Mexico is one of the countries that participated with national samples in each of the four waves of the World Values Surveys (WVS) conducted between 1981 and 2000, providing, along with Argentina, the only two Latin American settings with two decades of longitudinal data. The four Mexican samples measured the persistence and change of values during the last two decades of the twentieth century in a society undergoing rapid and profound change in its political system, its economic structure, and its social features. Since the first Mexican survey, conducted in 1981, polling methodologies have improved substantially, and survey research techniques have become more widely used in Mexican social and political sciences. Although all four surveys relied on national representative samples of Mexican adults, changes in sampling techniques and the availability of better sampling frames in Mexico may raise some methodological concerns. However, even with some possible methodological differences, an analysis of the four surveys tells us much about how Mexican values persist and change over time.

In this chapter, we go beyond the descriptive review of the 1990 World Values Survey (Basáñez and Moreno 1994) and analyze general patterns of value change in Mexico by examining both the distribution of responses for some theoretically relevant questions over time, and the intergenerational differences in each year the survey was conducted. Value differences among age cohorts help us understand the nature of value change in Mexico and formulate new hypotheses about how Mexican society is likely to change in the coming years.

Our basic concern is to delineate those features of the Mexican value system that showed a significant change during the 1980s and 1990s as well as those aspects that have persisted. Of the possible approaches to the question of change and persistence, we focus on three issues that we consider of greatest theoretical significance. First, we look at
the possible connection between the process of democratization and political attitudes. Second, we examine some of the value-orientations linked with the process of economic transformation. Finally, we look at social attitudes regarding the old and new issues that are salient in Mexican society.

Politically, Mexico experienced a rapid increase in electoral competition during the last two decades. The political reforms that began in 1977 and which deepened in the 1990s changed Mexican politics from a one-party regime to a competitive multi-party system, first at the local, and then at the national level. The first signs of a power transition were observed in 1989 at the state governor level. Shortly thereafter, in the presidential election of 1994, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had dominated the political scene for over six decades, was able to keep office, but, as we will argue later, the federal government paid an enormous price for the election, both socially with the Zapatista movement, and financially with all the funds transferred from the government to the PRI (Basáñez 1996). Also, it was unable to avoid the cyclical term-end crisis anticipated well in advance (Basáñez 1993a).

In 1997, the PRI lost control of Congress for the first time since the party was founded in 1929 and, in 2000, it lost the presidential election for the first time in seven decades. The Mexican party and electoral systems are now regarded as competitive, and elections, once fraudulent, are now free and fair. Immediately after the July 2000 elections, the majority of Mexicans, regardless of their partisan identifications, considered that Mexico was a democracy (Moreno 2003). Given this development towards democratic politics, one question we ask is whether or not there is a greater sense of political confidence among Mexicans.

Mexico’s economic transformation involves the adoption of free-trade policies that were initiated in the 1980s and that intensified in the early 1990s. Economic reforms included the privatization of state enterprises, deregulation, and economic integration. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, Canada, and the United States went into effect on January 1, 1994 after over four years of negotiations. Ten years later, NAFTA had changed not only much of Mexico’s economic dynamics, but also many of Mexicans’ preferences and expectations. Mexico has entered fully into a trend of conjunction with the U. S. and Canada (Inglehart, Nevitte, Basáñez 1996). There are clear changes in patterns of consumption, but strong