

4-30-1997

Zedillo Caught Between Pledge of Fair Elections, Good Showing for PRI

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Zedillo Caught Between Pledge of Fair Elections, Good Showing for PRI." (1997). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3735>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Zedillo Caught Between Pledge of Fair Elections, Good Showing for PRI

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1997-04-30

President Ernesto Zedillo's administration is facing a difficult political dilemma in the weeks leading up to the July 6 congressional and state elections. On the one hand, opposition parties and a highly independent federal electoral institute (Institute Federal Electoral, IFE) are holding the president accountable for his pledge to deliver clean and fair elections. At the same time, the executive has come under increasing pressure from his own party to use his influence to ensure a good showing for the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). According to political analyst Lorenzo Meyer of the Colegio de Mexico, Zedillo's original promise to maintain a "sane distance" from his party during this year's campaign has been replaced by an "insane closeness."

As recently as early April, the Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion, SG) and the IFE signed a landmark agreement to suspend any official activities that could in anyway skew the election in favor of the PRI during the 30-day period prior to the election. Following the IFE-SG agreement, members of the PRI in the Chamber of Deputies successfully filed a motion with the electoral tribunal (Tribunal Federal Electoral, TFE) to overturn the agreement. The PRI legislators complained that the IFE overstepped its jurisdiction in seeking the ban on government activities. The Zedillo administration did not openly challenge the move by the PRI delegation in Congress, but rather continued to insist that the elections would be fair.

In a speech a few days later, Zedillo warned that he would not be able to govern unless the PRI retained a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, a sharp contrast to his earlier pledge to stay out of the electoral arena. PRI concerned about losing majority in Congress Political analysts suggest Zedillo's recent decision to become involved in the electoral campaign may be the result of pressure from members of the old guard of his party. Indeed, many longtime PRI members are concerned that recent campaign and electoral reforms pushed by Zedillo could result in heavy losses for the ruling party in the July election. This year's elections are crucial because the PRI could lose its long-standing majority in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Three hundred of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies will be contested through direct elections. The other 200 will be distributed based on the proportion of votes received by each party.

The opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) says its candidates have a strong chance of winning the election in 80 of the 300 seats up for direct election. The opposition National Action Party (PAN) also has a chance to pick up several seats, although party officials have not offered any public projections. In addition to the 300 seats open for direct election in the Chamber of Deputies, 32 of the 128 Senate seats will be contested in July.

According to political analysts, the loss of a majority in Congress could have profound implications for the legislative process. In the last full session of Congress, a total of 128 of 134 initiatives were proposed by the Zedillo administration. In a Congress dominated by the opposition, most bills

would be drafted by the legislators rather than the executive. "Unfortunately, the majority in Congress is very limited to whatever the president says," said Ramon Sosamontes, a PRD deputy. "We have made some advances. The opposition is taken into account. But the PRI dominates."

The prospect of losing control of the legislature has created significant concern among some members of the PRI. Earlier this year, more than 50 legislators, led by deputies Ofelia Casillas Ontiveros and Hector Sanroman, signed a petition asking that the PRI expel former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari from the party ranks. Otherwise, they warned, the party could experience significant losses in the July 6 election.

Rumors circulated that many of the petitioners would resign from the PRI if Salinas remained a member of the party, forcing party president Humberto Roque Villanueva to call a special meeting to plead for party unity. A handful of PRI members have also blamed the party's recent poor performance on the neoliberal economic policies followed by Zedillo and his predecessors Salinas and Miguel de la Madrid. In addition, PRI secretary-general Juan Millan said that voters may use the upcoming election as a referendum on Zedillo's performance in office, particularly the administration's handling of the economic crisis. He made the comments in an interview with the daily newspaper Reforma. Later, Millan who represents organized labor within the PRI attempted to mend fences with the president by suggesting that business and labor were equally responsible for the country's recent economic crisis.

PRI seeks to restrict electoral observers

The PRI's efforts to hold on to power are illustrated in other recent moves in the Chamber of Deputies. In late April, PRI members of the constitutional committee (Comision de Gobernacion y Puntos Constitucionales) in the Chamber of Deputies voted for changes to the federal elections code (Codigo Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales, COFIPE). PAN and PRD members abstained from voting to protest the lack of adequate debate on this issue.

The proposed changes prohibit nongovernmental organizations in Mexico from accepting funds from foreign sources for electoral activities, including monitoring on election day. PRI legislator Jorge Moreno Collado defended the legislation on the grounds that it helps safeguard Mexico's sovereignty. He said the bill eliminates the opportunity for foreign governments and individuals to influence the elections through monetary donations to nongovernmental organizations. The legislation appears to be directed particularly at organizations that receive funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a program established through the US Agency for International Development.

According to The Dallas Morning News, NED has provided about US\$4.5 million to citizens groups in Mexico since 1994. The largest recipient of NED funding is Alianza Civica (AC), a coalition of more than 400 grassroots organizations with 50,000 members across the country. The AC played a major role in organizing citizen observers in the 1994 presidential and congressional election. NED funds are also channeled to two women's democracy movements, the PRD-affiliated Mujeres en Lucha por la Democracia and the PAN-affiliated Asociacion Civica Femenina de Mexico. Human rights groups immediately criticized the PRI for the bill. Calling the initiative an "unfortunate and regressive" measure, Oscar Gonzalez, president of Mexico's human rights

academy (Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, AMDH), said the legislation was a clear illustration of a "hardening" in the PRI's position.

Earlier this year, the Mexican government pressured the European Union to cancel a grant of US\$420,000 for human rights groups to monitor the July 6 elections (see SourceMex, 04/02/97). The Zedillo administration, attempting to appease human rights groups, said the Mexican government would request that the United Nations manage and disburse any financial assistance to nongovernmental organizations for election observers. But Dong Nguyen, who will oversee the UN's delegation observing the Mexican election, said the organization will be serving entirely in a technical advisory capacity and will not provide financial assistance to nongovernmental organizations.

Meanwhile, the two major opposition parties are taking advantage of Zedillo's backtracking on his promise earlier this year to keep a healthy distance from the electoral process. In mid-April, Carlos Castillo Peraza of the PAN, who is running for mayor of Mexico City, accused Zedillo of using the resources of his office to support the campaign of PRI candidate Alfredo del Mazo. "The chief of state should perform his role as president of the republic and not enter the political arena in such a manner," said Castillo.

A stronger challenge to Zedillo's role in the election came from PRD president Manuel Lopez Obrador, who wrote a strongly worded letter to executive questioning the appropriateness of using the power of the presidency to campaign for PRI candidates. Furthermore, Lopez Obrador accused Zedillo of aiding the ruling party's "dirty campaign" against the opposition. PAN and PRD legislators also took the opportunity to criticize Zedillo's call for voters to retain a PRI majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Speaking to reporters, Deputies Alejandro Gonzalez Alcocer of the PAN and Javier Gonzalez Garza of the PRD said opposition parties are "politically mature" to seek legislative compromises with the administration. "We cannot push confrontation among the branches of government because this will harm our country," said Gonzalez.

Polls show very tight race for Mexico City mayor

According to the most recent public-opinion poll conducted by Gabinete de Estudios de Opinion (GEO), the race for mayor of Mexico City remains extremely tight. The GEO survey showed 21.8% support for the PRI's Del Mazo, 21% for the PAN's Castillo Peraza, and 19.5% for the PRD's Cardenas. The poll, based on a survey of 400 potential voters in Mexico City on April 18-19, was commissioned by the daily newspapers El Economista and Diario de Monterrey. The survey asked respondents whether they based their decision on the candidate or the party. Roughly 34.8% said they took into account both the candidate and the political party, another 25.3% said just the candidate, and 21.3% said only the party.

The GEO survey seems to support a public-opinion poll conducted by the PAN, which shows a comeback of sorts for Castillo Peraza. In earlier polls conducted by GEO and other organizations, Castillo had fallen several percentage points behind his opponents (see SourceMex, 03/19/97 and 04/16/97). However, the PAN poll showed Castillo with 34.4% of voter preference. The PAN insisted that the results are based on a survey of 67,000 residents of Mexico City, not just members of the PAN.

According to Daniel Lund, director of the polling organization MORI de Mexico, the tight race is not surprising, since many voters who would have traditionally supported the PRI are now supporting opposition parties. PRI candidate leads polls in Nuevo Leon governor's race A tight race is also expected for the governorship of Nuevo Leon. According to a poll conducted by Centro de Estudios de Opinion (CEO), PRI candidate Jose Natividad Gonzalez Paras leads his PAN opponent Fernando Canales Clariond by a margin of 41.3% to 30.7%. The poll showed very little support for candidates from the other parties.

In Nuevo Leon, representatives of the PAN, PT, Mexican Democratic Party (PDM), and the Democratic Coalition (which includes the PRD) have filed a complaint accusing the PRI of attempting to unduly influence voters ahead of the election. The parties took issue with the timing of interim governor Benjamin Canales Clariond's move to offer grants to state residents to reduce the cost of public utilities, such as sewer and water fees.

The PRI is facing a less competitive race in the northern state of Sonora. According to a CEO survey, PRI candidate Armando Lopez Nogales received support from 38.5% of respondents, followed by 16.6% for Enrique Salgado Bojorquez of the PAN and 7.9% for Jesus Zambrano Grijalva of the PRD. The survey was conducted March 21-23 in 70 different locations throughout Sonora. Other gubernatorial contests are scheduled this year in Queretaro, Colima, San Luis Potosi, and Campeche states. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 04/21/97; El Universal, 04/02/97, 04/04/97, 04/22/97, 04/25/97; El Nacional, 04/25/97; Novedades, 04/01/97, 04/02/97, 04/14/97, 04/21/97, 04/22/97, 04/24/97, 04/25/97, 04/28/97; Reuter, 04/19/97, 04/28/97; El Economista, 04/28/97; La Jornada, 04/02/97, 04/04/97, 04/23/97, 04/25/97, 04/29/97; The News, 04/09/97, 04/15/97, 04/22/97, 04/24/97, 04/25/97, 04/29/97; Excelsior, 04/15/97, 04/16/97, 04/21/97, 04/24/97, 04/25/97, 04/29/97; The Dallas Morning News, 04/27/97, 04/28/97, 04/30/97)

-- End --