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Party Politics in Mexico's Midterm Elections: The PRI Celebrates While the PAN and PRD Regroup*By Katherine E. Bliss*

In the July 5 midterm elections in Mexico, the former ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), had the greatest success across the board. All of the 500 seats in Mexico's Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the country's bicameral legislature, were up for grabs, along with six governorships and municipal presidencies in the 11 states where citizens were electing mayors. The PRI captured around 37 percent of the overall vote, followed by incumbent President Felipe Calderón's Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), which secured 28 percent. The Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) came in a distant third with support from only 12 percent of the voting population. The nearly 2 million voters who cancelled their ballots in order to send a message of protest to Mexico's political class put the null vote as the fourth place winner, after the three major parties. A cluster of smaller parties and political alliances such as the Partido del Trabajo (PT), the Partido Verde Ecológico de México (PVEM), the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), and Convergencia captured the remainder of votes cast.

Almost three years into the administration of President Felipe Calderón, the midterm elections are widely viewed as a referendum on Calderón's achievements. Calderón has faced a confluence of difficult challenges since taking office in December 2006. These include confronting the domestic implications of the global financial crisis, managing the late April outbreak of H1N1 influenza, and waging a deadly struggle with drug-trafficking cartels. According to polls taken the week before the elections, the PRI was in the lead and was projected to win an estimated 34 percent the votes cast. President Calderón's PAN was expected to attract around 29 percent of voters, and polls showed the PRD could expect to capture about 13 percent of the vote.

According to preliminary reports, the PRI will claim 233 seats in the Cámara de Diputados, a gain of 127. The PAN will have 146 seats, a loss of 60. The PRD also lost ground, claiming only 72 seats, down from the 127 seats it currently holds. The PRI gained one governorship, that of Querétaro,

but lost its hold in Sonora to the PAN, likely a response of voters to the recent ABC day care scandal in which 48 children died in a facility licensed by the federal Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS) and owned by wives of two prominent officials associated with incumbent PRI governor Eduardo Bours. In Campeche, Colima, and Querétaro the PRI held steady, with party candidates replacing outgoing PRI governors in all three cases.

The PRI's gains represent an impressive comeback for the party that controlled Mexican politics from 1929 to 2000, was tainted by scandal and allegations of corruption, and suffered considerable losses at the presidential, state, and local levels in the 2006 elections. Now, with nearly half of the seats in the Cámara de Diputados, the PRI has more than doubled its presence there. However, it still does not count on a majority, meaning it will have to find common ground with the PAN and PRD as well as with the smaller parties, particularly the Partido Verde Ecológico de México (PVEM), with which it successfully collaborated in several local elections in this round. In the Senate, which will not be up for election until 2012, the PAN maintains a plurality with 40 percent of the seats.

The PAN's loss of 60 seats in the Cámara de Diputados means a significant erosion of influence. This could make it more difficult for President Calderón to continue to advance policy measures related to such issues as energy reform, the economy, and the security agenda without compromise and negotiation with the PRI. Alternatively, as the PRI keeps its eye on the 2012 presidential contest, it may seek to strike a conciliatory tone with PAN deputies in order to demonstrate its worthiness to reclaim national leadership in three years.

After the PRD's strong showing in the 2006 presidential elections, in which candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador was judged to have lost to Calderón by only .58 percent of the votes, the party's weak performance on Sunday suggests that it will need to spend time rebuilding its constituency and generating a new vision for politics in Mexico as it eyes the 2012 presidential contest. The apparent affiliation of López

Obrador with the Partido del Trabajo (PT), at least in this election, suggests that going forward the PRD will need to expand its network of leaders in order to reinvigorate the party.

Around 44.7 percent of the eligible voters went to the polls on Sunday. Midterm elections in Mexico rarely generate a large turnout, and the percentage was higher than what many analysts had projected. But in the weeks preceding the elections, a campaign encouraging voters to nullify their votes galvanized widespread support as a way to send a message to politicians regarding perceived corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency. Estimates are that more than 5 percent of votes were annulled, more than movement organizers had anticipated. Some observers have estimated that null votes reached as high as 60 percent in some localities. The Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) was supposed to release the official numbers on Wednesday, July 8, but by the end of the day the IFE had not yet updated the information on its website.

Issues

The economy, health care, security, and corruption were key issues on voters' minds as they headed to the polls on Sunday. The country's recent economic performance has been a prominent concern for voters. Mexico has suffered from the global financial crisis, with reduced international demand for Mexican products, decreased remittances from migrants living abroad, and declining oil production putting fewer funds into Mexico's budget for social spending. The outbreak of H1N1 influenza in April and May hit Mexico's economy hard, particularly in the critical tourism and agriculture sectors. The Mexican economy had already shrunk 8.2 percent in the first quarter, and the World Bank recently estimated that influenza-related losses could contribute an additional 2.2 percent decline in GDP. Minister of Health José Cordova noted in a recent speech that the H1N1 outbreak will cost Mexico at least \$40 billion this year. Polls in May suggested that the Calderón administration got high marks from citizens for its management of the outbreak, but the cost was high.

Security was a major issue for voters going to the polls on Sunday. Since assuming office in 2006, the Calderón administration has waged an intensive campaign against drug-trafficking organizations that control the production and flow of marijuana and methamphetamines from Mexico to foreign markets and oversee the flow of cocaine through the country, as well. The turf wars among the cartels, themselves, and the struggles between the cartels and the government, have left at least 11,000 people dead since 2007. Kidnappings and grisly executions have become prominent issues of concern for voters worried about the

safety of their families. The deployment of more than 45,000 military troops and 20,000 federal police to hot spots, particularly in cities along the U.S.-Mexico border, has also generated debate over the increasing role of the military in civilian life. The military is widely viewed as untainted by the corruption scandals that have characterized local police forces, and polls show popular support for the use of the armed forces in the campaigns against organized crime. But in Ciudad Juárez, where the government has deployed troops in an attempt to stem the drug-related killings, citizens have expressed concerns over the military's association with human rights abuses.

Voters' perception of corruption among local- and national-level political figures appears to have influenced electoral patterns and may have contributed to support for the null vote campaign. Three events generated headlines and discussion in the weeks prior to the election: the late May detention of 27 public officials, including mayors and the state attorney general, in the state of Michoacán on suspicion of collaboration with the La Familia Michoacana drug cartel; a June 5 fire that killed 48 children at an Hermosillo, Sonora, day care center owned by wives of politicians close to the incumbent governor; and the recent detention of 94 law enforcement personnel in Pachuca, Hidalgo, on suspicion that they were collaborating with the Gulf Cartel.

To promote transparency and safety during the elections, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) had imposed new rules regarding campaign financing, advertising, and conduct. But in the weeks prior to the election, candidates and opposing parties accused incumbents of using public funds to sway voters toward their own political parties. Election day was not free of violence, either. On Sunday, according to press reports, there were at least 29 homicides across the country, with 12 in the coastal state of Guerrero alone.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the PRI is in a good position to advance aspects of its own agenda and will likely focus on federal budget reform and stimulating economic growth in Mexico. Party president Beatriz Paredes has already hinted that the new deputies will be eyeing opportunities for working with allies in the Senate to enact emergency legislation to alleviate unemployment and mitigate the effects of the financial crisis. Following the resignation of PAN president Germán Martínez in the wake of the party's poor showing on Sunday, the PAN may regroup and refocus its legislative approach to economic and security issues in order to reinvigorate its base. To put itself in a stronger position going into 2012, the PRD will need to address the apparent affiliation of López Obrador with the PT and identify a new cadre of leaders capable of revitalizing the party.

Of course, a broader question is whether the null votes and abstention rates will continue to characterize future electoral contests. If voters continue to cancel their ballots or abstain in high numbers, the extent to which any of the political parties in Mexico can claim a clear mandate for continuity or reform will be unclear.

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