Electoral behavior has been extensively studied in the US and Western European countries, with very little work being done on the subject of voting in Latin America. One reason for the lack of investigation in this area is the fact that, until recently, few countries in the region have had any experience with democracy. As of 1990, only one country (Costa Rica) had any history of consistent democratic rule.

The fact that Mexican voting behavior has been widely studied is interesting, given that the Polity III data set on democracy ranks Mexico as the least democratic (a score of 0 on a scale of 0–10) for every year between 1900 and 1990. In 1996, Domínguez and McCann presented a two-step model of Mexican voting behavior, where a voter must first make the important decision of whether to continue supporting the one-party political system before he or she considers issues of ideology, policy, or economic performance. While in some ways this theory is not unique to Mexico, insofar as voters in every country must decide whether to support the incumbent party, the decision is magnified in the Mexican case, where a single political party, the Partido Institucional Revolucionario (or the PRI), has ruled the country for more than 70 years. In the past, voters have feared the results of electing a president from an opposition party, which has no experience in running a country. The PRI, of course, has joyfully played to these fears in previous elections, hinting at the chaos, anarchy, and violence that would surely prevail if an opposition candidate were to win the presidency.

While the fear of opposition rule at the national level still exists, voters are increasingly likely to elect opposition candidates to posts where the stakes are not so high. By 1997, more than fifty percent of the Mexican population was governed by opposition parties. Recent electoral reforms have created an independent electoral authority to supervise elections and have provided opposition parties with increased campaign financing and media access. After
the public expressed outrage at the results of the 1988 presidential elections, which many thought were manipulated by federal officials, subsequent elections have been relatively clean and open. Toward Mexico’s Democratization investigates electoral behavior in the wake of these changes and seeks to answer whether the two-step model is still useful in explaining voting.

In separate chapters, Alejandro Poiré and Beatriz Magaloni present evidence that voters were still wary of opposition rule in the 1994 presidential elections. Poiré shows that of the class of voters in 1994 who were unsatisfied with the president’s performance and felt that policy changes were needed, 25 percent were still planning on voting for the PRI. Likewise, Magaloni finds that 40 percent of voters who held negative opinions of the PRI still intended to vote for the PRI presidential candidate in the 1994 elections.

Magaloni argues that in the years before the 1997 mid-term elections, voters were becoming increasingly comfortable with opposition rule and thus were more likely to reject the PRI. The fact that a majority of the population had opposition governors or mayors (and the world did not come to an end as the PRI predicted), combined with the fact that the economy was still reeling from the 1994–1995 peso crisis, led many to vote for the opposition. Magaloni shows that none of the socio-demographic and regional variables thought to be important in explaining PRI voter support were statistically significant in the 1997 elections, and older people were increasingly de-aligning with the PRI and voting for opposition parties. The most significant predictor of PRI support was voters’ assessment of economic performance under Zedillo.

Alberto Cinta, on the other hand, studies the 1997 elections and finds that while the PRI received the worst evaluations in national polls, the party still received the most votes in the elections. Cinta argues that this anomaly is due to the fact that voters believe that they can more accurately forecast the performance of the PRI than the opposition parties.

Although many claim that the leftist opposition party, Partido Revolucionario Democrático (or PRD) was the real winner in the 1988 presidential election, until recently the party has not been able to capitalize on the political liberalization of the system. A combination of PRI campaign tactics and PRD mismanagement of public relations led voters to associate the left-leaning party with violence and instability. The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), a long time opposition party to the right of center ideologically, on the other hand, has significantly chipped away at PRI dominance by winning many state and local elections.

Kathleen Bruhn argues that the PRD scared off potential voters with its reputation for being leftist, disorganized, divisive, and uncompromising. Given this negative reputation, she investigates how the PRD was able to