

# The Fragile State: Mexico's Post-PRI Struggle for Democratic Rule

Kent Roth

The recent Mexican presidential elections and the fiasco that followed demonstrate the difficulties involved in making a fledgling democracy successful. With its unique history of turmoil and bloodshed, corruption and autocracy, Mexico has a lot to prove to the world and itself if it is to create trust in its new political structure. Despite the government's extensive preparations, the most recent elections contained many reminders of the old system's flaws, as well as the party that dominated it. The refusal of Lopez Obrador from the left-leaning PRD to admit defeat and the instability that followed can only be understood in the realm of Mexico's *caudillo* politics in which the strongest man manipulates the system to his advantage. The political battles that are plaguing Mexico, if not decided in the courts, may find their way once again to the streets. However, if the law is upheld, the electoral and judicial institutions retain their credibility in the eyes of the public and the president elect remains strong yet checked, then Mexico may very well be on its way to a thriving democracy.

## **PRI Origins to fall from Power**

“Mexico: where life is cheap, death is rich, and the buzzards are never unhappy.”

—Edward Abbey

To make sense of the evolution of Mexican politics it is important to understand the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the solutions the party brought when it came to power in 1929, the problems it created,

*Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, College of Charleston*  
Volume 6, 2007: pp. 154-75

© 2007 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

and the reasons it was eventually cast aside by the Mexican population. Numerous accounts of corruption, fraudulent elections, and even some atrocities are well documented and serve to cast a bad light on the regime. On the other hand, compared to other authoritarian regimes during the same period the PRI was relatively reserved and respectful of its citizens. While the PRI can be described as an authoritarian regime, it stands separate from other examples in that it strove to be popular, and stepped down relatively gracefully when its popularity subsided. For most of its history, the PRI had the support of most Mexicans, who preferred a strong, stable government to the instability that preceded it. As the PRI-led government became more unstable and at the same time more controlling, its popularity fell, giving rise to a new wave of opposition parties, primarily the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). After several last-ditch efforts to retain control, including large-scale election fraud, the PRI was forced to accept its demise and took its place as the least popular of the three parties in Mexico.

### **Out of the Chaos**

Before the PRI came to power, Mexico regularly switched between dictators and revolutionary-induced anarchy. Politics were controlled by the strongmen, *caudillos*, who did little for the Mexican population and concentrated on maintaining their power by any means necessary. A president's life span was not likely to be long. Many of Mexico's early leaders ended life at the hands of the next, who in turn often shared a similar fate. Elections, when they took place, were generally riddled with fraud and irregularities, allowing dictators like Porfirio Diaz to reign from 1876 to 1880, and again from 1884 until 1910.

An uprising in 1910 led by Francisco Madero successfully ousted Diaz, but did little to stop the tradition of strongmen and violence. When Madero was shot by a rival's assassin the following year, control of the country was once again uncertain. Attempting to consolidate power at this point was a collection of generals led by Venustiano Carranza seeking to create a constitution emphasizing a strong central government authority. On the other side were the rebel armies loyal to Emiliano Zapata and Francisco "Pancho" Villa, who focused on gaining equality for Mexico's poor. After Zapata was assassinated and Pancho Villa drifted into obscurity (he too was eventually murdered), the constitutional forces solidified

their power. The resulting constitution contained significant social content which was progressive for its time, but also established a strong central government as the authority in Mexican society.

In 1915, Carranza was placed in the presidency, but *caudillos* as allies are no allies. Carranza fell at the hands of a rival's bullet shortly after gaining power. After the following president, Álvaro Obregon, was assassinated in 1928, rival generals began to understand the need for a more united government. In 1929, Obregon's successor, Plutarco Calles, joined with other strong generals to form the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Party), later to be named the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party) (Preston and Dillon 48-51).

At this point in Mexico's history, stability was clearly needed. The *caudillos* were not going to give up the power they had obtained, but when acting individually, they were too competitive and violent to govern effectively. The creation of a party made up of procedures and regulations that all members were required to accept created a sense of order out of the chaos following Madero's revolution. Political rivals and enemies were now in the same party, supposedly focusing on the same goals. This provided much needed stability in Mexican politics. At the center of the system was one man, the president, whose word on any matter was final.

### **An Uneasy Compromise**

Political stability came at a price, however. Although the political violence stopped, or at least slowed down, *caudillos* rarely sought what was best for the people of Mexico. A no-reelection policy acted as the only balance against presidents becoming dictators, but also allowed the president to act without being accountable to the voters in a subsequent election. Despite this fault, after a history of invasions, foreign occupation, and after losing half its territory in the Mexican/American war from 1846 to 1848, the Mexican people were quite content with leaders they perceived as strong and aggressive.

The most popular of the early leaders was Lorenzo Cárdenas, who in 1934 at the age of 39 became one of Mexico's youngest presidents. Cárdenas used his popular support as a tool that allowed him to nationalize Mexico's oil reserves as well as implement much needed social reforms (Tuck 1-2). Cárdenas remains one of the examples of how the PRI system

propelled and supported a good and honest leader who used the nearly limitless presidential power to accomplish great things. However, we will see from other examples that this sort of system had as much, if not more, potential to raise a leader of less noble intentions.

It is important to note how presidents were chosen. Within the PRI, the candidate (who was generally assured the presidency), was picked directly by the former president. In *Perpetuating Power* (2000), Jorge G. Castaneda describes the two ways a successor came to power: through choice and elimination. A president generally chose his successor from his ministers, a system which tended to limit the pool of candidates. Often, the person most preferred by a president would be out of favor with some other facet of Mexican society or barred from the office by constitutional requirements. In several cases, after all of the best choices were exhausted or eliminated, a president would simply settle for someone who might not be suitable for the job (Castaneda 3-4). Since there was no real competition outside the PRI, this person would automatically become the most powerful person in Mexico. By raising unqualified leaders, this system served to weaken the PRI structure over time.

### **The Downward Spiral**

If the rise of the PRI was propelled by cooperation between competing forces, its fall was determined by both external and internal divisions and conflicts, caused by clashes between a traditional political guard and a modernizing society. The origins of the regime's downward spiral can be traced to the protests and repression of the 1960's, and supplemented by government inefficiency and corruption reaching new heights, especially in regards to drug trafficking. The spiral became a vertical drop following the Cárdenas-led defection of the left wing of the party from the PRI in 1987, the 1988 fraudulent presidential election and following protests, and the loss of PRI majority in the Chamber of Deputies in 1997. When President Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) was elected in 2000, the PRI received a crippling blow.

As the 1960's ended, student protests in Mexico City and the nation as a whole were escalating. Students were demanding a more democratic government, and had supporters from all facets of Mexican society. President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who ruled from 1964 To 1970, viewed these protesters as dissidents that a stable Mexico could not tolerate, and

therefore sought to eradicate them. In July 1968, Ordaz responded to a series of clashes between students and police in Mexico City by sending in army soldiers to subdue the disturbance. On Oct 2, 1968, the violence reached a new level. Student demonstrators in Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City were mowed down by military and police gunfire in what has become known as the Tlatelolco Massacre. At the end of this terrible night, approximately 325 people had been killed, and as many as 2300 were arrested and beaten. This brutal repression of the student movement shocked the Mexican population, and paved the way for a larger movement that would draw citizens from all walks of life (Preston and Dillon 63-6).

Increasing corruption and fraud also served to rock the foundation of the PRI power base. While police corruption at the local level was most visible, a series of major scandals shook confidence in the leadership. Such scandals involved the highest levels of Mexican government and included bribery, extortion, election fraud, and, in some cases, murder.

The election of 1988 is a prime example of the level of corruption that the PRI had reached. This was the first year that a rival candidate had a strong chance of winning; many still refer to 1988 as the year “the system crashed.” Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the immensely popular former president, had broken away from the PRI along with several others from the left wing of the party to join with the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), a relatively young organization at the time. Cárdenas’ opponent was the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas, an awkward man who did not relate well to the general population (Preston and Dillon 150-4). In an effort to demonstrate the steps taken to improve the election process, a new computer system was used to count the votes. There is still debate about what exactly took place, but as Cárdenas’ lead continued to climb, the computers suddenly crashed. When they came back on, Salinas was miraculously ahead by a landslide (Rumbaut A20).

Despite massive protests, Salinas gained the presidency. Cárdenas’ response at the time is laudable and significant. While he was in a position to rally a large number of supporters around his cause and potentially create a great deal of trouble for the government, he eventually chose to step aside for the good of Mexico. This gave significant credibility to the PRD, but did little to give it more power. Cárdenas did vow, however, to fight the PRI machine on its own ground by developing one just as strong, widespread, and disciplined (Preston and Dillon 176-9). As we will see in

the following sections, this event will have a great influence on the approach the PRD has taken towards elections.

1994 was a year of much turmoil and conflict in Mexico. It was during this year that a movement calling itself the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) began armed insurrection in the state of Chiapas. Angered by the recent implications of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) and the mistreatment of the state's Indian population, the EZLN organized a significant resistance movement by demanding autonomy and aid for the region. While the violent uprising did not last long, the EZLN became even more successful in the next several years through its use of information technology to build worldwide support ("Zapatista" 1-2).

In this same year another event rocked the Mexican political world: the assassination of Luis Colosio, a PRI presidential candidate. Colosio was the first PRI candidate in history who did not have the public support of the entire party, and while an investigation concluded that the gunman acted alone, the credibility of high-profile investigations in Mexico are always suspect (Preston and Dillon 229-31). As in several other cases of Mexican presidential succession, the last name on the list of presidential candidates ended up being the only possibility. Ernest Zedillo, a technocrat who had never held an elected position, faced little opposition and won the Mexican presidency in 1994. One of his first acts was to cut off funds diverted from the government to the PRI to fund campaigns. He also allowed more in-depth public viewing of the presidential budget, which resulted in numerous changes to presidential spending powers. These actions fragmented the party, destroying the respect that most members had held for the Presidency (Preston and Dillon 292-300).

As the PRI structure struggled with new ideological goals forced on them by their leader, opposition groups were gaining power and support. By 1997, years of corruption, inefficiency, repression, and fraud caught up to the PRI. This was the turning point in Mexican politics: for the first time since the revolution, the PRI's opposition, comprised of a weak and uneasy coalition between the PAN and PRD, gained control of the Chamber of Deputies. The significance of this transfer of power was a complete restructuring in the way alliances, debate, and political procedures were conducted. (Preston and Dillon 365-70). The PRI may not have realized it, but this was effectively the end of its reign.

In July 2000, Vicente Fox, a businessman, devout Catholic, and former congressman and governor, won the presidency by an undeniable margin. His election would be the final blow to PRI control over the country, and would set a precedent for the future political structure in Mexico (Preston A1). The acceptance of his victory was not guaranteed, however, and may well have failed if not for Ernesto Zedillo's commitment to the democratic process.

Mexican politics had changed dramatically in a short period as the domination of the PRI crumbled. Yet the Mexican tradition of rule by strongmen and the corresponding power of popular uprisings remained significant factors. The 2006 elections would demonstrate the fact that although things had changed, they were still very much the same.

### **The Candidates of the 2006 Election**

“We have concluded an important part of the legal changes needed to bring the electoral process to bear on the new political realities of the country.”

—President Carlos Salinas

As the campaign season began, all parties seemed confident. Fox's six years as president had mixed results in the eyes of the public, and while many felt that it was the PRD's turn to give it a try, many remained loyal to Fox's idea of change. Others felt that the experiment had failed, and remembered with nostalgia the stability the PRI had brought. What emerged was a competition of wits and rhetoric between three men: Felipe Calderón from the National Action Party (PAN), Roberto Madrazo from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, (commonly referred to by the acronym AMLO), leading the Coalition for the Good of All, which consisted of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), the Convergence Party, and the Workers Party (PT). The differences between these men capture the conflicting political forces currently operating in Mexico, while their similarities show remnants of Mexico's traditional politics.

How these candidates were perceived was based on how the press reported them, how they interacted in debates, and how the candidates described and portrayed themselves. Within the press coverage one can

find preferences and biases based on geography, financial interests, and guiding ideology. In Mexico City, Obrador was the clear favorite, and the newspapers reflected this. A front page photo spread in *La Jornada* showed the three candidates; Calderón surrounded by three supporters, Madrazo in a roomful of supporters, and Obrador speaking to tens of thousands in the Zócalo, Mexico City's main square. The article beneath the spread praised the PRD, saying "If the PRD wins, Mexico will be able to retake the road to development" (Iruegas 7). US and British media generally favored Calderón, the more conservative candidate who promised to be most friendly to foreign investment. *The Economist* ran an article in April dismissing Obrador as a populist speaking of change but without clear-cut plans, then a month later ran an article titled "The Rise of Felipe Calderón," which spoke highly of Calderón's business-related background (Hulton 1-2). A writer from the *New York Times* warned, "should Andres Manuel Lopes Obrador (AMLO), the front-runner in Mexico's presidential race, emerge victorious on Sunday, it could usher in a form of Latin American Leftism as yet unseen" (Bell 1).

Very few respectable newspapers wrote favorable about Roberto Madrazo, whose support base declined steadily as the race continued. One must understand that Roberto Madrazo was a dinosaur from the old guard PRI system, who, had the party kept control, may very well have become president. While his party had a well-developed campaign infrastructure and sufficient funds, those factors could not make up for the fact that people simply did not like or trust him. The PRI machine produced what appeared to be the most expensive literature: glossy, multi-page pamphlets that promised, "Roberto can do it." Like the crumbling remains of an ancient empire, the PRI remained well within public view.

During the campaign, Madrazo tried to cast himself as the center candidate, between the "radical and conflicting left" and the "intolerant and repressive right" as he referred to the PRD and PAN in one of the debates (Herrera 5). The majority of analysts ruled him out as the winner early on due to his poor performance in the debates. One political cartoon published the day after the second debate shows the candidates at their podiums, except Madrazo's podium was on its side with the PRI logo rearranged to spell RIP.

Adding a personal dimension to the campaign was the fact that in 1994 Madrazo and Obrador had run against each other in a very nasty

campaign for the governorship of the state of Tabasco. Obrador's camp had little money, but was well organized on the grassroots level and put up a good fight against the Madrazo juggernaut. Obrador's supporters documented numerous unscrupulous acts committed by the PRI, such as monopolizing media time and newspaper attention, and in one case actually handing out cash to sway voters. An independent report by several respected lawyers concluded that the election was full of irregularities, and even President Zedillo refused to attend Madrazo's inauguration. As he had done before and would do again, Obrador responded by launching protests and demonstrations that soon turned bloody. PRD supporters and PRI-deployed state troops brawled in the city square of Villahermosa. The PRD members eventually left the square, bloodied and beaten, allowing Madrazo to begin his term as governor (Preston and Dillon 364-9).

Circumstances such as these have been common for Lopez Obrador for the majority of his political life. Obrador started his political career the way most did, within the PRI. He had been the president of the party in the state of Tabasco, five years before Madrazo obtained the same job. As his role in the party continued to grow, Obrador became one of many who were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the PRI system. AMLO joined the Cárdenas-led defection in 1987, which drew the more left-leaning members of the PRI to form what became the PRD. In response to the 1988 presidential election fraud, Obrador perfected what would become his key political maneuver: massive and effective protests and demonstrations (Preston and Dillon 265). For a party that could not gain power through conventional methods, mass mobilization became a very powerful tool. In his state of Tabasco he surrounded oil refineries to procure payments for local Indians (Lyons 1-2). After the 1988 election, Obrador had arranged sit-ins, roadblocks, demonstrations, and other forms of civil resistance (Preston and Dillon 265). In his own disputed election against Madrazo in 1994, he led a protest march 560 miles from Tabasco to Mexico City. There was much speculation before the election that he would undoubtedly be the most reluctant of the candidates to accept any results unfavorable to him (Bell 1).

AMLO receives most of his support from the working class and the many who are disillusioned by Mexican politics- primarily from residents of southern Mexico where foreign investment is less prevalent. Obrador

speaks passionately about the underprivileged of Mexico regaining their rightful place, restoring integrity and honesty to the government, rooting out corruption amongst the police and politicians, standing up to foreign powers, re-negotiating NAFTA, and modernizing Mexico. One of his most popular campaign slogans was “for everyone’s good, the poor first” (“A Tie” 1). His primary campaign literature consisted of small newspapers, in which he outlined his “*compromisos*” with each individual state, point by point. Cheaply made and distributed on a large scale, these newspapers feature cartoon illustrations that emphasize Obrador’s position on social issues.

While Obrador speaks critically of the ruling class, his rhetoric stops short of other left-leaning Latin American leaders when it comes to criticizing the US, which remains an extremely important part of the Mexican economy. Many have tried to relate Obrador to Venezuela president Hugo Chavez. AMLO’s positions, however, are much less radical and controversial. An advertising spot funded by Calderón comparing the two personalities was ordered off the air after being considered “unfair” by the Federal Election Institute (IFE) (“A Tie” 1).

Several high-profile cases of corruption were noted during Obrador’s stint as Mayor of Mexico City, but this has done little to affect his public image. As mayor, he became immensely popular for initiating large symbolic projects that seem to have revamped the city’s economy and improved its crumbling infrastructure, although crime, poverty and corruption on all levels still remains a large problem. His personal honesty seems to be reaffirmed in the minds of voters by his moderate life style; he lives in a mid-sized apartment and drives an inexpensive car (“The Front-runner” 1-2). He is one of the few Mexican politicians to leave office with a positive approval rating.

Nonetheless, some critics credibly claim that Obrador represents a risk of violence. Years of dealing in Mexico’s harsh political climate as an underdog as well as leading a city of 20 million already saturated with corruption has forced Obrador, and many high-ranking Mexican politicians for that manner, to build a network of allies of questionable integrity. One of these is Alejandro Lopes Villanueva, one of Mexico City’s dons. He controls a group of militant squatters, who work together to take and retain housing and property that is not in use. This is a powerful ally for Obrador, since Villanueva can quickly rally thousands of dedicated

supporters (who literally owe their houses to him), to block traffic, attend rallies, and otherwise cause pandemonium. Mr. Villanueva was jailed for several months for allegedly murdering a judge, but was released for lack of evidence. His organization as a whole operates illegally, and uses its power of numbers to counterbalance city authorities (Lyons 1). An ally such as this is clearly beneficial and useful to Obrador, but such alliances recall the methods of old *caudillo* politics. Being a product of and then an enemy to the PRI, AMLO has no easy choice in this matter. Mexico City's politics are what they are, and corruption is embedded to such a high degree within even the basic municipal services that to attack it would be impractical. With the National Government at the very center of the city, these realities have often spread across the nation as a whole.

Felipe Calderón struck a clearer alternative to the *caudillo* system, representing the much tamer political environment the PAN has created for itself. Unlike the PRD, the PAN has avoided direct confrontation with the PRI outside of governmental institutions and had never been a direct part of it, which has allowed its development to differ significantly. Presenting himself as a fiscal conservative, Calderón is the preferred candidate of big business, upper-middle and upper class families, and foreign investors (who can not vote, but exert influence through their economic stake in the nation). His stance supporting NAFTA and free trade has given him support in the boarder regions that rely on US industry. Despite his close relations to the US he has assured all parties concerned that he will not be a “push over” or “puppet” to American investors (Bell 2). He uses less fiery rhetoric than Obrador, and spends considerable time explaining how he plans to accomplish the economic recovery of Mexico. His campaign literature at first appears like a PowerPoint business presentation. It wins no points for general appearance, but aptly displays graphs and figures indicating problems in various areas of the Mexican economy and society.

Calderon is a well-educated man, with a B.S. in Law, an M.S. in Economics, and an M.S. in Public Administration from the John F Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He grew up within the PAN system, and has an extensive career in public office and party positions. He served as a local deputy in Mexico City, twice as a federal deputy, as the Secretary of Energy under Fox, the Secretary General followed by President of the PAN, and was CEO of Banobras; the state-

owned banking system (Calderon 1). He has used this experience to his advantage, propelling himself as the candidate “most prepared to govern.” Calderón prides himself on having “clean hands” (“Felipe” 1-2), although he was accused by AMLO of corruption during his tenure as CEO of Banobras (Herrera 5). Along with Obrador, Calderón has insisted on the need for social reform, but tends toward more restrained spending plans and lacks the passionate appeals and promises that have characterized his opponent’s campaign.

Calderón has been very critical in his comments about Obrador, whom he referred to in the second debate as a “danger for Mexico” (Urrutia 6). He has spent considerable time systematically discrediting Obrador’s term as mayor of Mexico City, with one campaign pamphlet showing how unemployment, debt, and crime have increased in the nation’s capital. In the debate, he pointed out the problem of “unorganized police combating organized crime” and went on to say, “you’re not going to win with lies, Mr. Lopez Obrador” in reference to Obrador’s claims about his tenure as mayor (Herrera 5).

Until the debate in April of 2006, Obrador had maintained a significant lead, his total support peaking at 40% in March, compared to Calderón at approximately 30% and Madrazo trailing with less than 27% (“Rise” 1). Obrador’s refusal to attend the first debate and his increasingly rude treatment of President Fox, whom he told to “shut up” at one point, hurt him in the eyes of the voters (“The Front-runner” 1; Zehbrauskas 1). A barrage of negative ads from Calderón’s camp further undermined his support and some economic gains served to boost confidence in the current PAN leadership. In April, Obrador lost his substantial lead and the race between him and Calderón became very close (“Rise” 1-2). In poll results released mid-June, AMLO had 34.2%, Calderón had 31%, and Madrazo was creeping up at 29.6% (“Primera” 3A). It was this close and uncertain situation that led into the elections on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. All candidates expressed confidence, or at least optimism, that the elections would be fair and express the will of the people. Others were not so sure. One senator predicted another 1988 scenario, with disputed results and general chaos (Mercado 16). Other articles pointed out past instances of Obrador being stubborn when faced with defeat; with one American journalist predicting a “nightmare scenario” should Obrador lose by a small margin (Bell 1).

For the people of Mexico, all they could do was hope that the country would take another crucial step toward democracy.

### **The Election and Aftermath**

“I will not recognize anyone who parades himself as the head of the federal government without any legitimate credentials.”

—Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

The line stretched out of the Puerto Vallarta bus station almost to the entrance of its parking lot. The experienced voters had brought chairs, lunch, and a radio. At the very front the line spread into a large crowd surrounding the registration table, where one by one voters would get their chance to go into the only voting booth set up. A dozen people wearing PRI, PRD, and PAN shirts or buttons watched on from behind the scenes. The ballots were very simple, with large boxes containing the party's logo, to be marked with a large red “x.” About four yards away from the registration table, workers separated cast ballots into three piles, one for each party, while party representatives, curious onlookers, and one foreign student waiting for his bus watched the counting closely. Nearby a few police officers stood by in case the situation got out of control. A sign outside the voting location proclaimed “the vote is free and secret.”

Such a scene was common in many areas of Mexico during the July 2<sup>nd</sup> elections. The Federal Election Institute (IFE) monitored election results as they came in (“IFE” 1). The IFE had allowed many international election monitors into the country, and most approved of the steps that had been taken to prevent fraud. Robert Pastor, a professor of Latin American Studies from American University who has watched Mexican elections for 20 years, went as far as to say of the IFE, “they have done so much to prevent fraud, implemented all kinds of safeguards, none of which we have in the US” (Jarman 1).

According to the PAN's website, more than a million party representatives, 25 thousand independent Mexican observers and 637 international observers were overseeing the polls on Election Day (“Election Facts” 1). Newspapers predicted a trouble free day, with headlines such as “everything ready for a successful election,” along with

many articles praising the IFE's preparations. People braved the long lines, determined to make their voice heard, and the voting continued into the night.

The counting began with a preliminary step, called the PREP. This would determine a rough estimate of the outcome, which would be enough to encourage candidates to concede should the victor's margin be large enough. As the counting continued, however, it was clear that the election would be too close to count entirely on the PREP. Although results were not certain at this point and the margin between the PAN and PRD was very small, it was clear Madrazo and the PRI had suffered a defeat.

Despite the uncertainty, Felipe Calderón decided this was the moment to tell supporters "we have no doubt that we have won the presidential elections." Lopez Obrador, following suit, told his supporters "smile, we've already won," and went on to say, referring to the 1988 election fraud, "we are going to defend our triumph; we are not going to let them make our results disappear" (Adams 1). Despite his words, as the count continued his small lead did disappear, from a confident margin of 2.8% to a small .21% gap, with Calderón finally gaining the upper hand by a half a percent (Hernandez 4). As the counts continued to come in and the margin decreased, Obrador's supporters gathered at the Zócalo in Mexico City and began to chant, "Lie! Lie! Fraud! Fraud!" (Adams 1). Both candidates' websites were updated to proclaim victory, and for a moment Mexico held its breath.

By July 7, five days after the elections, the IFE's preliminary numbers showed Calderón as the victor, with 35.89% of the votes (15,000,284). Obrador was just below, with 35.31% (14,756,350 votes) ("Mayoria" 1). By this point Obrador was starting to lose his cool, claiming fraud and vowing to have the results overturned on the basis of irregularities. "We cannot recognize these results," he said to supporters once again in the Zócalo, "we will ask for a vote for vote recount" ("AMLO" 1).

Obrador did not have extensive evidence of election fraud, but he revealed what he did have with such political savvy that it made a dramatic impact on his supporters. One of his first claims was that 3 million votes had simply "disappeared." In the news outlets loyal to him the situation was portrayed as the IFE trying to hide the votes, then being caught in a lie and forced to reveal them (Giordano 1). The IFE, however, consistent with its policies in regards to the PREP, had set aside tally sheets that

were illegible or suspected of irregularities to be reviewed by representatives from each party. The IFE did not include these 3 million in their preliminary count, which is designed to show results quickly, not declare a winner. Luis Carlos Ugalde, head of the IFE, insisted that these votes would be included according to the original plan (Roots and Hall 1).

Obrador also claimed that a supposedly secret video showed a poll worker stuffing a ballot box with votes. This video was shown on numerous occasions and rallied many supporters behind Obrador. He claimed that this was sufficient evidence to overturn the election results, or at least to constitute a vote-by-vote recount (Lloyd 2). However, the IFE as well as the PRD representative who was in attendance during the event had confirmed that this had been a special incident where it had been necessary to put misplaced ballots in their correct box. In this case the transfer had been approved and monitored by all party representatives. The IFE went on to say that videotaping the polls is encouraged, implying Obrador's claim of a "secret video" was nonsense (Thompson and McKinley 1-2). The PRD complained of many other irregularities during the election, such as double counting and bad reporting. However, the IFE claims that out of the 3000 polling places that were recounted, small human errors were all that was detected (McKinley 1).

So with only suspect evidence supporting his position, Obrador sought a vote for vote recount of all the 42 million cast. The issue then went to a special election tribunal, who would take into account any grievances, take any action deemed necessary, and finally declare a winner. The TRIFE, as it is called, is an independent body and consists of seven judges without party affiliations ("Smile" 1). The TRIFE would have until August 31 to consider all appeals, and would have to declare a winner by September 6. All proceedings would be conducted behind closed doors, and any decision made would be final and could not be overturned by any court ("Lopez" 1).

Mr. Obrador presented the tribunal with a 900-page legal challenge claiming irregularities and demanded recounts in 55% of polling stations, assuring the public that in the event of a recount all crimes would be exposed and he would surely be Mexico's next president. Knowing the courts were skeptical of his evidence, Obrador led a march in the Zócalo protesting the expected decision of the TRIFE. Before the TRIFE had

even presented its decision, Obrador persuaded supporters to interrupt Fox's State of the Union address on September 1.

Calderón, meanwhile, argued that there were no outstanding irregularities and therefore no basis for a recount. In a TV interview Calderón put his faith in the Tribunal. "We will not respond to provocations," he said; "we trust our authorities, [and] we respect our laws" ("Lopez" 1-2)

The TRIFE issued its decision on September 5, confirming that Felipe Calderón would be sworn in as the next President of Mexico. Showing clear strain and frustration, Obrador tactfully responded "to hell with the institutions," and renewed his commitment to fight to his dwindling, but still significant, supporters. The new vow would be to camp out in the Zócalo and increase the disruption right on the doorstep of the Presidential Palace. Within the following months, however, Obrador's support faded slowly. His Coalition for the Good of All fell apart, with the Convergence Party officially recognizing Calderón's victory. Members of his own party began distancing themselves from him, the most prominent being Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Having led the PRD breakaway from the PRI, Cárdenas is generally considered the most respected man of the party. In early September, Cárdenas publicly called on Obrador to cease his protests and step down. Despite these setbacks, Obrador maintained a solid group of supporters in Mexico City ("Left" 1). On Revolution Day, November 20, Obrador swore himself in as the "legitimate" president of Mexico. Calderón followed on the traditional day, December 1.

## Reactions

"Under every stone lurks a politician."

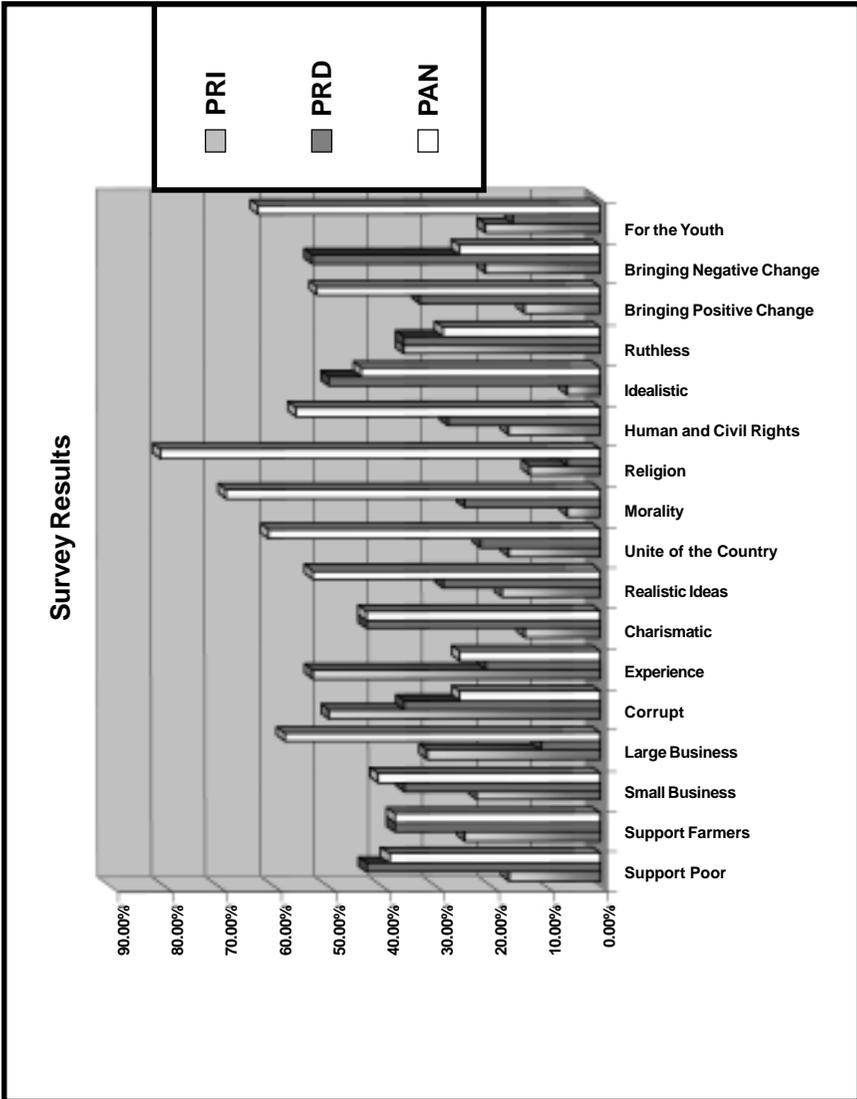
—Aristophanes

Outside Mexico City, it is difficult to determine the amount of support Obrador retains. It is clear that his popularity has fallen; his appearance in his home state of Tabasco did not rally enough voters to win the governorship, and his list of allies and loyal PRD members is growing smaller. However, every demonstration is attended by tens of thousands and smaller protest movements have broken out in various areas of the country. In order to get a sense of how the general population views the

different political parties and how they interact, this author conducted an informal survey and several interviews.

The surveys and interviews took place in La Paz, the capital of Baja California Sur. The state voted heavily for PRD, and is one of the more economically stable states to have done so. The survey was given to

**Figure 1: Survey Results**



different members of the community: teachers, university students, taxi drivers, people waiting at the bus station, etc. The goal was to see if in a PRD state people still supported Obrador's claim about election fraud.

The survey consisted of 27 people and was divided into two sections. The first posed a series of questions regarding confidence in the election process. When asked about whether fraud was present during the past election, the vast majority said no (76%), and the same majority supported the way the IFE handled the situation. While 24% did support Obrador's claim of fraud, a slightly higher percentage (36%) supported the need for a complete recount. This might suggest that a certain percentage believes that a recount should be done to appease the PRD and encourage unity. Those that thought fraud was evident were not necessarily Obrador supporters. After completing a survey, one man brought up a good point, that there had generally been fraud of some scale in every Mexican election, making it difficult to believe otherwise.

The second section of the survey placed the focus on the political parties, asking respondents to match a series of phrases with the party they best describe (see Figure 1). These generally favored the PAN, which was most closely associated with *unity of the country*, supporting *human and civil rights*, *realistic plans* for development, encouraging *big business*, and, by a large margin, *morality* and *religious*. The PAN was also seen as the *party of the youth* and the most likely to bring about *positive change*. The PRD was primarily viewed as *idealistic* and *for the poor*, but also most likely to bring about *negative change*. The PRI was perceived as the most *corrupt*, but also the most *experienced*. The PRD and the PAN were equal when it came to *charisma* and *support for farmers*, and all parties were pretty close for *ruthlessness*.

## Conclusions

“Change will not come from above, it will come from below.”

—Vicente Fox

It is clear that Mexico is still deeply divided by the recent elections and the aftermath. Judging from the support of international observers, the praises from Latin American scholars, and the general lack of evidence to the counter, it is unlikely, however, that fraud on a large scale did take

place. It is possible that in some areas irregularities occurred, although it appears that these are within an acceptable realm for an election of this size. Most citizens believe the IFE handled the election well and that claims about conspiracies and plots are unrealistic.

President Calderón will be dealing with a divided congress, a divided country and large-scale protests. There is, however, room for optimism; Calderón is after all much more politically shrewd than his predecessor, and apparently more tactful than his opponent. Obrador's stubborn stance has alienated many of his own voters, which has in turn strengthened Calderón's position.

Mexico is at a turning point in its history, and the strength of its new administration will determine which direction it goes. Obrador's movement claims to support democracy, but instead may be standing in its way. It appears that Mexico dodged a *caudillo* in exchange for a new kind of Mexican politician who may be more of a servant of the system than a master over it. The recent election provides a hopeful indication that Mexican politicians will no longer be chosen by their political connections or strong-arm tactics, but by the people and a fair election.

### Works Cited

- "A Tie not Broken" *The Economist* 8 Jun. 2006. 20 Jun. 2006. <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.
- About Felipe*. 3 Nov 2006. National Action Party. Access date < <http://www.felipe-calderon.org/fc/html/eng/trayectoria/carrera.htm>.> .
- Adams, Lisa J. "Too Close to Call: Rivals Declare Victory as Mexico's President." *Deseret News* 3 July 2006. 10 July 2006 <[http://www.desnews.com/cgi-bin/cqcg\\_plus/](http://www.desnews.com/cgi-bin/cqcg_plus/)>.
- "AMLO ira a l tribunal." *Diario de Colima* 7 Jul 2006: A1.
- Bell, Alistar. "Mexican Election Could Put Leftist on US Doorstep." *Yahoo news* 20 Jun 2006. 15 July 2006 <[www.news/yahoo.com/s/nm/20060620](http://www.news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20060620)>
- Cárdenas, Hliodoro. "Encuestas: AMLO, feliz; Calderón, no." *EL Milenio* 23 Jun 2006: 16.
- Carlos Salinas*. 20 Sep 2006. *NNDB: Tracking the Entire World*. 20 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.nndb.com/people/439/000096151/>> .

- Castaneda, Jorge. "Perpetuating Power; How Mexican Presidents Were Chosen." New York: New Press, 2000.
- Election Facts*. 10 Nov 2006. Felipe Calderón. 10 Nov 2006. <<http://www.felipe.org.mx/fc/html/eng/eleccion2006.htm>>.
- "Felipe Calderón: Presidente del Empleo" Calderón Campaign Literature.
- "The Front-runner under Pressure." *The Economist* 12 Apr. 2006. 20 April 2006. <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.
- "Game, Set and Match." *The Economist* 7 Sept 2006. 10 Sept 2006. <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)> .
- Hernandez, Erika. "Vive el instituto un día de tensión." *El Mural* 6 June 2006: 6.
- Hernández, Esau. "Madrazo: A Votar Para Construir al País." *Diario de Colima* 21 June 2006: 1.
- Herrera, Claudio. "Los candidatos marcan diferencias ideológicas" *La Jornada* 7 June 2006: 5.
- "IFE abre su macrosala de prensa." *Los Vecinos* 2 July 2006: A24.
- Iruegas, Gustavo. "Lo que esta en Juego." *La Jornada* 7 June 2006: 7.
- Jarman, Janet. "On a Peaceful Election Day across Mexico." *New York Times* 3 July 2006: A8.
- Krauze, Enrique. "Presidential Elections: Bringing Mexico Closer to God." *International Herald Tribune* 28 June 2006. 29 July 2006. <[www.ihf.com/articles/2006/06/28/opinion/edkrauze.php](http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/06/28/opinion/edkrauze.php)>.
- "The Left Cannot Hold." *The Economist* 21 Sept 2006. 22 Sept 2006. <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.
- "Lopez Obrador Refuses to Recognize Rival." *The New York Times* 14 July, 2006. 27 July 2006 <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)>.
- Lloyd, Marvin. "Lopez Obrador videos show election fraud." *Houston Chronicle* 11 July 2006: A8.
- Lyons, John. "In Mexico, A King of Roadblocks Works to Clear a Path." *Wall Street Journal* 28 June 2006: 1-2.
- "Mayoría a Calderón." *Diario de Colima* 7 July 2006: 1A.
- McKinley, James. "In a Presidential Tone, Calderon Rejects Recount." *The Economist* 14 July 2006. 20 July 2006 <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.

- Mckinley, James C. "Electoral Crisis In Mexico As Top 2 Declare Victory." *New York Times* 3 July 2006: A1.
- Mercado, Angelica. "La elección del 2 de Julio es tan confiable como en 88: Bartlett." *El Milenio* 30 July 2006: 16.
- "Mexico's Leftist Party Demands a Recount." *CBS News*. 4 July 2006. 27 June 2007 <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/07/03/world/main1773948.shtml>>
- Obrador, Andres Manual Lopez. "Mis Compromisos con Colima." Obrador Campaign Literature. La Coalición Para el Bien de Todos.
- Preston, Julia. "Joy in Streets of Capital, as Reign of 71 Years Ends for PRI." *New York Times* 2 July 2000: A1+.
- Preston, Julia and Samuel Dillion. *Opening Mexico: the Making of a Democracy*. New York; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005.
- "Primera encuesta de junio." *La Diario de Colima* 14 June 2006: 3A.
- "The Rise of Felipe Calderon." *The Economist* 11 May 2006. 20 June, 2006 <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)> .
- "The Return of Populism." *The Economist* 12 April 2006. 3 Jun 2006 <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.
- Root, Jay and Kevin Hall. "Inconsistencies on Ballots Stall Mexican Elections." *Star-Telegraph/McClatchy Newspapers* 4 July 2006: A1.
- Rumbaut, Luis. "Silence on a Stolen Election." *Washington Post* 19 Sept 2006: A20. 29 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/18/AR2006091801217.html>>.
- Schroeder, Jane. "The Truth about Tatelolco." *World Press Review* 49.2 (March 2002) 14 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.worldpress.org/americas/0302mexico.htm>>.
- "Smile, We Won!" *The Economist* 1 Aug 2006. 10 Sept 2006. <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.
- Thompson, Ginger and James McKinley. "Video, doubts, and a backlash in Mexico's Vote." *The Economist* 14 July 2006. 20 July 2006. <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>.
- Tuck, Jim. "The Phenomenon of Larazo Cárdenas." 1999 *Mexico Connect* 3 Oct 2006. <<http://www.mexconnect.com/mex/history/jtuck/jtlCárdenas.html>>.
- Urrutia, Allonso. "El encuentro devino confrontación entre los punteros AMLO y Calderón." *La Jornada* 7 June 2006: 6.

“The Zapatista Uprising: 1994-2004.” *Democracy Now*. 31 Jan 2004.

14 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=04/01/02/150251>>.

Zuniga, Laura Murillo. “Todo dispuesto para elecciones exitosas.” *Los Vecinos* 2 June 2006. A1.