second vote-getters in the last three presidential elections. This is particularly true for presidential elections, which have a higher voter turnout than mid-term elections (Figure 3).

THE POLITICAL AGENDA OF MEXICO’S YOUNG ADULTS

Surveys show that poverty, unemployment, poor public safety, corruption, violence, and drug trafficking rank at the top of the concerns of young Mexican citizens (Figure 4). In this sense, their positions are very similar to those of most Mexicans, who also cite such issues as key problems facing the country.¹² This could indicate that young Mexican voters may vote like other Mexicans—i.e., largely against the current government. More proactively, many will also look for candidates or political parties whose visions for the country are more attuned to their own cultural, social, and economic views. If they find such a candidate or political party, their votes will certainly carry that candidate or party to power.

Moreover, young Mexican voters are considerably more open-minded and liberal than older Mexicans and much more exposed to intense and varied online political debates. They are also less exposed to traditional media, such as television and radio, both of which tend to be dominated by the Mexican government’s official discourse, primarily through so-called “social communication,” which is funded by the government.¹³ Finally, 27 percent of young people consider themselves leftist in their ideological orientation—that is, they are more socially liberal and believe in greater government responsibility for social welfare, which could favor certain political parties—although another 27 percent consider themselves politically right of center.

FIGURE 3 — VOTER TURNOUT IN MEXICAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS BY AGE (2009, 2012, 2015)



SOURCES Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE), or National Electoral Institute,¹⁴ and a study of a citizen participation sampling from the 2015 federal congressional elections

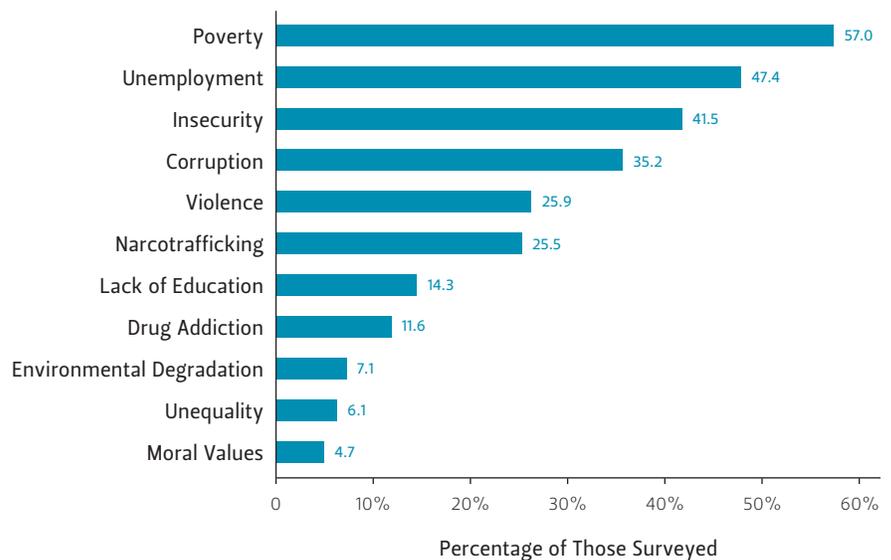
POTENTIAL IMPACT OF YOUTH ON ELECTIONS IN 2018

Having examined key characteristics of Mexico’s young voters and the problems associated with predicting their voting intentions, it appears that this enormous voting bloc is up for grabs in the 2018 election. It is therefore important to pay attention to their political behavior, as they will likely be a major force in Mexico’s politics in the foreseeable future.

ENDNOTES

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FIGURE 4 — ISSUES THAT CONCERN MEXICO’S YOUTH (2012)



SOURCE Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud, or Mexican Institute for the Young¹⁵

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