



## THE SUFFRAGISTS (LAS SUFRAGISTAS)



### The Suffragists



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## Synopsis

**The Suffragists** tells the story of Eufrosina Cruz, an indigenous woman from the Zapotec community of Santa María Quiegolani in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. In 2008, her right to vote and run as Municipal President of her community was denied on the grounds that indigenous customary laws prohibit women from participating in electoral processes. In Mexico, women won the right to full suffrage in 1953. Today, after a long battle, Eufrosina Cruz is a representative in Mexico's federal government, and the first indigenous woman to be a member of the Congress of Oaxaca. **The Suffragists** details her political struggle, as well as Mexican women's long fight for political power, beginning with the Revolutionary period. The film also considers challenges that women in power face, drawing on interviews with Mexican female politicians and Michelle Bachelet, Chile's first female president and the first Executive Director of UN Women.

## Mexico's Administrative Structure

Mexico, officially known as the United Mexican States, is a federation of 32 states, including the nation's capital, Mexico City. Based on a presidential system established in the 1917 Constitution, the government is divided into three levels: the federal union, the state and the municipality. Elections in Mexico determine who holds positions at all three levels. The President of the Republic is elected for a six-year term, and is not eligible for re-election. The federal government also includes The Congress of the Union (*Congreso de la Unión*), which is made up of two chambers: The Chamber of Deputies (*Cámara de Diputados*), and the Chamber of Senators (*Cámara de Senadores*). At the state level, constituents elect legislative deputies to the state congress, as well as a governor who serves a six-year term. Each municipality elects a municipal president, much like a mayor.

## Indigenous Communities, Oaxaca and "Usos y Costumbres" Law

Mexico's Indigenous communities form a significant part of the nation's total population, with the greatest numbers concentrated in Southern and Central Mexico. In recent decades, Mexico's indigenous population has increased in overall number as well as percentage of the nation's total population. According to the 2010 census, indigenous people numbered 15,700,000 and constituted 14.9% of the total population. In 2015, according to the National Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples (CDI), indigenous Mexicans numbered 25,694,928, making up 21.5% of the nation's population. This increase is due to a combination of increased self-identification, and higher birth rates among indigenous women as compared to non-indigenous women. With approximately 65% of their state's population identifying as indigenous, Oaxaca and Yucatán are the states with the greatest percentage of indigenous people.

Eufrosina's home state of Oaxaca is located in Southwestern Mexico along the Pacific Ocean and bordered by Chiapas to the east, Veracruz to the north, Puebla to the northwest and Guerrero to the west. Zapotecs are the largest indigenous group in Oaxaca and make up almost one-third of

the state's total indigenous population. The state officially recognizes sixteen indigenous groups. Mixtecs are the second largest group, and number around 240,000 or a little over one-quarter of the indigenous population. Oaxaca is divided into 570 municipalities, 418 of which are governed by a system of customary indigenous law.

Most indigenous communities in Mexico have a certain amount of political and financial autonomy under the indigenous customary law known as “usos y costumbres” (uses and customs). “Usos y costumbres” is a legal term for political mechanisms established during Spanish Colonialism, through which Colonial authorities applied their interpretation of indigenous traditions and customs, rather than “ordinary” Spanish legal proceedings, to govern Indian subjects. This legal division was part of a binary social and political system in colonial Mexico, and other Spanish colonies, that differentiated between a *Républica de Indios* (Republic of Indians) and a *Républica de Españoles*, (Republic of Spaniards), contributing to a complex system of social and political stratification. Contemporary indigenous communities in Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia and other nations have used the laws to govern or resolve issues, such as criminal conflicts or disputes over natural resources. However, these laws also have the effect of segregating Indigenous communities and exacerbating social stratification. In contemporary Mexico, “usos y costumbres” laws are recognized in the states of Chiapas, Sonora and Oaxaca. As the film **The Suffragists** documents, community representatives and state officials in Oaxaca used these laws to deny Eufrosina's right to run for office, at the same time they denied women in Santa María Quiegolani their right to vote.



## Glossary

**Suffrage** – The right to vote in political elections.

**Universal Suffrage** – Universal suffrage refers to the right to vote for all constituents over a certain age, irrespective of gender, literacy, wealth, social status, language, religion, race, or ethnicity.

**Full Suffrage** – Full suffrage is a combination of the right to vote and the right to run for political office.

**Eufrosina Cruz** – (January 1, 1979- ) Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza is an indigenous woman and political activist who fought for women’s right to vote and run for public office in Oaxaca’s indigenous municipalities. Raised in a Zapotec community, she left home at twelve to learn Spanish and further her studies in the state capital. She received her undergraduate degree in accounting. After working in professional positions for some years, she returned to her community of Santa María Quiegolani to run for municipal president. The results of the elections were annulled by the male authorities in her municipality on the grounds that under the laws of “usos y costumbres” women do not have the right or run for public office.

**Hermila Galindo Acosta**— (1886-1954) Mexican journalist, revolutionary and activist for equality and women’s rights, Galindo was the first woman in Mexico to run for an electoral office. She was a fervent advocate of women’s suffrage, divorce and sex education in schools at a time when these issues were considered extremely radical. In 1914, Galindo began working as part of Venustiano Carranza’s government, continuing to advocate for women’s rights. Later, disillusioned with Carranza and his administration’s growing corruption, she ran as a candidate for Deputy of the 5<sup>th</sup> constituency of Mexico City on March 2, 1917. The Electoral College rejected the results of the election, which some records indicate she had won, on the grounds that the law forbid women from holding public office. In 1952, she became Mexico’s first congresswoman.

**Porfirio Diaz** – (1830-1915) José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori was President of Mexico for 35 years (1876-1911), as a result of the 1876 military coup. During the period of his regime, known as the Porfiriato, he pushed forward economic modernization and expansion of foreign investment. While wealthy hacienda owners acquired vast areas of land, Mexico’s rural populations became increasingly poor. The Profiriato ended with the Mexican Revolution in 1910.

**The Mexican Revolution** – (1910-1920) The Mexican Revolution was a pivotal sociopolitical event in Mexican history spurred by opposition to the Porfiriato. The resulting Constitution of 1917 included articles for land, labor and education reform, economic nationalism and restrictions on the Roman Catholic Church. Although the Constitution outlined terms for universal suffrage, it did not explicitly include women. The Revolution’s armed struggle lasted approximately ten years, followed by a twenty-year period of social reform based on the revolutionary constitution.

**Venustiano Carranza** – (1859-1920) José Venustiano Carranza Garza was President of Mexico from 1917 to 1920. Prior to the establishment of the Mexican Constitution of 1917, he served as head of state (1915-1917). Upon completing his term in 1920, he tried to avoid relinquishing control of the government by imposing a civilian candidate as the next President of the Republic. He was assassinated in a political uprising that sought to curtail his efforts to remain in power.

**Álvaro Obregón** -- (1880-1928) Obregón was a general during the Mexican Revolution and President of Mexico between 1920 and 1924. Although initially a supporter of Carranza, he was one of the principal figures who led the 1920 revolt against Carranza. Obregón's administration carried out educational reform, land reform and established new labor laws.

**Elvia Carrillo Puerto** – (1878-1967) Carrillo Puerto was Mexico's first woman state deputy. She was elected by the District of Izamal in the state of Yucatán in 1923. Her brother, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, who was governor of Yucatán at the time, pushed forward legislation giving women the right to vote and hold office. However, prior to his assassination in 1924, these rights had not been incorporated into Mexico's constitution. Subsequently, the incoming government revoked women's suffrage, and removed Elvia Carrillo and two other women from their elected positions in the municipal and state governments in Yucatan. Carrillo Puerto is also well known for having founded several feminist leagues, which focused on a range of women's rights issues, including family planning programs with legalized birth control, prenatal and postnatal care for women. In Southeastern Mexico, the leagues also organized and trained women for civic responsibility and to hold elected positions.

**Felipe Carrillo Puerto** – (1874-1924) Felipe Carrillo Puerto was a Mexican journalist, politician and revolutionary who, as the governor of the state of Yucatán (1922-1924), granted women the right to vote and hold office. In 1924, he was captured and assassinated by rebel army officers aligned with Felipe Adolfo de la Huerta, who led a failed revolt against president Álvaro Obregón (1920-24). Huerta had served as interim President of Mexico prior to Obregón.

**Beatríz Peniche Barrera de Ponce**– (1893-1976) Peniche Barrera was one of the first three women elected to a legislative body in Mexico. On November 18, 1923, Peniche was elected for the second district of the City of Mérida, in the state of Yucatán. She was a writer, teacher, leader of the Socialist Party of the Southeast and one of the founders of the Feminist League of Yucatán.

**Raquel Dzib Cicero** – (1882-1949) Dzib Cicero was one of the first three women elected to a legislative body in Mexico. On November 18, 1923, she was elected to represent the third district of Mérida, in the state of Yucatán. She was a teacher for over fifty years, a member of the Socialist Party of the Southeast and one of the founders of the Feminist League of Yucatán.

**Lázaro Cárdenas del Río** -- (1895-1970) Cárdenas was a general in the Mexican Revolution who later served as President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940. During his administration, he supported women activists and pursued the cause of women's suffrage, but was unable to push past political opposition. He also nationalized Mexico's oil industry (1939) and carried out expansive land reform, redistributing large commercial hacienda lands to peasants.

**Miguel Alemán** -- February 17, 1947: Under the administration of President Miguel Alemán, who was interested in creating a modern country, women in Mexico win the right to vote in municipal elections.

**Griselda Alvarez** – (1913-2009) Álvarez was the first woman elected governor in the history of Mexico. She was the governor of the state of Colima from 1979 to 1985.

**Beatriz Paredes Rangel** – (August 18, 1953- ) A Mexican politician, Beatriz Paredes was the first woman to serve as Governor of Tlaxcala (1987-1992), and the second woman to serve as a state governor in the history of Mexico. She was also the president of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), one of Mexico's three major political parties. In 2006, she ran for mayor of Mexico City, but lost to Marcelo Ebrard of the PRD (Party for the Democratic Revolution).

**Dulce María Sauri Riancho** – (August 14, 1951- ) As interim governor from 1991-1993, Sauri Riancho was the first woman to serve as the Governor of Yucatan.

**Rosario Robles** – (February 17, 1956-) Mexican politician and economist, María del Rosario Robles Berlanga was the first woman to serve as mayor of Mexico's Federal District, Mexico City (1999-2000). She also served as the Secretary of Social Development (2012-2015) during Enrique Peña Nieto's administration, and is currently the Secretary of Agrarian, Land and Urban Development. She was a member of the PRD (Party for the Democratic Revolution).

**Amalia García** -- (October 6, 1951-) Amalia Dolores García Medina is the first woman to have served as Governor of Zacatecas (2004-2010). She was the fifth woman to hold the office of governor in Mexican history.

**Ivonne Ortega** – (November 27, 1972 - ) Ivonne Aracelly Ortega Pacheco was the first elected governor of the state of Yucatan (2007-2013). Dulce María Sauri held the office as interim Governor of Yucatan from 1991-1994.

**Michelle Bachelet** – (September 29, 1951- ) Chilean politician and physician, Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria is the first woman to have served as President of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-present). She was also the first executive director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), which was formed in 2010.

**Felipe Calderón** – Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa served as President of Mexico from December 1, 2006 to November 30, 2012. He is a member of the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)).

**Enrique Peña Nieto** – (July 20, 1966- ) Peña Nieto began a six-year term as President of Mexico on December 1, 2012. He is member of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

**PRI** – The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) has dominated Mexican politics at the municipal, state and national levels for most of the 20th century. The party was founded in 1929 by Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexico’s president from 1924-1928. Though it is a member of Socialist International, the PRI today it is considered a centrist party. Mexico’s current president is a member of the PRI.

**PRD** – The Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party for the Democratic Revolution) is one of Mexico’s three major political parties. The PRD is left of center and formed from a political faction of the PRI Party, called the Democratic Current, following the 1988 electoral fraud that resulted in a movement against the PRI. On May 5, 1989, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas who lost the presidential elections to PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the fraudulent election, declared the establishment of the PRD. The PRD has held the office of mayor of Mexico’s Federal District, Mexico City, since 1997.

**PAN** – The Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party) is one of Mexico’s three major political parties. Founded in 1939, the PAN is right of center and a member of Christian Democracy. Only in recent years, the PAN won the elections for the President of Mexico with Vicente Fox (2000) and Felipe Calderón (2006).



## Timeline

- 1821: Mexican War of Independence from Spain.
- 1846-48: The Mexican-American War, which resulted in Mexico losing one-third of its territory, including portions of the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila and Tamaulipas, to the United States.
- 1910: The Mexican Revolution begins.
- 1914: Hermila Galindo begins to work as part of Carranza's government.
- 1917: The Constitution of Mexico is drafted and approved by the Constitutional Congress on February 5, 1917. The 1917 Constitution, which was the first in the world to set out social rights, included the universal right to vote for men, but denied women's suffrage.
- March 2, 1917: Galindo, frustrated with the revolutionary government's failure to decree women's suffrage, runs for office in Mexico City. The Electoral College denies her election, on the basis that the law prohibits women from holding public office.
- 1920: In the United States, women are granted full suffrage across the country.
- 1922: Governor of Yucatan, Felipe Carrillo Puerto attempts to reform constitutional Article 34 in order to give women the right to vote, but he is unsuccessful.
- Elvia Carrillo Puerto, along with Beatriz Peniche de Ponce and Raquel Tzibi Cero go to congress in the Federal District to gather signatures of feminist women and political figures like Vasconcelos and Gabriela Mistral in support of women's suffrage.
- In November 1923 Elvia Carrillo Peniche de Ponce and Tzibi Cero all win the elections. However, on December 12, 1923 the Huertista Rebellion reaches Yucatan, the army rebels kill Felipe Carrillo Puerto and twelve others, and the three congresswomen are denied their elected positions.
- 1923: The First Congress of the Pan-American League of Women in Mexico is organized in order to demand women's suffrage, birth control and sexual liberation.
- 1935: Women's Pro-Rights Front, which includes a heterogeneous group of 50,000 members, is created. Hunger strikes and demonstrations petitioning President Cardenas for women's suffrage take place. Two women run for congress.
- 1937-1939: Women's suffragist movement in Mexico gains momentum. President Cardenas sends reform to congress. It passes, but is never officially published, because Cardenas never finished the paperwork.
- 1947: Under the administration of President Miguel Alemán, who was interested in creating a modern country, women in Mexico win the right to vote in municipal elections.
- 1952: Galindo becomes Mexico's first congresswoman.
- 1953: Women's right to vote in national elections is approved by congress and published in the Official Diary on October 17, 1953.
- 1958: Women in Mexico vote in national elections for the first time.
- 1979-1985: Griselda Alvarez becomes the first female governor in the state of Colima and in Mexican history.
- 1987-1992: Beatriz Paredes Rangel serves as Governor of Tlaxcala.
- 1991-1993: Dulce María Sauri Riancho serves as Governor of Yucatan.



- January 1, 1994: NAFTA goes into effect. Zapatista uprising begins in the state of Chiapas.
- 1999-2000: Rosario Robles serves as Head of Government of Mexico's Federal District, Mexico City.
- 2004-2010: Amalia García serves as Governor of Zacatecas.
- 2007: Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza runs for Municipal President of Santa María Quiegolani, Oaxaca. Local authorities, all men, annul the results of the election on the grounds that "usos y costumbres" law stipulate that women may not vote or run for public office.
- 2007-2013: Ivonne Ortega serves as Governor of Yucatan.
- January 1, 2008: A new term begins for the municipal government in Santa María Quiegolani, Oaxaca. Women are beaten.
- March 8, 2008: *Día de la Mujer* (International Women's Day), Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza, standing next to Mexican President Felipe Calderón, delivers a speech in Morelos, demanding the right to vote for indigenous women in Mexico.
- May 2008: The Congress of Oaxaca votes to modify Article 25, Fraction II of the local constitution, stipulating that all women across the state have the right to participate in electoral processes.
- 2010: Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza becomes the first indigenous woman to serve as an elected official in the state congress.



## Books and Online Resources

The Heritage of Latin American Women's Political Empowerment

<http://gender.stanford.edu/news/2012/heritage-latin-american-women%E2%80%99s-political-empowerment>

Stephen, Lynn. 2013. *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements*. Duke University Press.

Stephen, Lynn. 2005. *Zapotec Women: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Globalized Oaxaca*. Duke University Press.

Mitchel, Stephanie and Patience A. Schell. 2007. *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953*. Plymouth, UK and Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

The 1917 Constitution of Mexico

<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mexico/1917-Constitution.htm>

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