

**MEDIA OBJECTIVITY IN MEXICO**  
**and Media Monitoring Activities of**  
**the Mexican Academy of Human Rights**

*An NDI Delegation Report*

**May 1997**

**NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Fifth Floor

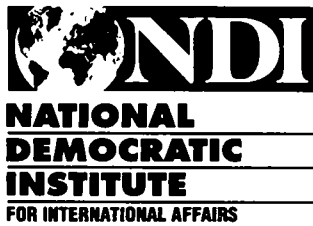
Washington, D.C. 20036

Tel.: (202) 328-3136 Fax: (202) 939-3166

E-mail: [demos@ndi.org](mailto:demos@ndi.org)

[Http://www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org)

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1717 Massachusetts Avenue N.W.  
Fifth Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
(202) 328-3136 Fax: (202) 939-3166  
E-Mail: [demos@ndi.org](mailto:demos@ndi.org)  
Home Page: <http://www.ndi.org>

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## NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Democracy depends on: legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive; independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law; political parties that are open and accountable; and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. Acting as a catalyst for democratic development, NDI bolsters the institutions and processes that allow democracy to flourish.

Since 1983, NDI has compiled a remarkable record of achievement. Strictly nonpartisan, the Institute supports the efforts of democrats in every region of the world to:

***Build Political and Civic Organizations:*** NDI helps build the stable, broad-based and well-organized institutions that form the foundation of civil society. Democracy depends on these mediating institutions, which link citizens to their government and to one another by providing avenues for participation in public policy.

***Safeguard Elections:*** NDI is the world leader in election monitoring, having organized international delegations to monitor elections in dozens of countries worldwide, helping to ensure that polling results reflect the will of the people.

***Promote Openness and Accountability:*** NDI responds to requests from leaders of government, parliament, political parties and civic groups seeking advice on matters from legislative procedures to constituent service to the balance of civil-military relations in a democracy. NDI works to build legislatures and local governments that are professional, accountable, open and responsive to their citizens.

International cooperation is key to promoting democracy effectively and efficiently. It also conveys a deeper message to new and emerging democracies that while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on international allies and an active support system. Headquartered in Washington D.C., with field offices in 38 countries, NDI leverages the skills of its lean and, highly committed staff by enlisting volunteer experts from around the world, many of whom are veterans of democratic struggles in their own countries and share valuable perspectives on democratic development.



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## **Introduction**

In July 1997, the Mexican electorate will elect leaders who will shape the political future of the country. In deciding how to cast their ballots, voters will rely on the media to help make informed choices about candidates. Numerous studies have shown, however, that media coverage has not been impartial, especially during election periods. If all political sectors in Mexico are to have confidence in the electoral process, an environment must exist in which political candidates receive fair and equal treatment.

Since 1991, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has worked to increase confidence and participation in Mexican elections by supporting Mexican observer groups, cosponsoring electoral reform forums with the Mexican Federal Electoral Institute and organizing an international election observer delegation. Prompted by concerns from a broad spectrum of Mexicans about the July 1997 elections, NDI organized a delegation of media experts from four countries to analyze media coverage and media monitoring efforts in Mexico.

Based on meetings with representatives of major political parties, the government, the election commission, print and electronic media, and civic groups, the delegation issued a statement about the July elections and media objectivity. Given the length of the delegation's visit and the complexity of the issues involved, the delegation does not presume to offer the statement as a complete study of media coverage in Mexico. The delegation respectfully seeks to contribute in some measure to the continued development of a free media in Mexico.

The delegation found general agreement that media coverage in Mexico has become more balanced and professional when compared to coverage of elections in 1988 and 1994. These changes seem to follow the economic and political opening taking place in the country. Despite this progress, the Mexican media is in transition and is still plagued by self-censorship, intimidation of journalists, legal and allegedly illegal payments for favorable coverage, and a heavy dependence on government advertising revenues. A lack of impartial coverage is particularly acute at the state and local level. Some political party leaders also expressed concern that high campaign spending limits would further advantage the ruling party which has the resources to purchase extensive media time.

In response to requests, NDI also analyzed the monitoring methodology of the Mexican Academy of Human Rights, a nongovernmental organization that promotes human rights and democracy. The Academy played an important role in improving media objectivity in the 1994 presidential elections and is organizing similar activities for 1997 as part of a broader electoral observation effort by Civic Alliance, a coalition of Mexican civic organizations.

In offering general recommendations to Mexican organizations planning to monitor the objectivity of media coverage, the NDI delegation urged these groups to develop simple methodologies and to involve practicing journalists in the development of their monitoring efforts. The participation of journalists will help determine the aspects of media coverage that can be

measured accurately given the realities of producing news coverage and making editorial decisions. It would also raise awareness among members of the media about these issues and help distinguish between intentional efforts to favor or discredit candidates from inequities in coverage due to inexperienced journalists or inadequate campaign planning.

The NDI delegation found respect for the Academy's monitoring efforts in 1994 and acknowledgment of the right of Mexican organizations to conduct media monitoring activities. The delegation was similarly impressed with the commitment and professionalism of the Academy staff members and noted that monitoring efforts will be particularly important for the 1997 elections, given that many voters will likely make decisions based on television coverage.

The delegation concluded the Academy's "content analysis" approach to media monitoring is appropriate given Mexican concerns about the quantity and quality of coverage received by political candidates. The delegation also recommended that the Academy simplify its methodology to promote public understanding and undertake outreach efforts to increase awareness of the monitoring effort, provide ideas for refining the methodology and to continue the political neutrality of the program.

NDI is grateful to the National Endowment for Democracy whose support made this assessment mission possible. The Institute also wishes to express its appreciation to the members of the delegation who volunteered their time and expertise to this program. Finally, the Institute thanks the many Mexicans who shared their time and insights with the delegation. We hope this report will contribute to their efforts to advance the democratic process in Mexico.

Kenneth D. Wollack  
President  
National Democratic Institute for  
International Affairs

May 1997

# Media Objectivity in Mexico and Media Monitoring Activities of the Mexican Academy of Human Rights

Delegation Statement  
May 23, 1997

## *NDI Assessment Mission*

On July 6, 1997, Mexicans will go to the polls to elect governors, federal deputies, senators, state representatives and municipal leaders, as well as the mayor and general assembly of Mexico City. With thousands of positions at stake, the outcome of the elections will shape Mexico's political landscape for years to come. The elections also break new ground by allowing the eight million citizens of Mexico's capital to vote for mayor, a position traditionally appointed by the president and held by the ruling Institutionalized Revolution Party (PRI) for almost 70 years. Professional, balanced media coverage will play a critical role in ensuring that Mexican voters can make informed choices regarding their elected leaders.

In anticipation of the July elections, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) organized an international delegation to analyze media coverage in Mexico. Prompted by concerns about coverage of past elections, NDI sought to assess the current media environment and its effect on the electoral process. Given the length of its visit and the complexity of the issues involved, the delegation did not presume to conduct an exhaustive analysis of media coverage throughout Mexico. That task is better left to the skilled Mexican organizations capable of conducting long-term efforts to monitor coverage on the national, state and community level. The delegation's goal is to offer respectfully its observations in the hopes of contributing to the continued development of a vigorous and free media in Mexico.

To undertake this assessment, the delegation of journalists and media analysts from four countries met with a range of individuals involved in media and the elections between February 13 to 23 in Mexico City. These meetings were also supplemented by consultations conducted by NDI staff members in October 1996. In sum, NDI staff and the delegation met with the following organizations: PRI; National Action Party; Party of the Democratic Revolution; *Reforma*; *Universal*; *Financiero*; *Jornada*; *Washington Post*; *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*; Directorate of Social Communication; Radio, Television and Cinematography Commission; *TVAzteca*; *Televisa*; *Multivision*; *Univision*; and the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).

The delegation also met with members of the Mexican Academy of Human Rights (*Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos*) in response to the group's request that NDI review its program to monitor media coverage of the 1997 elections. In 1994, the Academy analyzed media coverage of the presidential candidates and helped promote more balanced coverage. The Academy is organizing similar activities for this year's elections under the auspices of the Civic Alliance (*Alianza Civica*), a 500-member civic group coalition. The Academy will be monitoring media coverage in Mexico City and coordinating similar efforts by Civic Alliance state chapters for federal, state and local elections taking place in July. These activities are part of larger effort

by the Civic Alliance to monitor the entire election process including the campaign period and election day.

Based on these meetings, the delegation has produced this statement on media coverage of the 1997 elections. This statement also includes an assessment of the Academy's 1994 media monitoring efforts and recommendations for a similar program for the 1997 elections.

### ***NDI Delegation***

The NDI delegation included experts with a broad range of experience in print and electronic media in the Americas: **Suzanne Bilello**, program director for the Americas of the Committee to Protect Journalists, former reporter for *Newsday* and former Mexico City bureau chief for the *Dallas Morning News*; **Ken Bode**, *WETA* senior correspondent and moderator of "Washington Week in Review," a national political affairs program on public television, John Hughes professor of politics and the media at De Pauw University, correspondent for CNN for U.S. presidential elections in 1992 and 1996 and Washington, D.C. correspondent for NBC from 1979 to 1980; **Rosental Calmon Alves**, professor and Knight Chair in International Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, former Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, and former editor and member of the board of directors of *Jornal do Brasil*, one of Brazil's largest newspapers; **Jorge Elias**, winner of the Argentine National Academy of Journalism Award, former editor and current U.S. correspondent for *La Nacion*, one of Argentina's largest and respected daily newspapers; **Beth Haddon**, former head of Radio Current Affairs and Features and former Ottawa bureau chief for the television program the "Journal" at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The delegation also included **Matt Dippell**, NDI senior program officer, and **Claudia Barrientos**, program assistant.

### ***Media Coverage in Mexico***

Media coverage in Mexico has been historically criticized for a lack of impartiality, particularly during election periods. A 1994 report by the Academy on the elections asserted that "television has unfairly favored the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI) and its presidential candidate, Ernesto Zedillo...both in terms of news coverage and paid political advertising." A commission of the IFE also noted this disparity. Following the 1994 national elections, an international observer delegation cosponsored by NDI and the International Republican Institute, and with the participation of the Council of Freely-elected Heads of State based at the Carter Center, stated that it "was greatly troubled by numerous reports of bias in favor of the governing party...evident in broadcast news media, particularly in coverage of the election campaign." A 1995 study by the Freedom Forum noted that "most media owners are well disposed to the governing party...and generally discourage oppositional journalism in their media outlets." And a 1996 report by Freedom House, a human rights organization, rated the Mexican media as only "partly free."



## ***Delegation Conclusions***

Based on previous media analyses and meetings with representatives of major political parties, the government, the election commission, print and electronic media, and civic groups the delegation made several conclusions about the July elections and media objectivity:

### ***1997 Elections***

- In the July elections, some 72 percent of Mexicans are likely to receive information on candidates via television and the radio. This fact ensures that electronic media will play an important role in shaping voter choices, particularly for those citizens whom polls indicate are “undecided” about which candidate they will support.
- Major political parties were generally satisfied with electoral reforms that divided state controlled media time among the candidates. However, concern exists that disparities in access to and quality of purchased media time will give the incumbent PRI strong advantages in the campaign period. This situation was said to be exacerbated by the high limits again set for campaign spending.

### ***The Media***

- On the whole, media coverage in Mexico has become more open, independent and balanced in recent years particularly when contrasted with coverage of the 1988 and 1994 elections. The media now routinely reports on the full spectrum of political views.
- The print media and radio were most commonly cited as the examples of media that offer balanced coverage in this new, more open environment. Once seen as a “great ally” of the PRI, television coverage has also become more balanced and generally includes coverage of all political parties.
- The advances in media coverage seem to parallel the economic and political opening that has taken place in Mexico in recent years. Greater competition between outlets also has encouraged the media to offer more balanced coverage as a means to attract and maintain a larger audience.
- Despite progress, the Mexican media is still in the midst of a transition toward complete freedom of expression. Most individuals interviewed stated that coverage still operates within tacit limits, leading the media to practice self-censorship.
- Mexico is still plagued by traditions that undermine the independence and integrity of the media. These customs include efforts to pressure or intimidate journalists; illicit payments for favorable coverage; financial agreements (*convenios*) between political parties and media outlets to assure positive coverage; and paid articles (*gacetillas*) that often pass for

real news stories. Many media outlets also depend heavily on revenues from government advertising to survive.

- Although the delegation's visit was limited to Mexico City, serious obstacles to objective media coverage were said to be especially common on the state and community level.

### ***Mexican Academy of Human Rights***

In response to a request from the Academy, the NDI delegation assessed the group's plans to monitor the objectivity of media coverage of the 1997 elections. Founded in 1984, the Academy is a nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that seeks to promote human rights, democracy, citizen education and participation, political rights and fair elections in Mexico. The Academy maintains a pluralistic approach to promoting these goals through its diverse membership which includes academics, civic leaders, government officials, opposition leaders, artists and scientists.

Since 1992, Academy has conducted studies to evaluate the role and behavior of the media during the electoral process. As a member of the Mexican civic group coalition, Civic Alliance, the Academy was responsible for designing the methodology used to evaluate media coverage of the 1994 Mexican elections. In June 1994, following critical reports by the Academy and its own findings, the IFE was compelled to call on media networks to "respect the right to information of the Mexican people, and to behave in a manner that is truthful, objective, balanced and fair." On behalf of the Academy and other coalition members, leaders of the Civic Alliance met with then President Salinas and presented the results of its monitoring program, which concluded that the two main television networks, *Televisa* and *TVAzteca*, did not provide a fair and equal coverage of the different political candidates. After this meeting, President Salinas expressed his support for implementing measures to ensure fair and objective media coverage of political contestants. The two stations responded by granting all political parties and candidates free media time to present party platforms.

### ***Academy Methodology***

The Academy uses a "content analysis" methodology to monitor television, print and radio coverage of elections. The Academy collects data on the way the media treats issues and uses this information to draw inferences as to the importance that the media attributes to these topics. In studies of the television coverage of political candidates, the Academy begins by recording news programs. Volunteers then analyze the programs using a set of especially designed variables. These variables may include: the number of minutes dedicated to a candidate; the order in which a candidate appears in a broadcast; segments of the show in which the candidate appeared, i.e. general news or editorial; issues that a candidate addresses; camera angles employed; use of the candidate's voice or a narrator; and the positive or negative tone of news commentators toward a candidate.

While viewing the taped broadcasts, Academy analysts record their observations on the different variables, which are later entered into a computer data base. Once the data is collated, the Academy interprets the results and presents the information in a public report. A similar methodology is used for radio programs. For the print media, the Academy uses such indicators as the number of column inches received by a candidate, the tone of the story and the section in which the story appears.

### ***Delegation Recommendations on Media Monitoring Activities***

Based on its consultations, the delegation made the following recommendations on monitoring media coverage in Mexico:

- Day-to-day realities of producing television news can have a significant effect on the coverage that candidates receive. The location of campaign events, the time of day the events take place, and the time available for production can have critical impact on the quality of coverage.
- Journalists must decide what constitutes the most compelling news stories on a particular day based on their professional judgement. These editorial decisions will affect the placement of news stories and amount of coverage that candidates receive. The right of a free media to make these decisions should be taken into account when determining the quantity and tone of coverage that candidates receive.
- The skill of reporters and camera operators covering political events can greatly influence the quality of television coverage that candidates receive. The ability of political parties to organize "media friendly" campaign events will also shape coverage. These factors can have a dramatic impact on the way a candidate is perceived particularly on television. Monitoring groups should endeavor to distinguish poor coverage -- due to unskilled camera operators and ineffective campaign planning -- from intentional efforts to distort a candidate's image. If monitors find a consistent pattern of poor reporting, they may wish to analyze and report on the resources and personnel that the media assign to cover a particular candidate. Monitors may also wish to assess the ability of parties to organize events which engender good media coverage.
- Monitoring organizations should be cautious in drawing conclusions that exceed what social science techniques can accurately measure. Extrapolating beyond what data can realistically support could undermine the credibility of monitoring groups in the eyes of the media, the sector they most seek to influence. Advances that have taken place in media coverage in Mexico in recent years will make solid, credible analysis even more important. It is likely that inequities will be far less clear-cut than in the past, requiring greater care in interpreting coverage.

The delegation believes that the aforementioned factors should be considered when monitoring media coverage of the 1997 elections. It is critical that monitoring organizations

separate unintentional factors affecting television coverage from open efforts to aid or harm candidates. The delegation offers the following recommendations to help these groups make this distinction:

- Involve practicing journalists, television editors and producers in the development of the variables that will be used to measure media objectivity. These practitioners will help determine which variables they believe can be effectively and equitably measured. The consultation process will also raise awareness among members of the media about these issues.
- Reduce the number of media coverage variables that are monitored. A limited number of variables would make monitoring methodologies more easily understood by the media and general public. Increased understanding and transparency will likely bolster the credibility and support for monitoring programs.

### ***Delegation Recommendations on the Academy Program***

In regard to the Academy program, the NDI delegation offers the following comments and recommendations:

- Individuals interviewed expressed general respect for Academy's "ground breaking" study of the objectivity of the 1994 election coverage. Federal election authorities underscored that the Academy "did important work in 1994" that served as a reference for federal studies on media coverage. Opposition party leaders observed that the effort was "useful for the process" and that the Academy "merited respect for the work they had done." Journalists commented that the effort was "extremely important" and one government leader stated that the effort was "positive" and "honest." All political sectors acknowledged the right of groups like the Academy to monitor media in Mexico. The NDI delegation was similarly impressed with the commitment and professionalism of the Academy staff members.
- Given that media coverage will help shape voter choices for the July 1997 elections, the delegation concluded that steps to encourage media objectivity, such as the Academy monitoring activities, will play an important role in increasing confidence in the election process.
- During the consultations, the delegation found that many individuals were not fully aware of the goals and methods of the Academy's monitoring effort. To increase communication and mutual understanding, the delegation recommends that the Academy undertake outreach efforts with the media, political parties, RTC, IFE and government officials. These meetings would increase awareness of the monitoring effort, provide ideas for refining the methodology and potentially increase support and cooperation of the different sectors. These contacts would bolster the Academy's image as a neutral organization and may lead the media to make improvements in media coverage. If time permits, the

Academy may wish to have TV producers and reporters participate in Academy workshops to discuss production realities that influence coverage.

- The delegation agreed that the Academy's "content analysis" approach to monitoring is appropriate. Given Mexican concerns about the quality of the coverage received by candidates, the delegation concluded that the Academy's decision to study both the amount of overall time allocated to candidates and the subjective tone of coverage is necessary for complete and accurate analysis of coverage. This two-part approach responds to concerns about differences in the quality and professionalism of media coverage that would not be apparent in studies which focus solely on the time or column inches a candidate may receive.
- The delegation recommended that the Academy simplify its methodology to facilitate the public's understanding of its techniques and application by Civic Alliance chapters. After receiving training from the Academy, these chapters will be monitoring media coverage on the state and local level in coordination with the Civic Alliance. Since most chapters have limited human and financial resources, a simpler methodology would make monitoring efforts more consistent and easier to carry out.
- The majority of the persons with whom the delegation met expressed respect for the Academy's work and agreed on the importance of its efforts; most viewed the Academy as an independent organization. At the same time, the Academy should continue to expand its outreach efforts to publicize its media monitoring methodology and affirm the political neutrality of the program.

### ***National Democratic Institute***

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

At the invitation of the major political parties, NDI began work in Mexico in 1991 by advising civic organizations that organized the first independent vote count ("quick count") of congressional and local elections for Mexico City. In 1993, NDI cosponsored a seminar with the Federal Electoral Institute and brought experts from around the world to share their nation's experiences with electoral reform. For the presidential elections in August 1994, NDI cosponsored a 76-member observer delegation including representatives from four continents. In 1995 and 1996 NDI supported the efforts of the Civic Alliance to promote citizen involvement in electoral reform discussions and conduct election monitoring activities for municipal and state elections. For the July 1997 elections, NDI continues to support Civic Alliance election monitoring efforts.

**NDI staff and the delegation met with the following individuals:**

Miguel Acosta  
Coordinator for Media Monitoring  
Mexican Academy of Human Rights

Sergio Aguayo  
President  
Civic Alliance

Manuel Alonso  
President News Division  
*Televisa*

John Anderson  
Mexico Correspondent  
The Washington Post

David Aponte  
Reporter  
*La Jornada*

Victor Manuel Aviles  
National Coordinator for Social Communication  
Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)

Carlos Benavides  
Reporter  
*El Financiero*

Felipe Calderon  
President  
National Action Party (PAN)

Salvador Camarena  
National Section Editor  
*Reforma*

Manuel Carrillo  
Coordinator for International Affairs  
Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)

Andres Chao  
Director for Studies and Special Projects  
Office for Radio, Television &  
Cinematography

Juan Cortes  
Coordinator for Mexicans Abroad  
Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

Patricia Cruz  
Assistant for Media Monitoring  
Mexican Academy of Human Rights

Adolfo Cuevas  
Director of Legal Affairs  
Office for Radio, Television &  
Cinematography

Julio Faesler  
President  
Council for Democracy

Hilda Garcia Villa  
International Section Editor  
*Reforma*

Alma Guillermprieto  
Mexico Correspondent  
The New Yorker

Bruno Lopez  
Bureau Chief  
*Univision*

Jean-Michel Leprince  
Mexico Correspondent  
CBC-SRC Canada Television

Molly Moore  
Mexico Correspondent  
The Washington Post

Daniel Moreno  
Editor of "Enfoques"  
*Reforma*

Porfirio Muñoz Ledo  
Political Advisor  
Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

Agustin Navarro  
Secretary for International Affairs  
National Action Party (PAN)

Elizabeth Palmer  
Correspondent  
CBC-SRC Canada Television

Ricardo Pascoe  
Secretary of International Affairs  
Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

Lorenzo Pelaez  
General Director  
*Confederacion Patronal de la Republica  
Mexicana (COPARMEX)*

Dionisio Perez Jacome  
General Coordinator  
Office of Social Communication of the  
Federal Government

Martha Perez  
Executive Secretary  
Civic Alliance

Alfredo Phillips Olmedo  
Coordinator for International Affairs  
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

Maria Teresa Ramirez  
Coordinator of Information & Analysis Party  
of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

Raymundo Riva Palacio  
Subdirector for Research & Special Reports  
*Reforma*

Humberto Roque Villanueva  
President  
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

Jose Luis Ruiz  
Reporter  
*El Universal*

Sergio Sarmiento  
Vice-President of News  
*Television Azteca*

Felipe Solis Acero  
Secretary General  
Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)

Ernesto Vargas  
President  
*Multivision*

Jose Woldenberg  
President  
Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)

Cesar Yañez  
Press director  
Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

Molly Moore  
Corresponsal/México  
*The Washington Post*

Daniel Moreno  
Editor de "Enfoques"  
Reforma

Porfirio Muñoz Ledo  
Consejero Político  
Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)

Agustín Navarro  
Secretario de Relaciones Internacionales  
Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)

Elizabeth Palmer  
Corresponsal  
CBC-SRC Televisión de Canadá

Ricardo Pascoe  
Secretario de Asuntos Internacionales  
Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)

Lorenzo Pelaez  
Director General  
Confederación Patronal de la República  
Mexicana (COPARMEX)

Dionisio Pérez Jácome  
Coordinador General  
Coordinación General de Comunicación Social  
del Gobierno Federal

Martha Pérez  
Secretaria Ejecutiva  
Alianza Cívica

Alfredo Phillips Olmedo  
Coordinador de Asuntos Internacionales  
Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)

María Teresa Ramírez  
Coordinadora de Información y Análisis  
Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)

Raymundo Riva Palacio  
Subdirector de Investigación y  
Reportajes Especiales  
Reforma

Humberto Roque Villanueva  
Presidente  
Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)

José Luis Ruiz  
Reportero  
El Universal

Sergio Sarmiento  
Vice-Presidente de Noticias  
Televisión Azteca

Felipe Solís Acero  
Secretario General  
Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE)

Ernesto Vargas  
Presidente  
Multivisión

José Woldenberg  
Presidente  
Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE)

César Yáñez Centeno  
Director de Prensa  
Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)