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Federal Electoral Institute Unable To Stop Governing Party From Using Patronage Programs To Influence Voters

by LADB Staff
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The independent Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) has taken extraordinary steps to prevent outright fraud in the July 2 presidential elections. But the IFE has been unable to stop the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) from using more subtle traditional methods to try to influence voters in what is expected to be one of the tightest presidential elections in Mexican history. Among other things, the IFE has implemented a strict system of voter verification, developed tamper-proof ballot boxes, and installed a computerized system that will post returns on the Internet on election day. These changes are intended to prevent a repeat of the 1988 election, which the PRI is widely accused of having stolen after engineering a "computer malfunction." In the end, Carlos Salinas de Gortari won the race with less than 50% of the vote. Conversely, the IFE has been powerless to prevent the PRI from resorting to its traditional practice of bribing voters to support the party in the July election. This practice is especially evident in rural areas, where residents have come to associate public-assistance programs directly with the governing party. "I think the IFE can guarantee a fair vote count, but unfortunately it does not have the jurisdiction to oversee whether voters are being pressured," said Rogelio Gomez, director of the citizens watchdog Alianza Civica.

A public-opinion poll conducted by MUND Opinion Services among participants in public-assistance programs like Progresa and Procampo found strong sympathies for the PRI. In the poll, 43% of respondents said they intended to vote for the PRI. In comparison, a similar poll conducted among the general population showed 33% of respondents were planning to vote for the governing party. "Traditionally those who receive state or federal aid tend to prefer the PRI in higher percentages than the general population," said MUND president Daniel Lund. Salvador Velazco, a political science professor at McKenna College in California, said the lack of political and civic education among residents of rural areas allows the PRI to get away with these practices. "These people do not know that programs like Progresa do not depend on the PRI," said Velazco. "They are afraid of losing this assistance." Lund said support for the governing party in rural areas could make a difference for PRI candidate Francisco Labastida in the election. IFE statistics show almost one-fourth of the 58.5 million registered voters in Mexico reside in rural communities. "Any marginal advantage makes a huge difference for any of the candidates," Lund told The Dallas Morning News. Labastida faces competitive race Most recent polls show Labastida slightly ahead or slightly behind Vicente Fox Quesada of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). One poll conducted by the daily newspaper Reforma on May 27-28 showed Labastida leading Fox by 42% to 38%. But another poll conducted in late May by Alducin y Asociados and published in the daily newspaper El Universal showed Fox leading Labastida by 42% to 36%. While Fox and Labastida have held steady in recent polls, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) has enhanced his standing among potential voters. Giving his relatively low standing in the polls, Cardenas has little chance of winning the July election. But some analysts think Cardenas could take enough votes away from Labastida or Fox to influence the outcome of the election. Polls show Fox's appeal has been greatest among residents of urban areas and members of...
the younger generation, who are seeking to root out the political corruption associated with the PRI. Fox's success in portraying himself as the "candidate of change" is evident in the wide cross section of support he has attained, including from prominent leftists like Porfirio Munoz Ledo and Hector Castillo. Castillo is the son of the late Heberto Castillo who represented the PRD in the Mexican Senate for many years. The PAN candidate also enhanced his standing with his strong performances in two presidential debates, compared with the lackluster showings by Labastida and Cardenas.

**Labastida brings old-guard PRI members into campaign**

Labastida's weak performance in the first debate led the PRI to change its campaign strategy and enlist the support of some of the party's old guard like former Puebla Gov. Manuel Bartlett Diaz and ex-party president Humberto Roque Villanueva. Bartlett and Roque both challenged Labastida for the presidential nomination in the PRI primary in November 1999 (see SourceMex, November 10, 1999). Some analysts said the presence of old-guard PRI members in Labastida's campaign is a clear sign that the party has abandoned its pledge to conduct a clean election and is determined to win at all costs. Bartlett is said to have coordinated the fraud that robbed Cardenas of a victory against Salinas de Gortari in 1988. "At the beginning of his campaign...Labastida proposed a 'new PRI' and offered to slam the door on fraudulent practices and corrupt officials," said Denise Dresser, an expert on Mexican political issues with the Pacific Council on International Policy at the University of Southern California. "The return of the PRI's retrograde rear guard, however, shows that Labastida is willing to compromise his principles to revive his political fortune." Bartlett has openly defended the PRI's practice of using public-assistance programs and other forms of patronage to win the election. "Yes, federal social programs are carried out by the PRI, and their aim is to win the presidency," Bartlett said in an interview with the weekly news magazine Milenio. "We don't have any reason to deny it. There are no such things as neutral programs." Agriculture Secretary Romarico Arroyo Marroquin also defended the use of assistance programs to advance the PRI's electoral aims. "In mentioning these programs, we must consider their positive effect on people's lives," Arroyo told reporters. "Logically, the opposition parties are the ones that want us to stop using them during the electoral season."

**Legislative committee continues to monitor expenditures**

A special legislative committee created to monitor government expenditures during the electoral season has received complaints about efforts by PRI elected officials to bribe voters. The committee (Comision Antidesvios), created in December 1999, was approved with the support of the opposition parties in the Chamber of Deputies (see SourceMex, December 15, 1999). PRI legislators decided to participate in the committee after its formation. But PRI deputies withdrew from the panel in mid-May because of disagreements about using nongovernmental organizations to help monitor misuse of public funds for electoral purposes. "This is a violation of the law," the PRI members said. The committee has received numerous complaints about the PRI misusing taxpayer funds to promote its electoral aims. At least 15 such cases have been documented in the states of Yucatan, Chiapas, and Veracruz, said committee chair Elodia Gutierrez Estrada, a member of the PAN. The PRI practice of bribing voters was also documented by a 30-member delegation of international observers who visited Mexico for 10 days during May. "We found that the line between being a public servant and a political campaigner is frequently blurred," delegation member Richard Warren told reporters. PRD candidate Cardenas placed the blame directly on the shoulders of President Ernesto Zedillo, who has done little to discourage the use of Progresa and other programs to promote the PRI. Some
reports say Zedillo distributed US$4.3 billion in public works among 20 states during April and May, twice as much as in the same two-month period in 1999. The administration, meanwhile, attempted to suppress an IFE letter urging all elected officials, regardless of political party, to stop all public-works projects during the last month before the election. "Legitimate publicity about public works and government programs tends to be confused with electoral propaganda by political parties and their candidates while voters should be deciding how to vote," said the IFE letter to Zedillo, Mexico City Mayor Rosario Robles, and governors across the country. Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco wrote to the IFE, urging it to rescind its request. This angered some members of the institute. "The federal government is doing everything it can to influence the outcome of the election," said Juan Molinar, one of nine members of the IFE's advisory council. "They're cynical and hypocritical." (Sources: Notimex, 05/23/00; The Dallas Morning News, 05/21/00, 05/28/00; El Economista, 05/31/00; Novedades, 05/18/00, 05/22/00, 06/01/00; Reuters, 05/29/00, 05/31/00, 06/01/00; Proceso, 05/28/00, 06/04/00; Los Angeles Times, 06/04/00; The News, 05/17/00, 05/21/00, 06/01/00, 06/05/00; Associated Press, 05/21/00, 05/29/00, 06/05/00; Reforma, 05/20/00, 05/30/00, 06/06/00; Excelsior, 05/23/00, 06/02/00, 06/05/00, 06/06/00; The Washington Post, 05/27/00, 06/06/00; La Jornada, 05/29/00, 05/30/00, 06/05/00, 06/06/00; El Universal, 06/05/00, 06/06/00)