



Notes on Recent Elections

## The July 2006 presidential and congressional elections in Mexico

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Received 27 February 2007; accepted 11 April 2007

### 1. Introduction

Mexico's 2 July 2006 presidential election produced a razor-thin margin of victory for Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN), who won by fewer than 235,000 votes out of nearly 42 million cast. A surprise nominee of his party, Calderón came from far behind in a raucous campaign to edge out the former mayor of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Coalition for the Good of All (*Coalición por el Bien de Todos*, composed of López Obrador's Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD, and two smaller parties). However, carrying but 35.9% of the popular vote, Calderón can hardly claim a mandate. Indeed, López Obrador challenged the legitimacy of Calderón's presidency and the democratic character of Mexican institutions by claiming that widespread fraud had been perpetrated against him during the campaign and on election day. He disputed the announced results legally and mobilised large rallies to protest the outcome, disrupting Mexico City for weeks after the election. In addition, the results of the congressional elections held the same day have left Calderón and the PAN without majorities in either the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate, so divided government will continue to challenge the president for at least the next three years. This first

presidential election after Mexico's transition to democracy has tested both its electoral institutions and the broader commitment of the political elite to electoral democracy.

### 2. Background

In the 2000 presidential election, Vicente Fox of the PAN-led Alliance for Change coalition pulled off an unexpected defeat of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate, bringing to an end 71 years of PRI dominance of the post-revolutionary Mexican regime. However, Fox's coattails were not long enough to drag his coalition's candidates into control of either house of the Mexican federal congress, setting the stage for divided government, with no party holding a majority in either chamber. And the high expectations with which Fox came to office quickly came to be frustrated, as much by Fox's political ineptitude in office as by the structural situation of divided government (Dresser, 2003; Lawson, 2004). In midterm elections for the Chamber of Deputies in 2003, the PRI and the PRD each led coalitions that gained seats in the lower house at the PAN's expense. The PRI also won several gubernatorial elections, showing that it was far from moribund as an electoral contender.

In July 2000 López Obrador won the second most important electoral post in the country, as the head of

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the Mexico City government.<sup>1</sup> This position at the nation's geographical and political centre gave López Obrador the perfect platform on which to build his presidential candidacy for 2006. His government came to be known for ambitious public works projects, particularly road building to relieve traffic problems, and populist spending programmes, notably the introduction of a pension programme for seniors. López Obrador survived an attempt by the PAN and the PRI to impeach and indict him for contempt of court with respect to a land dispute—in effect a bid to disqualify him from the 2006 presidential race—by organising mass demonstrations in Mexico City supporting his case. At the beginning of the 2006 campaign, polls offered no evidence that the impeachment attempt had damaged López Obrador's candidacy, as he led the field in all pre-election surveys.

During the protracted transition to democracy leading up to the 2000 election, a significant pro-regime, anti-regime cleavage came to dominate Mexican politics (Moreno, 1998; Klesner, 2005). Once the PRI lost control of the presidency, however, this regime cleavage diminished significantly in its importance. In its place, grave concerns about the direction of the Mexican development model, the country's relationship with the United States, and the breakdown of social order have emerged to dominate the issue agenda of the Mexican citizenry.

### 3. Electoral systems

Mexico holds presidential and senatorial elections every six years on the first Sunday of July; elections for the lower house of congress, the Chamber of Deputies, which sits for three years, are held simultaneously. The Mexican electoral system requires voters to show a voter identity card at their precinct. Those away from home on election day may visit a 'special' polling place to cast a ballot; depending on how far away from home an absentee voter is (in his electoral district, in his state, or outside of both), he may be able to vote only for the president, for president and senatorial candidates, or for those and party list deputy candidates.

The candidate with the simple plurality of popular votes wins Mexico's top executive office; there is no run-off election. Formally recognised parties and/or

party coalitions must nominate presidential candidates. Presidents serve for a single term and are permanently barred from re-election.

Mexico's bicameral federal congress includes a Senate of 128 members elected for six-year terms. Three senatorial candidates are elected from each of Mexico's 32 states: two seats to the party or coalition that wins the most votes in that state, and the third to the party in second place. The remaining 32 Senate seats are elected by proportional representation from party lists in a single national constituency. Voters cast a single ballot, the vote tallies being used to determine both state and national seat allocations.

The lower house of congress, the Chamber of Deputies, has 500 seats, 300 filled by simple plurality elections, the other 200 elected by proportional representation through a system of closed and blocked (i.e. voters cannot change the order of candidates) party lists in five equal-sized multi-member districts or 'regions'. In this mixed system, the party list seats are not compensatory, unlike for example in the German system. Parties must register candidates in at least 200 of the 300 districts in order to compete in the election and to register party lists for the regional PR seats. Parties may list up to 60 candidates simultaneously for district races and the party lists. Although the parties provide separate lists for the five multi-member regions, the PR seats are allocated according to the proportion of the national vote. As with the Senate, voters cast a single ballot, the tallies then being used to determine both the winners in district races and the party list allocation for the whole nation.<sup>2</sup>

The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), an autonomous government agency, maintains the national voter registry and administers federal elections. Its role includes regulating the campaign practices of parties and candidates, and allocating public campaign funds to the parties. The individuals who staff polling places are ordinary citizens chosen by lot by the IFE and trained to operate the precinct, count the votes, and report the results to the IFE on election night. Disputes about electoral practices must be taken to the autonomous Federal Electoral Tribunal (commonly known as the TRIFE, sometimes as the TEPJF), a specialised electoral court that has handled thousands of disputes over the past decade (Eisenstadt, 2004).

<sup>1</sup> The position is known simply as *jefe de gobierno*, or head of government, of the Federal District (DF). Mexico City covers most of the DF, which in most respects is comparable to a state. Thus, the position shares characteristics with a governor or big city mayor, in this case the biggest city in the hemisphere.

<sup>2</sup> Vote tallies in the PR races exceed those in the district races because the votes of those who cast ballots away from home but within the PR region count only in the proportional component of the system.

#### 4. Campaign

A year before the election, few observers expected Calderón to be the PAN nominee. However, he soundly defeated Fox's apparent choice, Interior Minister Santiago Creel, in a primary process. Calderón owed his nomination in part to his status as a veteran PAN insider (born into a PAN family, Calderón previously served as party president and head of the party's caucus in the Chamber of Deputies), a background sharply contrasting with that of Creel, who had come relatively lately into the PAN (as had Fox before him). The PRI nominated its party president, Roberto Madrazo, a well-known hard-liner. This followed an internal party struggle in which he eliminated the party's secretary-general from her leadership position in the Chamber of Deputies, and a primary process during which his strongest competitor dropped out after information was leaked about his previously unknown property holdings (Langston, 2007). The PRI headed a coalition called the Alliance for Mexico; its partner was the Mexican Ecological Green Party (PVEM). López Obrador was unchallenged for the PRD nomination, and had long been odds-on favourite when the formal election season opened in January 2006. He led in opinion polls from the outset until just after the first of two presidential debates on 25 April 2006 (CIDAC, 2006). López Obrador chose to skip that first debate so as to emphasise that he was well out in front of his adversaries and not inclined to stoop to their level by debating them in person more than once—a strategy that backfired on him as the other candidates and the press made much of his absence.

López Obrador ran a populist campaign, promising new spending on social programmes—scholarships for students, pensions for the elderly, health care subsidies—as well as on jobs. He condemned the Fox administration for perpetuating a development model that had worsened the quality of life for ordinary Mexicans. But he carefully avoided criticising the United States, recognising that most Mexicans prefer a close economic relationship with their neighbour to the north. Calderón, in contrast, emphasised that he would bring continuity in economic policy, with a focus on improving Mexico's international economic competitiveness and thus creating jobs.

After making little headway against López Obrador in the first two months of the campaign, Calderón began in March to run television spots comparing his main rival to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, suggesting that López Obrador would create a 'danger to Mexico' by damaging its relationship with the US. Calderón's campaigning was boosted by President Fox in the form of government-

paid advertising that trumpeted the accomplishments of the current administration, not too subtly implying that these achievements would be undone by a López Obrador presidency. The IFE eventually forced Fox and Calderón to withdraw both sets of ads, but—along with López Obrador's unimpressive response—they helped to push Calderón into the lead in the polls by early May.

Madrazo sought to steer a middle course on economic policy between the two front-runners, and to suggest that he would bring more responsible leadership, but his message failed to convert voters. Indeed, Madrazo consistently scored very poorly on feeling thermometers in the polls (Langston, 2007), and the race was clearly between Calderón and López Obrador. This race was so close that either result fell within the margin of error of the final pre-election poll forecasts.

Mexican congressional candidates traditionally ride the coattails of their parties' presidential nominees, hence they do not engage in campaigning that diverges far from their standard-bearers' messages. Perhaps as evidence of this phenomenon, late in the race the PAN apparently asked each of its congressional candidates to contribute about US\$15,000 from their campaign coffers to finance a large media buy for Calderón (Teherán, 2006). Interestingly, despite these well-known coattails effects, many PRI leaders chose to distance themselves from Madrazo as his candidacy floundered, perhaps deflating the number of PRI's congressional seats as a consequence (Langston, 2007). In the event, many who voted for PRI candidates for deputy and senator split their ballot, opting for either Calderón or López Obrador (Moreno and Méndez, 2007), and the PRI congressional slates finished six percentage points higher than Madrazo.

#### 5. Results

On polling day 41.8 million Mexicans turned out to cast ballots in the presidential election, representing 58.6% of the registered electorate. This turnout rate represents a continued decline from the 2000 (64%) and the 1994 (78%) elections. Almost all Mexicans of voting age (95%) are registered, but actually casting a ballot is difficult for the millions who live away from the district in which they are registered, either abroad (typically in the United States) or elsewhere in Mexico. Mexico's highly mobile society means that some 7 million of the 71 million registered voters were estimated to be living in the US in July 2006. Those attempting to use the 'special' polling places typically find queues to be very long, and those precincts often run out of ballot papers before voting is concluded.

In the all-important presidential race, Calderón triumphed over López Obrador, but by such a narrow margin—one percentage point according to the preliminary tally—that the IFE was unable to call the result on election night. Neither of the rivals was so reticent, however: each announced his victory that same evening. The next day, López Obrador challenged the accuracy of the preliminary figures and demanded a full recount. His case was strengthened by adjustments to the results that reduced Calderón's lead to about 0.6 percentage points (Herrera and Zárate, 2006). That was established as the official margin of victory when the votes were tallied at the district level on Wednesday 5 July (Table 1). López Obrador held his first major post-election rally three days later on the following Saturday. The next day, the Coalition for the Good of All submitted an 800-page legal brief to the TRIFE, demanding a full recount.

The PRI's Madrazo finished a distant third, about 14 percentage points behind the two front-runners. In contrast, his coalition's congressional candidates fared much better (Tables 2 and 3), again finishing third but only about one point behind the Coalition for the Good of All in the Chamber of Deputies election. Indeed, the new congress is divided relatively evenly among the three blocs, with the PAN slightly overrepresented in terms of seats due to the distortion effects produced by the plurality components in the two houses' electoral systems. However, in neither the Chamber nor the Senate will Calderón's PAN command a majority; indeed, it will need nearly 100 additional votes in the Chamber and 13 in the Senate to pass Calderón's legislative initiatives.

Table 1  
Mexican presidential election results, 2 July 2006, final corrected figures

Candidate	Votes	Votes (%)
Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (PAN)	14,916,927	36.7
Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Coalition for the Good of All)	14,683,096	36.1
Roberto Madrazo Pintado (Alliance for Mexico)	9,237,000	22.7
Patricia Mercado Castro (PASC)	1,124,280	2.8
Roberto Campa Cifrián (PANAL)	397,550	1.0
Others	298,204	0.7
Registered voters ( <i>lista nominal</i> )	71,374,373	
Ballots cast	41,557,430	58.2
Invalid ballots	900,373	2.2
Valid votes	40,657,057	97.8

NB: In all tables, percentages are based on the total of valid votes.  
Source: TRIFE (2006, pp. 28–35).

## 6. Post-election conflict

Mexicans will remember the 2006 election for the dispute that occupied the nation for fully five months after they voted. The narrowness of Calderón's margin of victory gave López Obrador hope that he could triumph if only what he saw as irregularities in the electoral process were considered by the TRIFE, leading either to the votes being recounted or a considerable number of them being annulled. López Obrador immediately initiated a dual response to the declared result: legal challenges through the established procedures, and popular mobilisation to put pressure on the TRIFE to meet demands for a full recount or cancellation of the election.

The Coalition for the Good of All complained that the election had been unfair in two ways: first, the vote count was suspect; second, the Calderón camp, including President Fox, had violated campaigning rules. On the first point, López Obrador identified three specific irregularities: in the Preliminary Electoral Results Programme (PREP) on election night, which he argued was manipulated by the IFE to show Calderón maintaining a lead all evening; in the district-by-district tally conducted on 5 and 6 July, which he suggested had not been conducted carefully; and in the counts at some 50,000 polling places, where myriad violations were alleged to have taken place. With regard to campaigning, the PRD argued that Calderón and the PAN had violated negative campaigning restrictions, that Fox had inappropriately interfered in the race in order to sway voters toward Calderón, and that the Business Coordinating Council (CCE, the major association of big business in Mexico) had launched illegal attack ads against López Obrador. He and his coalition demanded a full vote-by-vote manual recount of the ballots (NDI, 2006, 5–7).

To put pressure on the TRIFE to meet his demands, López Obrador began holding regular large rallies in Mexico City. While such estimates are notoriously unreliable in Mexico, suggestions that up to a quarter of a million people attended these rallies seem realistic. From the end of July until Mexico's Independence Day (16 September), López Obrador joined hundreds of his followers who camped in tents on Mexico City's major boulevard and its main square, disrupting traffic and discouraging tourists from visiting the capital. Calderón, meanwhile, demanded that the legal electoral processes be followed and vowed to respect whatever decision the TRIFE made. He also began plans to form a government, indicating that he expected the court's final decision would be in his favour.

Table 2  
Mexican senatorial election results, 2 July 2006

Party/coalition	96 seats from 32 states			32 party list senators			Total Seats
	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	
National Action Party (PAN)	13,896,869	34.4	41	14,035,503	34.5	11	52
Coalition for the Good of All	12,298,745	30.4	26	12,397,008	30.4	10	36
Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD)			23			6	29
Workers' Party (PT)			0			2	2
Convergence			3			2	5
Alliance for Mexico	11,629,727	28.8	29	11,681,395	28.7	10	39
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)			27			6	33
Mexican Green Party (PVEM)			2			4	6
New Alliance Party (PANAL)	1,677,934	4.2	0	1,688,198	4.1	1	1
Social Democratic and Peasant Party (PASC)	787,797	1.9	0	795,730	2.0	0	0
Others	118,966	0.3	0	119,422	0.3	0	0

Source: IFE (2006, pp. 69, 74–76).

After considering the Coalition for the Good of All's claims and those of other parties, the TRIFE decided to have the electoral packets of about 9% of polling places opened and recounted. This low percentage represented a major setback for López Obrador, but the electoral court argued that the Coalition had challenged outcomes in only 230 of the 300 electoral districts, and so a complete recount was unwarranted. After examining the reopened packets, the TRIFE annulled the results of only 174 polling places, reducing Calderón's tally by 81,080 votes but López Obrador's by almost as much, 76,897 votes. The TRIFE issued its final judgment on 5 September. In that judgment, the electoral judges chastised the Calderón campaign and the CCE for their negative ads, and President Fox for intervening in the campaign by indirectly advocating Calderón's candidacy in his public appearances and by running media ads promoting the achievements of his administration. However, the judges also ruled that the negative ads had not determined the outcome of the

election, and that Fox had remained within the limits of the electoral law by not explicitly referring to the candidates (NDI, 2006, 6–7).

Despite these rulings, which made Calderón the president-elect, López Obrador vowed to keep up his struggle for power. He staged an 'election by acclamation' in which those present at a rally on Mexico's Independence Day (16 September) 'elected' him by a show of hands, and he then held an 'inauguration' ceremony on 20 November, the anniversary of the onset of the Mexican Revolution. However, the political tide began to swing against the PRD, which in August only narrowly held a gubernatorial seat in the contested southern state of Chiapas, and in October lost the governorship of López Obrador's homestate, Tabasco. The PRD's congressional caucus attempted to prevent Calderón from taking the oath of office on 1 December, but the PAN's deputies managed to control the podium—despite a melee involving dozens of deputies from both parties—enabling

Table 3  
Mexican chamber of deputy election results, 2 July 2006

Party/coalition	300 district deputies			200 party list deputies			Total Seats
	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	
National Action Party (PAN)	13,784,935	34.2	137	13,845,122	34.2	69	206
Coalition for the Good of All	11,969,049	29.7	98	12,013,360	29.7	60	158
Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD)			90			36	126
Workers' Party (PT)			3			13	16
Convergence			5			11	16
Alliance for Mexico	11,647,697	28.9	65	11,676,598	28.9	58	123
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)			63			41	104
Mexican Green Party (PVEM)			2			17	19
New Alliance Party (PANAL)	1,876,443	4.7	0	1,883,494	4.7	9	9
Social Democratic and Peasant Party (PASC)	847,599	2.1	0	850,985	2.1	4	4
Others	128,731	0.3	0	128,825	0.3	0	0

Source: IFE (2006, pp. 70, 77–79).

Calderón formally to assume the presidency. Meanwhile, three of the five PRD governors, including former party president Amalia García of Zacatecas and Lázaro Cárdenas of Michoacán, perhaps the party's leading presidential candidate for 2012, have indicated willingness to work with the new PAN government for the good of their constituents.

## 7. Conclusions

Given the closeness of this presidential election, the degree of conflict after the votes were cast should surprise no one. After all, control of the federal executive for six years was on the line. However, the loser of the 2006 Mexican presidential election provided little evidence of the pervasive fraud he alleged (Poiré and Estrada, 2006). Without major technical failures, the electoral institutions—the IFE, which organised the election and oversaw the tallying of the results, and the TRIFE, which investigated the allegations of fraud—functioned as they were designed to. Because the majority of Mexicans did not perceive widespread fraud, in the end Calderón's election has proven to have broad acceptance.

However, a vocal minority of Mexicans, led by López Obrador, disagree. Their actions in the five months between the election and Calderón's inauguration have damaged the integrity of the electoral process. The intransigence of the PRD congressional caucus, coupled with the fact that no party has overall control of either house of congress, menaces the capacity of Calderón to govern a society that already faces significant challenges to law, order, and the authority of the federal government. This mostly elite-level conflict threatens to postpone the consolidation of democracy in a nation that has already endured an unusually protracted democratic transition.

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