

THE RETURN OF INSTITUTIONS

Political Opportunities and Political Participation

Mexico's political system was once hailed as the "perfect dictatorship," characterized by regular elections, widespread legitimacy, and uninterrupted rule by the same political party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI) for seventy years. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Mexico's brand of authoritarianism was its relative openness to political activity from ordinary citizens and social groups. There was little that was free or fair about this political activism, however. During the PRI's long reign, political participation was encouraged only when it provided support for the ruling party, tolerated when it was aimed at securing limited material benefits, and violently repressed when its goals were significant political change. This changed after 1990, when a series of sweeping political reforms opened up the political system, encouraged opposition parties to challenge the PRI's electoral hegemony at the polls, and created significant new opportunities for Mexican citizens to engage in political activities. This combination of political reforms, real electoral competition, and citizen activism worked together to steadily erode the PRI's power. By the 2000 presidential elections the democratic transformation was complete, as voters finally toppled the PRI from power in elections that were universally regarded as free, fair, and competitive. After a lengthy democratic transition, Mexican citizens were

now largely free to vote for whom they pleased, protest when they liked, and make large and small demands on the system.¹

There is a dark side to Mexico's democratic transition, however. Evidence from public opinion surveys shows that the poor, who make up as much as 50 percent of Mexico's population, participate in many fewer political activities than more affluent Mexicans. This is true for almost any kind of political activity, whether voting, protesting, contacting politicians, signing petitions, or working on political campaigns. Not only are the poor participating less, they are on the whole less interested in politics, more skeptical about the ability of elections to give them power over their leaders, and seem resigned to having little say in the political process. Curiously, the participation gap between the rich and the poor widened during the democratic transition, peaking in 2000, when the consolidation of democratic practices should have created incentives and opportunities for all citizens to become more involved in politics.

Mexico is not alone. A growing number of studies have revealed the shallowness of Latin American democracies, where deep socioeconomic inequalities are increasingly mirrored in political practice (Agüero and Stark 1998; Chalmers et al. 1997; Holzner 2007a and 2007b; Huber and Solt 2004; Kurtz 2004; Levine and Molina 2007; Oxhorn and Ducatenzeiler 1998a and 1998b; Posner 2008; and Weyland 2004).² This stratification of political participation by income is troubling for any democracy, since it undermines the core principle of political equality—that the interests and preferences of all will be given equal consideration in the decision-making process. But in Mexico and other Latin American countries, where levels of poverty and income inequality are among the worst in the world, the overlap between socioeconomic and political inequalities has added political significance. It may beget democratic systems that are not representative, responsive, or accountable to more than half of the population.

This book seeks to understand how Mexico's stratified pattern of political participation emerged. Stated simply, why do the poor in Mexico participate less than the rich? I examine the political activity of citizens from all income levels, paying special attention to the political activity of the poor who, despite the promises of industrialization and free trade, still make up half of the country's population. To many this disparity in participation rates will not seem like a puzzle, since the finding that the poor participate less than the rich is so common in the literature (at least in research that focuses on the United States as a single case), it has become an axiom of politics. The conventional answer places the participatory burden on individuals, who

choose to participate or abstain according to their personal motivation or individual resource endowments (see Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1971; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; and Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Other political scientists have explored the impact that people's experiences in schools, churches, organizations, and other nonpolitical institutions have on political participation (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; and Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). But these conventional explanations have ignored the powerful influence political institutions and the activities of the state have on patterns of political behavior. Although there is little doubt that personal characteristics matter for political activism, and organizations certainly do much of the work in mobilizing people into politics, individuals must also have incentives and opportunities to become involved. If political activity is too costly, too risky, or unlikely to produce the desired outcome, people—no matter their income level or organizational involvement—will choose nonpolitical activities to achieve their ends.

I have placed politics—public policies, the activities of the state, features of the party system, and the rules and practices that govern the political process—squarely at the center of explanations of political participation. These variables make up the institutional environment that has had powerful direct and indirect effects on people's decisions about whether, when, and how to become involved in politics. The institutional environment influences political behavior directly by shaping the incentives and opportunities (or obstacles) for political action. In Mexico political opportunities and incentives are not distributed equally, and this inequality explains much of the difference in political activity between the poor and the rich. Political institutions and opportunities also impact behavior indirectly through their effect on political attitudes and levels of political engagement, which are themselves powerful predictors of political activity. In Mexico the poor are much less interested in politics and have lower levels of political efficacy than higher-income groups. This book traces the cynical and apathetic attitudes of the poor back to their direct experiences with the state, the political system, and a democratic process that has left them disenchanting with politics.

Because of the massive institutional changes Mexico experienced between 1990 and 2000, the country is an ideal place to explore the institutional roots of political participation. During this decade Mexicans lived through a dramatic transformation from a one-party authoritarian regime to a multiparty competitive democracy. The citizens experienced just as radical a transformation from a state-led development model to a free-market model

emphasizing free trade, reduced government spending, and diminished state regulation over the economy. The decline in political activity among ordinary Mexicans, particularly the poor, and the stratification of political participation that emerged after 2000, are closely related to these big structural reforms implemented during the same decade. Privatization, elimination of trade barriers, cutbacks of subsidies for basic food stuffs and agricultural inputs, and especially a shift to targeted poverty-alleviation programs such as Oportunidades have raised the costs, reduced the benefits, and narrowed access to decision makers; these changes have affected the poor more than the middle and upper classes.

Democratization has had a mixed effect on political participation. Its effect has been more varied because the spread of democratic practices has been uneven throughout Mexico. Where elections are truly clean and fair, where leftist parties compete effectively, and where state and local governments govern democratically, political activity is bolstered; where authoritarian practices and rulers persist, citizens (unless they are captured by clientelist organizations) often see little reason to become politically involved. Because authoritarian enclaves are strongest in Mexico's poorest states, cities, and neighborhoods, the poor are much more likely to experience this authoritarian and demobilizing side of the Mexican political system.

This focus on institutions helps reframe core questions. Rather than asking simply why the poor participate less than the rich, the proper question becomes, Under what conditions do the poor participate less than the rich, and under what conditions can participation rates become more equal? What is the state's role in stimulating or constraining citizen participation? Are there specific state structures and policies that enhance the participatory capacity and motivation for some groups while diminishing it for others? Is it possible that democratic systems, where the participatory gap is large, create greater participatory obstacles for the poor or demand resources they have in least supply? Is it possible that the actions of the state and not the attributes of individuals are truly behind this participatory gap? The answers give us a deeper understanding of the connections between individual-level factors, political institutions, and political participation that should be relevant beyond Mexico.

Political Participation under Authoritarianism

It may seem strange to talk about political participation in an authoritarian regime, which we often associate with repressive governments that crack

down on any kind of independent political activity. In truth, most authoritarian regimes experience, if not actually tolerate and encourage, a fair amount of political activity from their citizens, whether in the form of periodic protests or strikes, voting in rigged elections, militancy in officially recognized political parties or organizations, or contacting and lobbying of local officials. Mexico's brand of populist one-party authoritarianism was particularly open to citizen political activity, and in fact depended on it to enhance its legitimacy and democratic credentials. Elections at all levels of government occurred regularly and often, and were usually contested by more than one party. Outside of the electoral arena, protests, marches, and strikes were relatively common occurrences that were usually tolerated as long as they did not explicitly challenge the legitimacy of the ruling party. Political contacting of government officials was also a common strategy, especially among the urban and rural poor, who relied on personal connections and clientelist networks to secure a share of government patronage and petition for public works and services.

Although the PRI liked to claim it ruled Mexico democratically, and could point to regular elections with high turnouts as proof of this claim, most of those elections had been marred by fraud and by clientelist mobilization that guaranteed overwhelming PRI victories in almost all local, state, and national elections through the mid-1990s. Thus political participation was a double-edged sword. On the one hand it provided citizens, especially the poor, with opportunities to voice their concerns and lobby for a share of government spending. Through membership in formal organizations many of them became politicized and learned how to participate in politics. On the other hand most political action was channeled through the PRI's corporatist organizations, whose primary function was not to represent the interests of its members but to control political activity and so limit the demands on the regime coming from below.³ Moreover, the primary function of elections and political campaigns was not to choose a government but to legitimate the PRI in power. Indeed, a great deal of political activity was largely symbolic, mobilized by elites through clientelist networks and limited to ritualistic regime-supporting activities (Cornelius 1975 and Eckstein 1977). So great was the PRI's control over political institutions and organizations that critics and opponents of the PRI often abstained from voting, soiled their ballots, or simply dropped out of politics altogether, realizing that a small but ineffective opposition did more to legitimate the PRI's claim to power than to undermine it. Thus Mexico's authoritarian political system—particularly the

links between the state, the party, and the poor—produced both mobilized activism and learned apathy among the poor.⁴

Because of the regime's authoritarian character, most students of Mexican politics saw political participation as having little importance for deciding who would govern. Consequently, there are few independent studies of political participation before 1990.⁵ Even official numbers are suspect. For example, turnout rates for presidential elections during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were very high—often above 80 percent—but it is now well understood that those figures were inflated by the government to make their victories seem all the more impressive. What studies do exist document a relatively high level of political activism by the urban and rural poor, especially if they were members of organizations affiliated with the ruling party. Although much of this political activity was not strictly voluntary because it was coerced or cajoled through clientelist organizations, the poor did have strong incentives to be active in public life. For starters, their access to the political patronage doled out by the state through PRI organizations depended on their willingness to participate when called upon. More to the point, given the state's rapid expansion under the import-substitution-industrialization (ISI) development model, its control over enormous resources, its predilection for large-scale and comprehensive poverty-alleviation projects, and the scarcity of private sources for credit, input, and jobs, the poor had clear incentives to pay attention to politics and to target the state when seeking solutions to their most pressing needs. As a result, voting, attending rallies for PRI candidates, political demand making, petitioning, and protesting government officials were routine strategies for both the urban and rural poor during this period.⁶

Data are not available to tell us whether political participation, constrained as it was, was stratified by income before 1990. Evidence from early studies suggests that overall Mexicans with more education were more engaged with politics and felt more efficacious about their activity (Almond and Verba 1963; and Nie, Bingham Powell, and Prewitt 1969a and 1969b). The earliest wave of the World Values Survey carried out in Mexico in 1981 shows a small but statistically significant difference in the political participation rates between low- and high-income groups.⁷ However, among members of organizations the pattern may have been reversed. Norman Nie, G. Bingham Powell, and Kenneth Prewitt (1969b) showed that in Mexico low-status individuals with high organizational involvement outparticipated all other groups, including high-status individuals who also were active in organizations.

Political Participation during and after the Democratic Transition

After the 1988 presidential elections, in which the PRI's candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, won a dubious victory and millions of Mexicans took to the streets to protest electoral fraud, analysts of Mexican politics began paying more consistent attention to political participation, giving us a clearer picture of who participates and how much. The World Values Surveys, carried out approximately every five years in Mexico, provide the best information about changing patterns of political participation between 1990 and 2000, albeit for a limited number of political activities. Table 1.1 shows the average level of political activism for low-, medium-, and high-income Mexicans from 1990 through 2005. Using 1990 participation rates as the baseline, two patterns are evident. First, the data confirm that during the decade there was a consistent gap in political participation across income groups. However, the gap widened after the democratic transition and became statistically significant starting in 2000, suggesting that the stratification of political participation got worse as the decade progressed. Second, political participation rates underwent a rather remarkable decline between 1990 and 2000, before recovering again in 2005. The decline happened for all income groups and for essentially all political acts.

Data from the 2000 wave of the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey allow us to examine political participation rates in more detail, since it collected information about many more political activities, in-

Table 1.1. Political Participation during Mexico's Democratic Transition

	<i>Low income</i>	<i>Medium income</i>	<i>High income</i>	<i>Significance</i>
1990	0.66	0.72	0.82	
1995	0.55	0.59	0.65	
2000	0.20	0.26	0.37	***
2005	0.41	0.47	0.64	***

Source: World Values Survey 1981–2005.

Notes: Values indicate the mean number of political acts calculated from a six-point scale (0–5) that includes protests, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and signing petitions. The 2005 survey only asked four of the five political participation questions (protest, petition, boycott, and other), so values for that year are based on a five-point scale.

The symbols *** indicate that the difference across income groups is statistically significant at 0.01.

See Appendix A. Survey Questions and Variables for an explanation of how the income categories were constructed.

cluding voting, participation in political campaigns, and contacting federal representatives. Figure 1.1 breaks down the average level of political activity across eight income categories using an index of political activism based on nine distinct political acts.⁸ This gives a clear picture of just how stratified political participation had become in Mexico by 2000. With the exception of the most affluent Mexicans, political engagement increases monotonically with income, so that compared to the poor, the most affluent Mexicans participate on average in nearly one additional political act.

Political acts are not equal in their consequences for the political process. Some activities communicate a lot of specific information to government officials, such as personal contacting or signing petitions; other political acts, like voting, are rather blunt instruments for communicating preferences. Voting is also impossible to multiply—each person should be able to vote only once in each election—whereas the volume of other activities—like donating money, time spent working or volunteering for a campaign, or the number of times someone contacts a public official—can be more easily

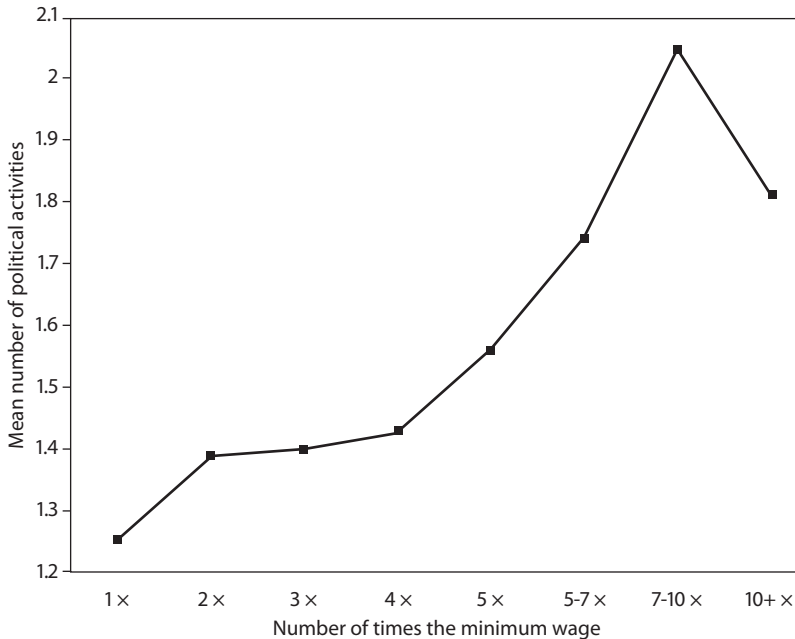
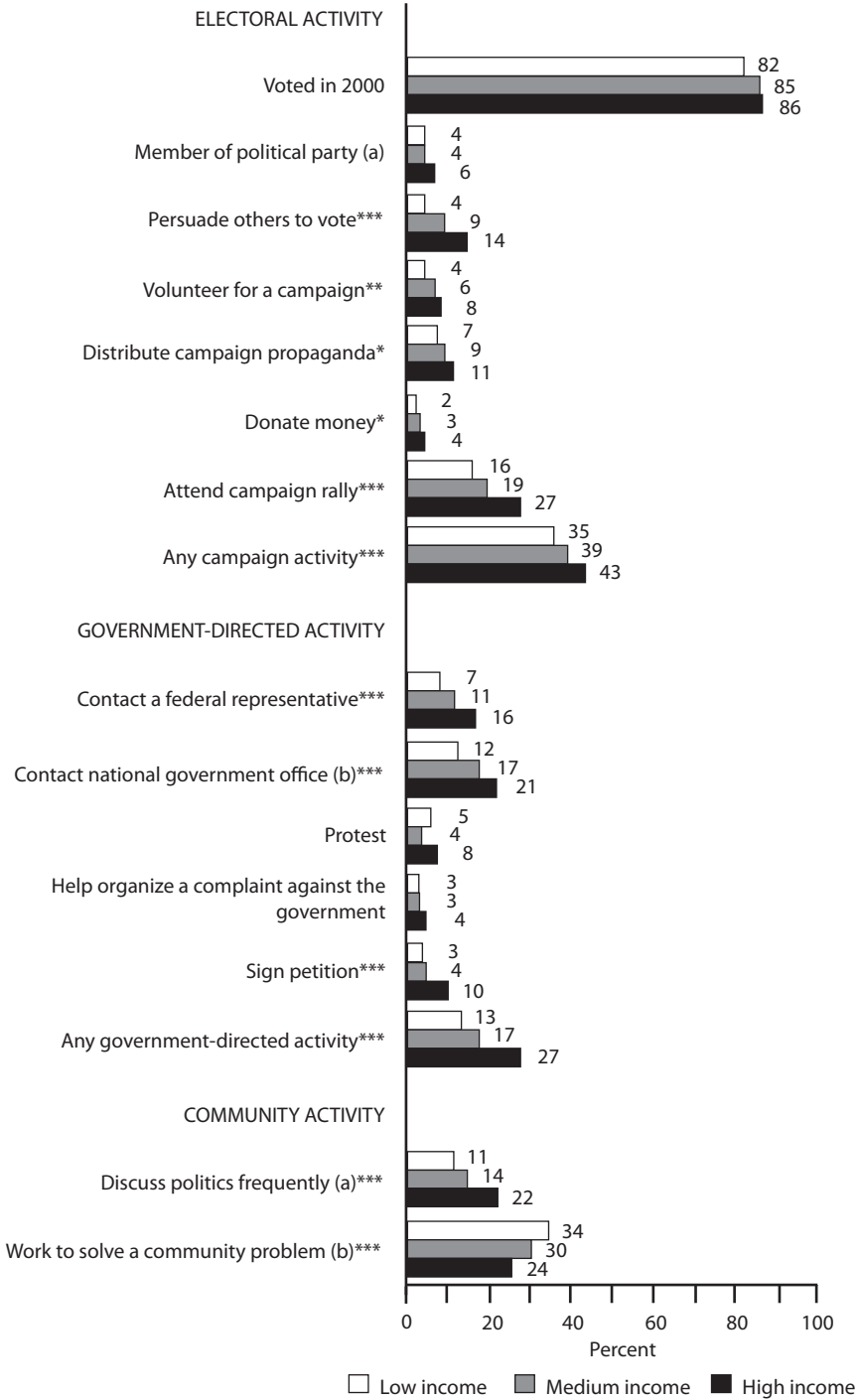


Figure 1.1. Overall Political Participation by Income. The income categories are multiples of the monthly minimum wage, which in 2000 was \$1,128 pesos per month, or approximately US\$110. *Source:* CSES-CIDE 2000.

multiplied to increase the potential influence over decision makers. Electoral acts have their greatest influence on the selection of government representatives, but relatively little influence on what they do once in power. Government-directed activities, however, have a more direct influence on the actual decisions and actions of officials already in power. Although on average there is a large difference in levels of activism across income groups, it is worth knowing whether the disparity is large, small, or whether it even exists for different kinds of political acts. Are there political activities for which the disparity in participation is lower or even reversed? Is the gap larger for electoral activities such as voting and volunteering for campaigns than for government-directed acts such as protesting and petitioning?

Figure 1.2 uses data from three national-level surveys to compare political activism by income group across a wide variety of political activities. It is evident that for almost all activities, the poor participate less than the most affluent and usually less than all other income groups. For some activities, such as signing petitions, talking about politics, and contacting government representatives, the differences are large and statistically significant. For other activities, such as protesting, donating money to political campaigns, or joining a political party, the differences are very small. The participatory gap is widest for government-directed activities, which communicate the most information to government officials and have the greatest potential effect on public policies. On average, the poor participate about half as often in these kinds of acts than the most affluent. The gap is smaller for electoral activities, but when we aggregate across electoral activities, the income gap is noticeable and statistically significant.

Voting is by far the most common political activity for Mexicans regardless of their income level and has received the most consistent attention in studies of political participation.⁹ Election turnout has always been high in Mexico, almost always exceeding 50 percent even for midterm elections. It peaked at 78 percent in the 1994 presidential elections, which was also the first election administered by the newly created Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE). Curiously, turnout rates have declined steadily since then, reaching 64 percent in 2000 and only 58 percent in 2006, even though those were the two most competitive elections in modern Mexican history. Not only has turnout declined, it has also become increasingly stratified by income. Scholars studying electoral participation in Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s documented very high turnout rates in rural and poor regions, usually much higher than in urban and more affluent regions (Ames 1970; González Casanova 1985; Nie, Powell, and Prewitt 1969a and 1969b). More

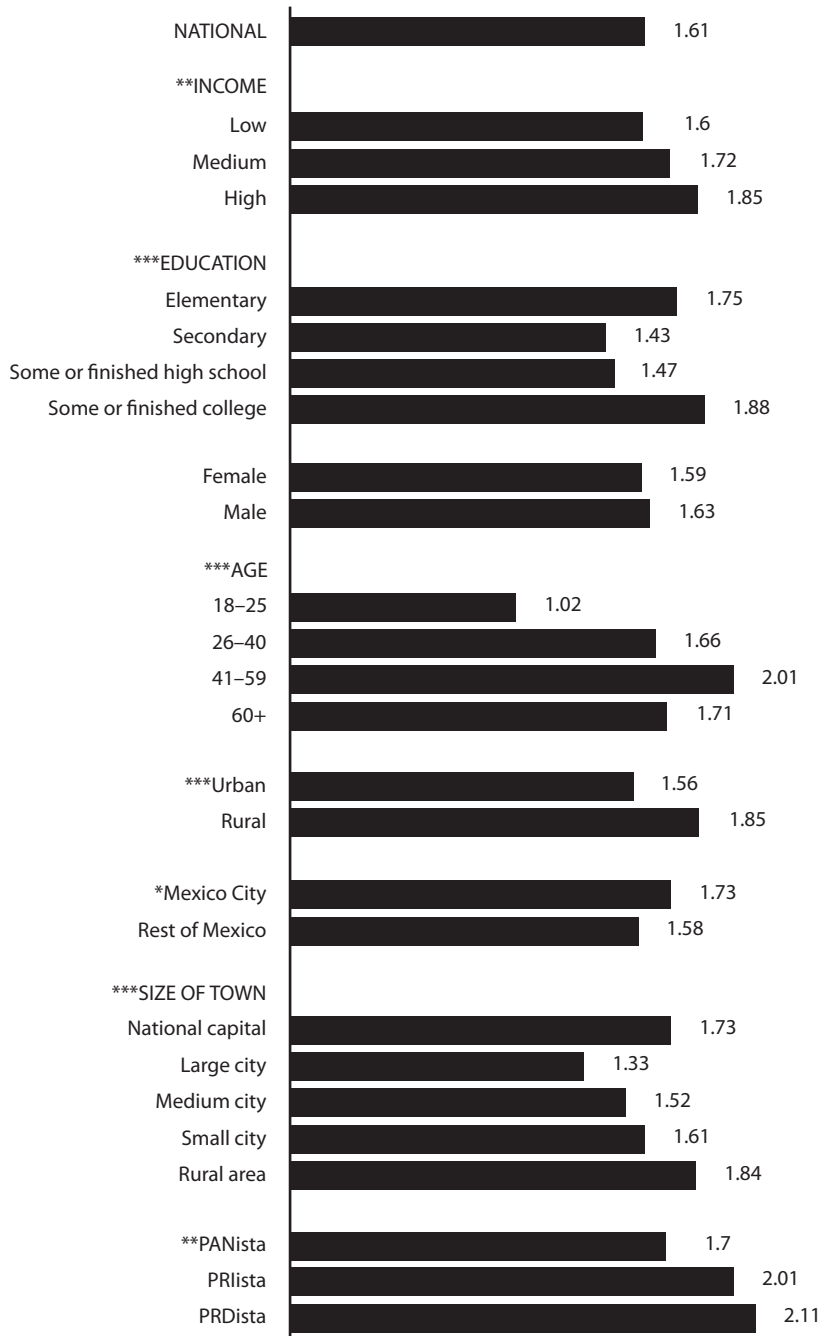


recently, Joseph Klesner and Chappell Lawson showed that up until the 1980s, district-level electoral participation was negatively correlated with levels of education and local economic development (Klesner and Lawson 2000; and Lawson and Klesner 2004). However, according to these authors, by 1991 the relationship became strong and positive, so that “Mexico’s more affluent and politically engaged citizens are now more likely to participate than the poorer, less informed and rural voters” (Klesner and Lawson 2000, 19).

The poor participate more often than middle- and high-income individuals in only one activity: working together with neighbors to solve community problems. Besides voting, this is the most common political activity undertaken by low-income Mexicans. There is some debate about whether community problem solving is actually a form of political participation. For some, this kind of community activity is a form of exit from politics because it does not target the state, affect the selection of government representatives, or allow citizens to communicate their preferences to political leaders (Dietz 1998).¹⁰ Either way, the implication is clear: when faced with a collective problem, the poor are more likely to seek solutions through informal activities that do not give them much voice among decision makers.

Although the focus here is on understanding Mexico’s stratified pattern of political participation around the time of the democratic transition, it is worth noting that the income gap persists. Figure 1.3 shows overall levels of political activism across different demographic groups for 2006. In Mexico, as in most other countries, there is a close relationship between income and education levels, and resource-based theories generally argue that education levels are the single most important factor in explaining income gaps in political activity. In Mexico, however, low levels of education do not seem to be the source of the income gap in participation, because Mexicans with less than a sixth-grade education participate just as much or more than those who graduated from high school. This finding challenges a common stereotype about low-income Mexicans: that they are too uneducated or ignorant to be politically engaged. The data also calls into question the stereotype that

Figure 1.2. (*opposite*) Political Participation by Income. The value for “any campaign activity” includes all electoral activities except voting and being a member of a political party. The value for “any government-directed activity” excludes only contacting a national government office. Here *, **, and *** indicate that the difference between low-income and medium- to high-income individuals is statistically significant at 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels respectively. *Source:* CSES-CIDE 2000; (a) World Values Survey 2000; and (b) LAPOP 2004.



rural residents are more apathetic about politics than urban ones. With the exception of Mexico City residents, the opposite seems to be the case: residents of medium-sized and large cities participate on average in the fewest number of political activities. These results are hints that something besides socioeconomic variables are behind the income gap in political participation.

The Institutional Roots of Political Participation

There is another way to think about political participation that makes better sense of the variations across time and locales in the political activity of ordinary citizens. This approach places political and institutional variables (such as party systems, state-society links, and the actions of the state) at the center of explanations of how, when, and why individuals become active in politics. This emphasis on the power of institutions to shape individual behavior is commonplace in sociology and economics and is at the core of rational-choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism within political science. One of the core insights is that understanding individual needs, predispositions, resources, and preferences is not enough to explain political behavior. Rather, all human behavior, including political activity, occurs within institutional constraints that shape actors' choices of possible activities and influence the incentives they have for undertaking them.

An important advantage of an institutional approach is that it forces scholars to take seriously the obstacles citizens face when attempting political activities even within well-established democracies. Too often, explanations of political participation, particularly survey-based models, assume that political activity takes place in a frictionless environment where actors are free to choose from a wide range of political acts constrained only by their abilities and motivations. Attention to institutional constraints forces us to abandon these naïve assumptions about democratic politics, allowing us to see old patterns in a new way. For example, in the United States there is a strong positive relationship between socioeconomic status and political

Figure 1.3. (*opposite*) Who Participates in Mexico: Mean Number of Acts, 2006. The figure reflects the mean number of activities calculated on the basis of an additive scale of eight different kinds of political activities: voting in presidential elections, working for a political party or candidate, persuading others to vote for a party, attending meetings of a political party, attending city council meetings, participating in a protest or march, contacting a federal representative, and participating in solving a community problem. Here ** and *** indicate that the differences across categories are significant at 0.05 and 0.01. *Source:* LAPOP 2006.