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PRI Wins Gubernatorial Elections in Veracruz, Oaxaca, Loses Aguascalientes

by LADB Staff

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In elections Aug. 2, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) handily won the governor's races in Oaxaca and Veracruz states but lost the contest in Aguascalientes by a wider-than-expected margin to the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Voter participation was highest in Aguascalientes, where roughly 67% of registered voters went to the polls. In contrast, only 30% of voters in Oaxaca and 52% in Veracruz cast ballots.

PAN candidate wins easily in Aguascalientes

In Aguascalientes, PAN candidate Felipe Gonzalez Gonzalez received 53% of the vote, compared with 36% for Hector Hugo Olivares Ventura of the PRI and 7% for Alfonso Bernal Sahagun of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). The margin of victory for the PAN candidate was a surprise, since most public-opinion polls before the election projected a tight race between Gonzalez and Olivares.

In addition to capturing the governor's seat, the PAN also won 10 of the 18 directly elected seats in the state legislature, giving the party a full majority in that body. Along with the four seats allocated on the basis of the percentage of the votes received by each party, the PAN will have 14 seats in the next legislature. In the past legislature, the PAN and PRI each had 11 seats, with another five seats distributed among smaller parties. The PAN also retained the mayoral seat in the state capital of Aguascalientes and six other cities.

With the victory in Aguascalientes, the PAN will again control the state legislature in six states, including Jalisco, Guanajuato, Baja California, Nuevo Leon, and Queretaro. Some analysts said the victory helped compensate for the party's recent loss in the gubernatorial race in Chihuahua state, which was won by the PRI (see SourceMex, 07/08/98).

The PAN victory in Aguascalientes was tainted by accusations that President Ernesto Zedillo's administration allowed the party to win in exchange for supporting the government's position regarding the bank-rescue fund (Fondo Bancario de Proteccion al Ahorro, FOBAPROA). PAN president Felipe Calderon Hinojosa denied the charges. "The party is not for sale," Hinojosa told reporters (see Notimex, 07/22/98).

Former senator Miguel Aleman elected in Veracruz

In Veracruz, PRI candidate Miguel Aleman Velasco, a former federal senator, won by a wide margin over opponents from the PAN, the PRD, and a candidate for a coalition formed by the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). Aleman received 49% of the vote, compared with 28% for Luis Pazos of the PAN, 13% for Arturo Herviz Reyes of the PRD, and 7% for Ignacio Morales Lechuga of the PT-PVEM. Morales Lechuga, who had sought the PRD nomination, likely took some votes that would have gone to Herviz Reyes.

The PRI also won 21 of the 24 directly elected seats for the state legislature, with the PAN taking the district representing the city of Veracruz and the PRD winning in its stronghold in the port of Coatzacoalcos. Another 21 seats will be divided based on percentage of the vote. Analysts attributed the large margin of victory for Aleman and PRI legislative candidates to a strong campaign in rural areas, where the party continues to employ its electoral tactics of vote-buying and patronage. In addition, Aleman carries strong name recognition in the state as the son of former president Miguel Aleman Valdes (1946-1952).

Aleman's impressive victory led to speculation that the governor-elect would seek the presidential nomination for the PRI for 2000. However, Aleman immediately quashed that talk. "I was elected to serve as governor for six years," said Aleman.

Oaxaca election tainted by charges of fraud

In Oaxaca, PRI candidate Jose Nelson Murat Casab, a federal senator, took 48% of the vote, compared with 37% for Hector Sanchez of the PRD and 7% for Pablo Arnaud of the PAN. The PRI also took 21 of the 25 seats in direct elections for the state legislature, compared with three for the PRD and one for the PAN. The PRD filed a formal protest with Oaxaca electoral authorities (Consejo Estatal Electoral, CEE) accusing the PRI of fraud. PRD candidate Sanchez, a federal senator, said the party would closely examine the final results for evidence of fraud. "We are going to contest the results of this election," said Sanchez.

In an interview with The New York Times, political analyst Sergio Aguayo acknowledged that the PRD complaint may have some legitimacy. "It's extraordinarily difficult to establish modern voting methods in a state like Oaxaca," said Aguayo, who has worked to prevent electoral fraud in many states. "There are still wide margins there for electoral fraud."

The Oaxaca election was peaceful despite concerns that the guerrilla group Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) would stage attacks to disrupt the voting. The EPR refused to pledge a cease-fire during the elections, but also did not launch any attacks. During the campaign and in his victory speech, Murat said he would seek peace with the EPR. "The door is open for negotiations, even for those with utopian thinking," Murat said. [Sources: Proceso, 07/26/98; The News, 07/30/98, 08/03/98; El Nacional, Reuters, 08/03/98; La Jornada, 07/27/98, 07/31/98, 08/03/98, 08/04/98; Novedades, 07/31/98, 08/03/98, 08/04/98; Associated Press, 07/30/98, 08/03/98, 08/04/98; The New York Times, 08/03/98, 08/04/98; The Dallas Morning News, 07/31/98, 08/04/98; El Sol del Centro (Aguascalientes), El Diario de Xalapa, El Economista, 08/03/98, 08/04/98; The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, 08/04/98; Excelsior, 07/31/98, 08/03-05/98; El Universal, 08/03-05/98]

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