

# REGIONAL FACTORS AS EXPLANATIONS OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN BAJA CALIFORNIA

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## ABSTRACT

Political geographers have shown increasing interest in explaining the regional dynamics of national political change. This article explores the dimensions of Mexico's political transformation, focusing on the northern border region. The case of Baja California is examined, and five regional elements are identified as significant: urbanization, regional economic development, integration with the United States, the rise of business elites, and the growth of a border middle class.

## RESUMEN

Los geógrafos políticos han mostrado un interés creciente en explicar las dinámicas regionales de los cambios políticos nacionales. Este artículo analiza las dimensiones regionales de la transformación política de México, enfocado en la región fronteriza del norte. El caso de Baja California sirve como enfoque, y se identifican como importantes cinco factores: la urbanización, el desarrollo económico regional, la integración con Estados Unidos, el crecimiento de grupos empresariales, y la evolución de una clase media fronteriza.

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

THE importance of regional voting trends in national politics has recently gained prominence among students of political geography. Taylor and Johnston, two leading political geographers, argue, for example, that at least four regional processes influence national electoral patterns: “candidate voting” -the tendency for some regions to vote for local candidates;

“issue voting”- when a specific issue is more important in one region than another; “campaign effects” —differential regional campaigning, due to targeting of certain geographic areas, or differences in resources allocated for campaigning; and “neighborhood effect”- where voters are influenced by the overall ideological orientation of a particular region.<sup>2</sup> These kinds of processes can generally be said to create distinct regional effects in national political power relations.<sup>3</sup> Yet, scholars have also maintained, more recently, that explanations of regional power are more complex than what models of electoral geography are able to capture.<sup>4</sup> Mexico’s changing political fabric offers an excellent illustration of precisely how complex the regionalization of power relations has become in late twentieth century national politics.

When PAN (National Action Party) candidate Ernesto Ruffo Appel won the gubernatorial election for Baja California in July, 1989 -the first opposition candidate ever to win a governorship (at least the first opposition candidate to be permitted to win)- a new era of power relations had begun in Mexico. While much recent attention has been given to the dynamics of change within the national context for Mexico,<sup>5</sup> this paper argues that a fundamental part of the transformation of Mexican politics lies in the emergence of distinct regional political trends, partly as a result of a general national movement toward decentralization. Also, the traditional system of PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party) corporatist political control is breaking down, giving way to a more open party system, which may have distinct regional manifestations. Perhaps the most important

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the helpful comments of Víctor Castillo of UABC in the early stages of this paper’s preparation, as well as editorial suggestions made by reviewers at *Frontera Norte*.

2 See Peter J. Taylor and Roland Johnston, *Geography of Elections*. London, Penguin, 1979.

3 Roland Johnston, *Political, Electoral and Spatial Systems*. London, Oxford University Press, 1979-

4 See, for example, Peter J. Taylor, *Political Geography*. London, Longman, 1985.

5 See, for example, Wayne Cornelius, Judith Gentleman and Peter Smith, “Overview: The Dynamics of Political Change in Mexico,” in Wayne Cornelius, et al., eds., *Mexico’s Alter-native Political Futures*. La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD, 1989, pp.1-51; or Tonatiuh Guillén López, “La cultura política y la elección presidencial en 1988: hacia un análisis del neocardenismo”, *Frontera Norte*, vol.1, n°1, 1989, pp. 125-150.

example of these maybe the northern Mexico border region, and especially the case of Baja California examined in this paper.

There is little question that the decade 1980-1990 was a watershed for political transformation in Mexico. The financial collapse of 1982 opened the floodgates of change. The subsequent years of crisis laid bare structural flaws that had been building toward impending crisis for some time.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Mexico truly was living on borrowed time during the period of the so-called "Mexican miracle," 1950-1980. During those decades of economic well-being the political system remained stable. But in the period 1982-88, currency devaluations and real wage decreases of nearly 40% released pent-up social and political stresses in the Mexican system. In 1985, the massive earthquake in Mexico City created a short-term drama that simply exposed more profound flaws in Mexico's economy and political structures. When the government failed to organize appropriate mechanisms for dealing with the immediate problems of post-earthquake Mexico City, well-orchestrated popular movements sprung up at the neighborhood level throughout the metropolitan area. These grassroots movements would echo a nation-wide trend that unfolded in the remainder of the decade:

the growth of non-traditional political expression in response to the PRI-dominated government's inability to address the needs of the people.<sup>7</sup>

Popular mobilization became one of several avenues of change that typified Mexico's political transformation in the 1980's. The declining credibility of the *sexenio*, the split within the PRI into a traditional elite and emerging technocrat group, and a breakdown in relations between the private sector and the political elite of the ruling party all added momentum toward the inevitable restructuring of Mexican politics.<sup>8</sup> Many believe that the latter tensions were exacerbated by former President López Portillo's nationalization of the banking system in 1982, which made it problematic for the government to continue to count on the cooperation of the private sector in programs of government economic stabilization.<sup>9</sup> Massive capital flight (mainly to the United States) highlighted the era. The decline of the

6 These are discussed in Wayne Cornelius, *The Political Economy of México Under de la Madrid: The Crisis Deepens, 1985-1986*. La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD, 1986.

7 There is a growing literature on the importance of urban popular movements as a political force in Mexico. See, for example, Juan Manuel Ramírez Saiz, *El movimiento urbano popular en México*, México, Siglo XXI, 1986; Carlos Monsiváis, *Entrada libre: crónicas de una sociedad que se organiza*, México, ERA, 1987; Daniel Rodríguez Velázquez, "From Neighborhood to Nation," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. XXIII, ? 4, Nov-Dec 1989, pp. 22-28; Vivienne Bennett and Jeffrey V. Rubin, "How Popular Movements Shape the State: Radical Oppositions in Juchitan and Monterrey, Mexico, 1973-1987"; paper presented at the XIV Latin American Studies Association International Congress, New Orleans, March, 1988.

8 Wayne Cornelius, Judith Gentleman, and Peter Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

9 *Ibid.*, p.13.

“corporatist” system of political control that had dominated in Mexico for so long was now firmly in place.

These changes most assuredly showed up at the polls. The rise of opposition politics in Mexico has been notable in the 1980’s. Where once opposition movements, principally the PAN, were restricted to local elections, in the 1980’s even the national electoral process was absorbed into Mexico’s political transformation. The 1988 presidential elections marked what was possibly the greatest moment of change in Mexico’s political history, as the hegemonic party system finally began to fade away. In 1988, every facet of the presidential election, from selection and campaigning to the vote, was different.<sup>10</sup> So, of course were the results of the election. While the PRI candidate -Salinas- won, the character and margin of victory were markedly different from past elections. The PRI did not dominate, but shared the vote tallies with two other emerging forces, the PAN and the FDN (Frente Democrática Nacional) of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Some have termed this outcome Mexico’s “political earthquake.”<sup>11</sup>

If the Mexican political system is undergoing one of its greatest transformations in this century, it is clear that these changes have important regional dimensions. For many decades, Mexico has been a nation of profound political centralization, and, for the most part, the corporatist system of controls was effective in maintaining power in the nation’s core -the Valley of Mexico— while keeping the outlying regions at bay. But today, the system is changing; regional power relations are being redefined, especially those between the core and the outlying regions.

While many of the explanations of Mexico’s political transformation are tied to structural flaws in Mexico’s economy and system of governance, this paper argues that at least part of the explanation is found in the changing social, economic, and ultimately political dynamics of specific regions. Both northern Mexico generally, and Baja California more specifically, offer evidence of these changing power relations.

### *The Role of Northern Mexico in the Nation’s Political Transformation*

There would seem to be little doubt that the northern border states have begun to play a more prominent role in the national political and economic picture. But some scholars continue to voice skepticism about the meaning of recent trends in the northern states. Schmidt, for example, has recently questioned whether political developments in northern Mexico are a significant deviation from the national norm; the key explanatory variables

10 Peter Smith, “The 1988 Presidential Succession in Historical Perspective”, in Wayne Cornelius, et al., eds., *Mexico’s Alternative Political Futures*. La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD, 1989, pp. 391-415.

11 Wayne Cornelius, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 14.

for recent Mexican politics, he notes, are both nation-wide phenomena-voter abstention and a rise in opposition support. Yet, in the same essay, Schmidt concedes that unique socio-economic conditions in the north may also be a factor.<sup>12</sup>

A little more than a decade ago, some observers of Mexican politics asserted that the national government seriously exploited the northern border region. For example, it was argued that infrastructure and development programs were designed mainly to extract wealth from the increasingly profitable sectors of northern Mexico with little concern about the needs of the border region itself.<sup>13</sup> Such thinking underlies a clear rivalry that developed between the center and the north. Since 1970, Mexico's northern border states experienced dramatic economic and demographic changes, especially in the areas of agribusiness expansion, modernization of the commercial sector, expansion of service industries, and the growth of the assembly plant sector. These changes have empowered the economy of the northern border region, making it increasingly difficult for the Mexican central government and the ruling powers to ignore the north. At the same time, population has grown rapidly in the north, further shifting the national center of gravity in that direction.

The political relations between central and northern Mexico parallel those that exist in many nations between the "core" and "periphery." In that sense, Mexico's northern border region can be compared to the southwestern United States. For a century and a half, the southwest was one of the peripheral regions of the U.S., thoroughly overshadowed by the dominant northeast "core," as well as the Midwest and Great Lakes areas. For much of the twentieth century, the Southwest remained outside the mainstream of the U.S. economy. In the private sector, there was a pattern of redlining among banks because the Southwest was seen as marginal and risky for investment. But, during the period 1950-1980, as the Southwest economy expanded, and as population increased, mainly due to migration from the "frostbelt" states, power shifted toward the "sunbelt."<sup>14</sup>

The north has finally risen to power in Mexico, too. As early as 1982-83, the PAN won important municipal elections in Sonora and Chihuahua. The PRI had always been vulnerable in the north, but in the early and mid-1980's, a new form of PAN support developed -"neopanismo"- which pulled together a broad array of interest groups seeking a more open style

12 Samuel Schmidt, "Las elecciones en la frontera México-Estados Unidos: Revisando las tendencias", *Estudios Fronterizos?* 21, 1991, forthcoming.

13 Antonio Ugalde, "Regional Political Processes and Mexican Politics on the Border", in Stanley Ross, ed. *Views Across the Border*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1978, pp. 97-116.

14 See Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975; and David Perry and Alfred J. Watkins, eds.. *The Rise of the Sunbelt Cities* Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1977.

of leadership, combined with honest government and clean elections. New sectors -the middle class, the church, and even the U.S. government-became supporting forces in these PAN movements.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, coalitions of business interest groups abandoned the PRI and began to shift their allegiance toward the PAN. Neopanista victories were recorded at the federal, state and local levels in Sonora and Nuevo León as early as 1983.

In Sonora, new business elite alliances with the PAN emerged out of the region's export-oriented agribusinesses, while in Nuevo León it came from the Monterrey-based elite. According to Guadarrama,<sup>16</sup> three elements explain these shifting power relations: first, a general schism between government and business communities in the 1980's, part of the erosion of the PRI's corporatist style; second, a loss of confidence in the government's ability to handle the economy; and third, a perceived need to counter balance the old vertical structure of decision-making in Mexico's political system. It has also been pointed out that the PAN did not necessarily offer a solution to the crisis; it simply presented an alternative to the status quo, and, in a moment of opportunism, was able to build a power base in the north.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, as the PAN'S power increased, the Mexican ruling party sought to use traditional techniques that had been effective in the past in limiting opposition power: manipulation of elections, censorship, or harassment.<sup>18</sup> The old tactics used for controlling the outcome of elections -padding electoral rolls, stealing ballot boxes, or altering election tallies- were less effective in an era of expanded communication technologies. In 1986, for example, the PRI's fraudulent intervention in the elections in Chihuahua were well documented by the media. This alienated an increasingly well-informed electorate in the north, often sending them into the ranks of the PAN, even though they might have originally disagreed with the traditional ideological bent of the party. The PAN became a symbol of openness and changing times in northern Mexico; the PRI became mired in a vicious cycle in which its attempts to stem the tide of change simply exacerbated the process, sending even more voters toward the PAN. The burden of proof in solving Mexico's problems -from economics to clean elections- was weighing more and more heavily on the shoulders of the PRI.

If all of the above was not enough to empower the PAN in the north, PAN also appealed to northern Mexico simply because many voters increas-

15 Alberto Aziz Nassif, "Electoral Practices and Democracy in Chihuahua," in Arturo Alvarado, ed., *Electoral Patterns and Perspectives in Mexico*, 1987, pp. 81-109.

16 Graciela Guadarrama S., "Entrepreneurs and Politics: Businessmen in Electoral Contests in Sonora and Nuevo León, July, 1985," in Arturo Alvarado, ed., *Electoral Patterns and Perspectives in Mexico*, 1987, pp. 81-109.

17 Aziz Nassif, *op. cit.*

18 See Wayne Cornelius and Ann Craig, *Politics in Mexico: An Introduction and Overview*, La Jolla, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1988, pp. 30-38.

ingly perceived the PRI to be central Mexico's party. As Aziz Nassif has stated<sup>19</sup> regarding the opposition: "old regional anti-centrist complaints align well with the current political movements which try to assert local and regional autonomy." Northern Mexicans have every reason to resent the longstanding economic, social and political centrist orientation in Mexico, and thus one sees that the north had all along been ripe for the rise of opposition politics—it simply took the proper convergence of forces to crystallize such a movement.

*Baja California: Regional Dimensions of Opposition Politics*

In an interview with the late PAN presidential candidate, Manuel Clouthier, a few months before the election for governor of Baja California in July, 1989, Clouthier was asked why the PAN might be victorious in Baja. He gave six reasons: 1) because there is a nationwide state of political change;

2) the 71% inflation rate over the previous 6 years had whetted the appetites of the voters for a big change; 3) the PAN candidate had already served as city mayor (in Ensenada); 4) the state of Baja California was in the position of being a "window to Mexico," thus the Mexican government could not afford to engage in fraudulent manipulations of the election; 5) Baja has only four municipalities; 6) since most of the voters in Baja California are urban (as opposed to rural) inhabitants, it would be harder for the government to rig the elections.<sup>20</sup> With these statements, Clouthier synthesized some of the essential dimensions of the Baja California region that heavily affected the outcome of the election.

The PAN candidate -Ernesto Ruffo- did, of course, win in July, 1989 (see Table 1). Ruffo's victory was preceded by an important demonstration of opposition electoral strength in the 1988 presidential elections. In Baja California, 1988 opposition presidential candidates garnered 63.3% of the vote (split between Cárdenas [FDN], 37.2%, and Clouthier [PAN], 24.5%), nearly twice as many votes as Salinas (PRI), who attracted 36.7% of Baja's electorate. The results of the 1988 presidential election thus proved that opposition candidates could challenge the PRI in Baja California.<sup>21</sup> Ruffo's success, combined with the startling presidential electoral results of the previous year, revealed that regional forces at work in the 1970's and 1980's had finally come together in Baja California. These forces are reviewed in the pages that follow. The intent is to suggest that *regional* factors may

- 19 Alberto Aziz Nassif, "Regional Dimensions of Democratization," in Wayne Cornelius, et al., eds., *Mexico's Alternative Political Futures*. La Jolla, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD, 1989, p.94.
- 20 *San Diego Union*, "Mexico's PRI Can't Hold Back Democracy," interview with Manuel J. Clouthier. Opinion section. February 12, 1989.
- 21 See Tonatiuh Guillén López, "¿Qué pasó en Baja California?" *El Nacional* (Sección Política), August 17, 1989, pp. 4-9.

explain as much about the rise of the opposition in Baja California as do national ones. The 5 regional factors are: urbanization, regional economic development, integration with the United States, the rise of regional business elites, and the emergence of the border middle class. While no single regional force, taken alone, would be significant in explaining the emergence of the opposition, taken together they become a powerful explanatory tool for understanding political change in Mexico.

### *Urbanization*

Urban growth is, of course, not unique to Baja California. Yet, it *is* significant that Baja has been one of the most rapidly urbanizing regions of Mexico over the last three decades. From 1970-1990, three of Baja's *municipios* -Tijuana, Mexicali and Ensenada— all had annual growth rates well above the national average (between 4 and 8% as compared to 3% nationally). This pattern can be generalized to all of Mexico's northern border. A recent monograph on Baja California<sup>22</sup> demonstrated that the border states' share of Mexico's urban population is growing from 7.4 million or 23.7% in 1980 to 12.6% or 27% in 1990.

One can argue that there are a number of important linkages between urbanization and Mexico's political transformation, keeping in mind that some intervening variables may affect generalizations about causality. In the 1988 presidential elections, PRI candidate Salinas carried the rural states, but did badly in many of the urbanized regions, including the Valley of Mexico and Baja California. In addressing this kind of pattern, Aziz Nassif distinguishes between "rural micropolitical zones," where electoral fraud dominates (for example, in Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Morelos, Michoacán, and rural Jalisco) and where the PRI has traditionally dominated, as opposed to "modern zones," such as the urbanized border regions of the north, where civic protests against fraud have unified disparate groups in the struggle against the old PRI tactics of control.<sup>23</sup> This was clearly the case in the 1989 elections for state governor in Baja California, where the citizens in the largest cities organized neighborhood level opposition fronts to oppose PRI electoral fraud. What seemed to unify voters in Baja, more than any ideological issue, was the objective of clean elections. This objective translated directly into an anti-PRI vote. The PAN candidate, Ruffo, symbolized this anti-PRI slant, and election day was most notable for the armies of neighborhood "brigades in defense of the vote" or "groups of civil support."<sup>24</sup> Baja's growing urban population, character-

22 Jorge Montano, "Diagnóstico de largo plazo de la economía de Baja California, 1950-1980" Vol. 3: 4 *Cuadernos de Economía*, 1987, p. 27.

23 Aziz Nassif, *op. cit.*, 1987.

24 Lawrence Herzog, "Politicians Steal Limelight But a New Voice Heard in Baja," *The*

ized by higher levels of education, exposure to the U.S. media, and socialization within a cultural climate strongly influenced by the United States, became a more informed electorate unwilling to submit to old PRI electoral manipulation tactics.

### *Regional Economic Development*

As pointed out earlier, Mexico's northern border region has long struggled for control over its destiny. There has been an historical resentment of central Mexico in the north, thus an inherent potential well of support for alternative political parties. Over the last two decades, the PRI's share of the vote in national presidential elections has steadily diminished (see Table 2). Not only can the PAN potentially rise in the north; there is an opening for other opposition parties. In Baja California, as mentioned, the Cardenista Frente Democrático Nacional (FDN) was the leading vote getter in the 1988 presidential election.

Ever since the 1985 earthquake, a steady stream of migrants from the Valley of Mexico, many of them white-collar professionals, has flowed toward Baja California. By the late 1980's, it was not uncommon in Baja to find reference to the regional rivalry between Mexico City and the north in Baja California's daily cultural world. For example, one saw during this period the emergence of the common, somewhat disparaging, term "chilango" in the everyday regional vocabulary (in extreme cases, one found bumper stickers announcing: "help control population growth-kill a chilango").

Part of Baja California's success in achieving power and a degree of autonomy from Mexico City is explained by its relative economic prosperity over the last three decades. Economic growth in activities such as assembly plants, tourism and trade allowed Baja California by 1981 to enjoy one of the highest per capita income levels for any state in Mexico.<sup>25</sup> Incomes may be even higher, since official statistics mask much of the income earned north of the border, which often goes unrecorded. Economic prosperity along the border has had two effects: first, it has allowed a feeling of autonomy to flourish in Baja, and second, it has accelerated anti-centrist attitudes, now not only aimed at warding off the political power of the center, but also at protecting Baja's successes from central government interference. Adding to these growing tensions between Baja California and the central government has been the increasing integration between Baja and the U.S., which has made the official party in Mexico City even more

Times of the Americas, July 26, 1989.

25 INEGI, *México: Estadística económica y social por entidad federativa*. México, SPP, 1984.

nervous. One must acknowledge, however, that the Salinas administration's progress, of late, in establishing the mechanisms that may lead to the signing of a Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. government has vastly strengthened the PRI's image as a party that is supportive of positive economic relations with the United States.

### *Integration with the United States*

Historically, Baja California has been more integrated with the United States than with central Mexico. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, Baja California's isolation from central Mexico was exacerbated by distance (some 1500 miles to Mexico City) and limited transport technology. In the first half of the 20th century, the revolution and economic instability impeded efforts to unify the nation. At the same time, U.S. capital took advantage of investment opportunities in Baja California. Many of the important early regional development projects were funded by U.S. interests, including cotton farming operations in the Mexicali Valley and the development of the town of Ensenada, both in the early 20th century. Baja's largest urban area- Tijuana" also owes its early growth to the connection with California, especially during the "Golden Years of Tourism", 1920-29, when U.S. capital built extensive infrastructure (gambling houses, racetracks, spas, hotels, saloons, roads, bridges, wine and beer factories) for the American tourism market.<sup>26</sup>

This legacy has been more than matched by developments in the modern era (1950-present). Baja California's phenomenal growth has been propelled by a set of growing linkages with California, principally in the areas of *maquiladora* growth, trade and tourism.<sup>27</sup> Yet integration with the U.S. has not been limited to the economic sphere; it has extended into the cultural realm as well. There is increasing evidence that residents of Baja California's largest cities are influenced by the U.S. media (radio, television, newspapers).<sup>28</sup> This may have had an impact on the matter of electoral fraud. For example, the PRI itself takes the presence of the United States along the border seriously, as illustrated in one of the PRI's strategy documents for the July, 1989, gubernatorial election in Baja California. The

26 See David Pinera, ed., *Historia de Tijuana*. Tijuana, UNAM-UABC, 1985.

27 For maquiladora growth and ties with the United States, see Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development*. Boston, Unwyn Hyman, 1989; and Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space and Politics on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Austin, CMAS/University of Texas Press, 1990, chapters 3, 6; more generally see Bernardo González A., *Vinculación fronteriza a Estados Unidos y su cambio con la crisis*. Tijuana, COLEF, 1987; Jesús Ramírez and Víctor Castillo, "La frontera México-Estados Unidos, estudio de las economías de Baja California y California," *Cuadernos de Economía* 1: 1.

28 See, for example, Amelia Malagamba, *Televisión y su impacto en la población infantil de Tijuana*. Tijuana, COLEF, 1986.

document states at one point: “Si Baja California se pierde or se arrebatada por el fraude, estaremos mostrando el estado autoritario en México en frente de la sociedad civil estadounidense.”<sup>29</sup>

In the border region, Mexican residents are exposed to U.S. culture on a daily basis. This increases the role of the media in the political process. Ruiz Vargas calls this the “silent cultural revolution.”<sup>30</sup> In Baja California, during the July, 1989, gubernatorial election, an important media influence was exerted by the progressive weekly newspaper *Zeta*, which is one of the few newspapers the PRI has been unable to manipulate. Led by its astute publisher, Jesús Blancomelas, *Zeta* has engaged in aggressive investigative journalism. In order to avoid government harassment, Blancomelas has the newspaper printed on the U.S. side of the border, and then distributed in Mexico. During the June/July election period, *Zeta* uncovered and documented a number of government fraudulent tactics; this represented a serious threat to the PRI’s image, in light of the tremendous attention of not only the Mexican media, but also international media, on the election. *Zeta* broke important stories on the padding of electoral rolls in Ensenada (which carried the title “Los muertos votarán”), the burning of false credentials of PRI voters who allegedly lived in one of the city’s poor colonias, and attempts by the PRI to annul the elections when its defeat appeared inevitable.<sup>31</sup> *Zeta* was further placed in the spotlight, since its most popular columnist Héctor (El Gato) Félix had been murdered the year before in a case that remained highly controversial due to possible (albeit unproven) links between the incident and high officials in Mexico City. The murder and alleged cover-up by Baja California’s PRI governor had been covered extensively in the U.S. press, including a much-discussed article in the national magazine, *New Yorker*.<sup>32</sup> The Mexican government could ill afford to harass *Zeta*. The world was watching.

In addition to investigative reporting, *Zeta* teamed with another northern Mexican newspaper, *El Norte* (from the state of Nuevo León), to create an army of poll watchers on election day. This group of journalists and volunteers travelled from polling place to polling place on election day, watching, interviewing, tape recording, photographing, and videotaping events. This again made it even more difficult for the PRI to engage in its age-old electoral manipulation habits.

29 PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), “Como ganar Baja California,” Tijuana. Unpublished strategy document, 1989, p.5.

30 Benedicto Ruiz Vargas, “Elecciones y escenario político en Baja California,” *Cuadernos de Economía* Vol. 3: 1987.

31 See *Zeta*, June 30-July 7, 1989.

32 See William Murray, “Reponer At large (Tijuana)”, *The New Yorker*, July 31, 1989, pp.57-66.

### ***The Rise of Regional Business Elitesxxx***

Two specific groups of social elites have emerged in Baja California in the last two decades; both have had an impact on the changing political environment. They are first, the sub-contractors and businesses associated with the assembly plant industry, and second, investors and entrepreneurs in the commercial sector (real estate, tourism, retail trade). In the area of assembly plants, by 1988, Tijuana and Mexicali had over 450 plants employing more than 58,000 workers. More importantly, as Sklair has recently argued,<sup>33</sup> a class of Mexican entrepreneurs has emerged along the border around the *maquila* industry. Businessmen (lawyers, accountants, financial consultants, managers, technicians) are heavily involved in setting up and managing shelter and sub-contract operations for U.S. corporations. These “facilitators” set up and manage assembly plants for U.S. clients, and as Sklair points out, they “take the anxiety out of relocation.”<sup>34</sup> This increasingly powerful social group represents an important political voice in Baja California, since it has a vested interest in assuring that opportunities for profitable ventures with U.S. corporations continue. Thus far, this group has turned toward the PAN, which it believes is a party that will be more sympathetic to maintaining its economic opportunities across the border.<sup>35</sup>

A second elite conglomerate that has emerged in Baja is centered around the areas of retail trade, tourism, construction, and real estate. We might term this the “growth sector,” since these interest groups are bent on seeing relentless economic growth, population expansion, and development along the border. They favor national policies that support both growth and continued integration with the North American market, expanded trade, and strengthening of infrastructure that supports border business (including free trade zones, construction of shopping centers, and the *artículos ganchos* program). The commercial sector is also booming along Baja California’s northern border; it employed over 52,000 workers in the early 1980’s.<sup>36</sup> The recent stabilization of the peso has allowed for a boom in shopping center construction in Baja California in the last few years.

Taken together, these two social groups share a number of political perceptions. There is a consensus of dissatisfaction with the economic policies of the national government and a concern over the uncertainty

33 Sklair, 1989, *op. cit.*, and Leslie Sklair, “Foreign Investment and the Creation of Transnational Capitalist Classes in the Mexican-U.S. and China-Hong Kong Border Regions”, paper delivered at the Association of Borderland Scholars meetings, Tijuana, Mexico, February, 1990.

34 Sklair, 1989, *op. cit.*, p.88.

35 Ruiz Vargas, *op. cit.*

36 Ramírez and Castillo, *op. cit.*

associated with the economic crisis of the 1980's and the possibility that the government might introduce changes that would threaten the privileged position of business elites. Thus both the *maquila* and commercial elites share a desire to open the economy and expand trade relations with the U.S. on the one hand, while on the other hand they want more room to negotiate with the government. They also wish to see the border region protected from the risks of the national economy. Currently they remain skeptical about aligning themselves with the PRI, and have moved toward the opposition, principally the PAN,<sup>37</sup> However, as mentioned above, the Free Trade Agreement could shift this group's allegiance back in the direction of the PRI in the future.

### ***The Border Middle Class***

The last piece in the regional puzzle involves the changing social characteristics of Baja California's population, highlighted by the formation of a growing middle class. Recent studies of Baja California have shown conclusively that despite the state's dependency on external forces, and despite the strong ties to agriculture exports and services, per capita incomes are high and growing steadily.<sup>38</sup> Between 1960 and 1980, for example, Baja's per capita incomes grew by 16.5%; in 1980 the per capita gross domestic product was higher in Baja California than the national average, and was the second highest of any state along the border (Nuevo León was highest).<sup>39</sup>

This has translated into a growing middle class in border cities. One study of income distribution in Baja in 1983 found increasingly lower percentages of Baja California's population with salaries below the SMM (minimum monthly salary of 12,740 pesos in 1985, or about (80)).<sup>40</sup> Another study of income in Tijuana showed that despite rising prices and an inequitable distribution of wealth, a growing number of Tijuana families were earning above the minimum salary.<sup>41</sup>

However imprecise these statistics (and one hardly wants to argue here that the economic picture is rosy for large numbers of urban poor along the border), the fact is that there is a growing middle class in Baja. This group has the potential to become a potent political force along the border. For some years in Baja, the middle classes were politically stagnant and did

37 Ruiz Vargas, *op. cit.*

38 Alejandro Mungaray, *Distribución del ingreso, comportamiento del consumo y precios en el área urbana de Tijuana, B.C., Tijuana, UABC, 1985;* Montano, *op. cit.*

39 Montano, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Mungaray, *op. cit.*

not have a strong voice. But, as Ruiz Vargas notes,<sup>42</sup> the middle class along the border has increasingly grown to identify with the comforts on the North American side of the border, and subsequently has become dissatisfied with the government's attitude toward the border. The middle class is searching for an alternative political option and, notwithstanding the old image of the PAN as a party of the upper class, has swung its votes toward the new PAN, creating the so-named "neopanismo." The attraction of the PAN lies in something new-honest elections, better handling of public resources, more efficient management. Ruiz Vargas sums up the position of the middle class when he writes: "la búsqueda de seguridad y reconocimiento rompe las barreras ideológicas."<sup>43</sup>

The first signal of a middle-class shift toward the PAN occurred in Ensenada in 1986 with the triumph of a PAN candidate for mayor (*presidente municipal*). Ruffo achieved victory by appealing to voters as a candidate of business-style democracy, open management of finances, and a crusade against government fraud. This appealed to the masses of middle-class voters who were tired of corruption. The opposition had grown and encapsulated the middle-class, so disenchanted with fraud, political and economic centralism, and the wave of rich *chilangos* arriving at the border. A new social force was emerging to counter these trends and for the moment it had found a point of expression with the PAN. Ruffo then rode this wave of support all the way to the governorship.

### *Conclusion*

The period 1986-1990 has been one of rapid change in Baja California's political environment. From the election of a Panista mayor to a Panista governor, the forces of change are firmly in motion. It is clear the PRI was running scared here. President Salinas was forced to remove PRI governor Xicotencatl Leyva before the 1989 election, in an attempt to "clean up" the state and win back the momentum from the PAN. Leyva's administration was rocked by two scandals: the Héctor Félix murder and subsequent cover-up of the investigation, and the reported high-level corruption of state police involved in drug smuggling.<sup>44</sup>

It should be emphasized that the regional forces that crystallized to alter Baja California's political landscape are strongly tied to larger processes that are reshaping national politics in Mexico. Perhaps what is unique in Baja California is the degree to which proximity to the United States, combined with distance from central Mexico, have served as regional forces

<sup>42</sup> Ruiz Vargas, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Ruiz Vargas, *op. cit.* p.21

<sup>44</sup> Patrick McDonnell, "Baja Governor's Resignation Tied to Political Fallout," *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1989.

that accelerated opposition political movements. The importance of proximity to the United States should not be misinterpreted, however. North American culture (especially the media) and the California economy may have served to stimulate the forces of political transformation in Baja California, but ultimately, change resulted from processes internal to Baja (e.g., urbanization, regional economic change, the rise of the middle class, etc.) and to Mexico more generally.

The political future of Baja California is, of course, far from clear. While a Panista governor has taken power, one must acknowledge that many of the attractions of Ruffo are non-ideological. Indeed, the *neopanista* movement owes much of its success to opportunism rather than profoundly ideological strategies. The PRI lost its credibility in the last years of the 1980's and was unable to win it back in time to beat off the momentum of Ruffo. The PRI has now been placed in a defensive position, and voters, if anything, are disposed to vote against the PRI as much as to vote for the PAN. It is not clear that the PRI cannot regain a foothold in Baja California's political future; what is clear is that the old tactics can no longer work. Regional forces have severely curtailed the PRI's ability to control Baja California; for the moment it is the PAN that has been able to crystallize these regional dynamics into a coherent political force.

<b>TABLE 1</b>		
<b>RESULTS OF 1989 ELECTION FOR GOVERNOR, STATE OF BAJA CALIFORNIA</b>		
Political party	Number of votes	% of Total
PAN	204 507	50.1
PRI	163 529	40.0
PRD	8 213	2.0
PPS	6 114	1.5
Other	26 256	6.4
Total	408 619	100.0

Source: PRI, : *Las elecciones de 1989*

<b>TABLE 2</b>			
<b>PRESIDENTIAL VOTING IN BAJA CALIFORNIA, BY POLITICAL PARTY, 1964-1988</b>			
<b>(Percent of vote)</b>			
Year	PRI	PAN	PPS
1964	78.6	21.4	
1970	72.1	25.3	
1976	85.0		4.5
1982	51.0	27.6	2.3
1988	36.7	24.3	19.9

Source: Samuel Schmidt, "Las elecciones en la frontera México-Estados Unidos: Revisando las tendencias", Estudios Fronterizos,