

9-29-1999

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Recommended Citation

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PRI Wins Coahuila Gubernatorial, Legislative Elections by Landslide

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1999-09-29

In an election that could have implications for the 2000 presidential race, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) won a convincing victory over a coalition of opposition parties in Coahuila state on Sept. 26. The PRI won the gubernatorial, state legislative, and mayoral elections by a landslide against the Coalicion Coahuila 99, an alliance formed by the PAN, the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

In the gubernatorial race, PRI candidate Enrique Martinez received slightly more than 59% of the vote, compared with only 34% for coalition candidate Juan Antonio Garcia Villa. The remainder of the vote was divided among several minor parties. The PRI also took 19 of the 20 directly elected seats in the state legislature and 35 of the 38 mayoral posts, including the major cities of Saltillo, Monclova, and Torreon. This year's election reversed the trends of the 1996 vote, when the PAN won the mayoral races in the state's three largest cities and made strong gains in the state legislature (see SourceMex, 1996-11-10).

PRI sees victory as preview of 2000 presidential race

The PRI was quick to label the sweeping victory a preview of the 2000 presidential and congressional elections, where the governing party may face a coalition of opposition parties. "The outcome of these elections is a prelude to what could be a PRI victory in 2000 against a possible coalition," said PRI president Jose Antonio Gonzalez Fernandez. Governor-elect Martinez repeated the sentiment at a victory celebration. "The election results show that alliances of this type don't work," Martinez said.

Martinez's landslide victory was marred by a relatively low turnout, with roughly 50% of registered voters casting ballots. Additionally, numerous complaints were made regarding PRI campaign violations, including vote-buying and coercion. The daily newspaper El Siglo de Torreon reported that PRI members hired a fleet of taxis to take residents of poor neighborhoods in Torreon to the polls. Some political observers had predicted a poor performance for Coalicion Coahuila 99 because of a lack of cohesion among its members and they expect the same situation to develop at the national level.

Jaime Gonzalez Graff, director of the Instituto Mexicano de Estudios Politicos, said enthusiasm was noticeably lacking in the PT, PRD, and PVEM campaigns on behalf of Garcia Villa, a PAN federal senator. Garcia Villa was the first coalition candidate who did not come from the ranks of the PRI. In recent elections in Zacatecas, Baja California Sur, Tlaxcala, and Nayarit states, the coalition candidates were recent PRI defectors. In all cases, the victor gained some votes from PRI members unhappy with the party's candidate.

National coalition effort falls apart

An effort to form a coalition at the national level fell apart in late September, when the PAN rejected a proposal from a panel of 14 citizens to select a common candidate for the original eight-party coalition. The panel had been asked to put forth a proposal after the two largest parties in the coalition, the PAN and the PRD, failed to agree on a method to select a common candidate (see SourceMex, 1999-09-15). The proposal sought to combine the PRD's desire for a fully open primary and the PAN's insistence on a more limited consultation. But the PAN said the panel's proposal was too similar to the PRD's original plan. The center-right party was especially concerned that a primary open to all citizens risked massive fraud similar to what occurred in the PRD's internal election earlier this year (see SourceMex, 1999-03-24). The irregularities forced the PRD to hold a second election in July (see SourceMex, 1999-08-04).

Political observers said the split very much reflected the strong differences between candidates Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD and Vicente Fox of the PAN, both of whom wanted to be the coalition candidate. An open primary was considered Cardenas' only chance to gain the coalition nomination, since public-opinion polls had consistently shown PAN candidate Vicente Fox leading by a wide margin. "If Vicente Fox is not capable of facing a primary election when he has a two-to-one advantage, he doesn't deserve to be the leader of the opposition or of Mexico," said a frustrated Manuel Camacho Solis, leader of the Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD). The PCD, PRD, PT and three other parties that had participated in the effort to form the larger coalition are now expected to form a smaller alliance that will put its weight behind Cardenas.

The Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), the only other party to reject the panel's proposal, is expected to form an alliance with the PAN in the 2000 election. To complicate matters, PRD member Porfirio Munoz Ledo, who has split with Cardenas, has accepted the presidential nomination from the Partido Autentico de la Revolucion Mexicana (PARM) and has proposed another opposition alliance called La Nueva Republica. A handful of PRD members have followed Munoz Ledo to the PARM.

With the failure to form a coalition for the presidential race, some PRD candidates are hoping for a more united front in congressional elections. PRD Deputy Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera said the opposition should now concentrate on retaining control of the Chamber of Deputies. In the 1996 election, the PAN, PRD, PT, and PVEM collectively won more votes than the PRI, which gave them control of the lower house (see SourceMex, 1996-11-13). "Not everything has been lost," said PRD secretary-general Jesus Zambrano, referring to the failed negotiations with the PAN. "An agreement on the legislative front is still possible."

The PRI, meanwhile, is scheduled to hold a primary on Nov. 7 to select its candidates for president and mayor of Mexico City. Former interior secretary Francisco Labastida and Tabasco Gov. Roberto Madrazo Pintado are the leading candidates for the presidential nomination. (Sources: Notimex, 09/26/99; El Universal, 09/23/99, 09/27/99; Associated Press, 09/23/99, 09/26/99, 09/27/99; El Siglo de Torreon, 09/21/99, 09/24/99, 09/27/99, 09/28/99; Vanguardia (Saltillo), 09/24/99, 09/27/99, 09/28/99; El Sol de la Laguna, 09/27/99, 09/28/99; Bloomberg news service, 09/28/99; Reuters, 09/22/99, 09/26/99, 09/27/99, 09/29/99; Excelsior, 09/23/99, 09/24/99, 09/27-29/99; The News, 09/23/99, 09/24/99, 09/29/99;

La Jornada, 09/23/99, 09/27-29/99; Novedades, 09/23/99, 09/27/99, 09/29/99; El Economista, 09/23/99, 09/24/99, 09/27-29/99; The Dallas Morning News, 09/25/99, 09/28/99, 09/29/99; Los Angeles Times, San Diego Union-Tribune, The New York Times, 09/29/99)

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