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Recent public-opinion polls suggest that Mexico's July 2 presidential election could be closer than the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had anticipated. While most polls show PRI candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa ahead in voter preference, his lead over rival Vicente Fox Quesada of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) is only a few percentage points. Some polls even show the two candidates in a statistical dead heat. Political observers generally agree that Fox is capable of defeating Labastida, which would end the PRI's string of 13 consecutive presidential victories. In its most recent report published in late March, Grupo de Economistas y Asociados (GEA) said for the first time the winner of a Mexican presidential election cannot be forecast with certainty at this stage in the campaign. "We have never seen a close campaign like this in the history of our country," said Daniel Lund, president of MUND Opinion Services, which conducted the survey in late February for the Mexico City daily newspaper The News. "Labastida has not sewn it up, and for him that is a crisis." The MUND poll showed Labastida with 41% support, compared with 37% for Fox and 22% for Cuauhtemoc Cardenas Solorzano of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). More recent polls published by the daily newspapers El Universal, Reforma, and the private Instituto Milenio- Multimedios showed support for Labastida ranging from 35% to 45%, compared with 35% to 40% for Fox, and 11% to 19% for Cardenas. Some analysts believe that Fox's strong showing in the polls is more directly related to his charismatic personality than to issues. Prominent political analyst Lorenzo Meyer notes that Fox, Cardenas, and Labastida are raising similar themes during their campaigns. "All three are dealing in the same universe, citing the need to create jobs, combat corruption, and promote education," Meyer told the weekly news magazine Proceso. "They are unable to distinguish themselves from the others or to awaken the imagination." Meyer said Labastida's inability to distinguish himself from his two rivals could work against the governing party. "In the short term, it's his lack of charisma," said Meyer. "In the long term, [many voters are beginning to see that] the PRI is something that belongs to the past." Support for the governing party has declined gradually since 1976, when the only candidate running in the election was the PRI's Jose Lopez Portillo. In the last two elections, PRI candidates Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Ernesto Zedillo each received only slightly more than 50% of the vote. Some observers believe that Salinas would have lost the 1988 election to Cardenas if the PRI had not tampered with computer results.

PRI electoral tactics under scrutiny
In an interview with Proceso, independent Sen. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser said the PRI may resort to tactics similar to those in 1988 if it appears Labastida is losing the election. "The PRI can always go to what I call its Plan B, attempting to influence the results of the election outside the legal electoral parameters," said Aguilar Zinser. Cardenas was leading Salinas in that election before electoral authorities announced a breakdown in the computer system used to count the votes. Salinas suspiciously vaulted ahead of Cardenas when the system was repaired, leading many critics to suspect massive fraud. Opposition parties are also concerned that the PRI will resort to its common tactic of buying votes. In December, the four opposition parties represented in

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the Chamber of Deputies created a special committee to ensure that government funds are not diverted to the electoral campaigns of PRI candidates. The PRI delegation in the lower house has tried unsuccessfully to dissolve the committee or to limit its scope. "We intend to stop any possible misappropriation of funds," said committee chair Elodia Gutierrez of the PAN. A majority of the illegal expenditures for campaigns occurs in rural areas where the PRI already has strong support. In a confidential report obtained by El Universal in late March, the PRI said it expected to gain more than 60% of the rural vote this year. Cardenas' relatively low standing in the polls has led to suggestions that he throw his support behind Fox. But the PRD candidate has insisted he will not back Fox nor negotiate any alliance. A good deal of animosity remains between the two candidates following last year's failed attempt to form a united opposition coalition to compete in the 2000 election (see SourceMex, August 4, 1999, September 29, 1999). But the opportunity to unseat the PRI may be too strong a temptation for Cardenas' supporters. "What's important is that some of Cardenas' backers have concluded that Fox is the only candidate who can beat the PRI," said prominent political scientist Jorge Castaneda, who knows both opposition candidates well. The candidates will have further opportunity to air their views in debates scheduled in late April and late May. The format and dates for the debates were announced March 28 after difficult negotiations among the three camps. Campaign spokespersons said the first debate, scheduled for April 25, will be limited to Labastida, Fox, and Cardenas. The second, set for May 23, will also include candidates Porfirio Munoz Ledo of the Partido Autentico de la Revolucion Democratica (PARM), Manuel Camacho Solis of the Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD), and Gilberto Rincon Gallardo of the Partido de Democracia Social (PDS). Fox is also the candidate for the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), while Cardenas represents the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and two other small parties.

Economy expected to play major role in election

Mexico's recent strong macroeconomic results are expected to play a major role in the election. Some analysts believe the Zedillo administration's ability to keep inflation low, foster economic growth, and attract foreign investment will influence some voters to vote for Labastida. The perception that the PRI has put the Mexican economy on a solid footing is enhanced by recent favorable investment ratings awarded to Mexico by Moody's Investor Services and Standard & Poor's and by the country's new free-trade agreement with the European Union (EU), scheduled to go into effect on July 1. But other political analysts disagree, suggesting instead that the strong macroeconomic factors could work against the PRI. These analysts say many voters could view Mexico's economic stability as an opportunity to risk a vote against corruption and for someone other than the governing-party candidate. Most of these voters would support Fox, whose economic policies differ little from those promoted by Labastida. Both Labastida and Fox support fiscal discipline, an independent central bank, free trade, flexible money-supply policies, and an improved tax-collection system. Fox has pledged to push for a 7% annual GDP growth, while Labastida has kept his target at a more modest 5%. Cardenas, meanwhile, has placed a major emphasis on gaining support in the impoverished rural areas. His campaign speeches have focused on renegotiation of some aspects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to favor the domestic market, particularly the agriculture sector. But this has failed to boost his support, since Labastida and Fox have also pledged to alleviate poverty, support agriculture, and boost small and medium-sized enterprises. "Let's measure our results in new jobs and in increased salaries and better incomes for campesinos," Labastida said in a campaign speech. The business sector, which in past presidential
elections has fallen in step behind the PRI candidate, is expected to divide its support between Fox and Labastida in 2000. Unlike past elections, when industrial chambers openly endorsed the PRI, many business organizations have officially decided to remain neutral. "We are apolitical," said Jorge Marin Santillan, president of the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE), an umbrella group for all the business chambers in Mexico. "We also respect the independence of our members, some of whom support the PRI, others the PAN, and still others the PRD." Some groups like the Asociacion de Banqueros de Mexico (ABM) are informally supporting Fox. At a recent ABM convention in Acapulco, Fox received a standing ovation from participants after his speech, while addresses by Labastida and Cardenas received only polite applause.

**Labor vote no longer automatic for PRI**

The PRI is expected to again count on support from the official labor groups, the Congreso del Trabajo (CT) and the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM). In past elections, these organizations have delivered thousands of votes to the governing party. But the endorsement of CT and CTM leaders may not necessarily translate into votes from rank-and-file union members, who are expected to defect to Cardenas and even Fox. "Pluralism appears to be the trend in labor organizations," economist Alberto Arnaut of the Colegio de Mexico told Reuters. The CTM and CT have also lost some members to independent organizations such as the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT). UNT leaders have pledged to remain neutral, but member unions generally support the PRD. (Sources: Businessweek, 03/06/00; The New York Times, 03/12/00; Associated Press-Dow Jones news service, 03/19/00; The Dallas Morning News, 03/12/00, 03/20/00; Los Angeles Times, 03/17/00, 03/21/00; The News, 03/13/00, 03/21/00; San Antonio Express-News, 03/22/00; Proceso, 03/12/00, 03/26/00; Associated Press, 03/21/00, 03/27/00; Novedades, 03/27/00; Reuters, 03/09/00, 03/21/00, 03/23/00, 03/27/00, 03/28/00; El Financiero, 03/28/00; Excelsior, 03/17/00, 03/20/00, 03/21/00, 03/24/00, 03/29/00; El Universal, 03/21/00, 03/23/00, 03/27/00, 03/29/00; Reforma, 02/14/00, 02/21/00, 03/17/00, 03/29/00; El Economista, 03/29/00)

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