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A Handful of Districts Considered as Key to Congressional Elections in July

by LADB Staff

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Political observers say the composition of the Chamber of Deputies could be determined by tendencies in a handful of electoral districts in the upcoming July 6 election. In an article published on May 12, the daily newspaper Reforma said the major parties are especially interested in 12 districts where voting was tight in the 2000 election. In these districts, the victor won with less than a 1% margin of the total vote. The 12 districts are scattered throughout the country, in the states of Baja California, Baja California Sur, Coahuila, Durango, Jalisco, Michoacan, Morelos, Tabasco, and the Federal District.

A separate internal study conducted by the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) anticipates competitive elections in as many as 60 districts, where the party that leads in voter preferences is ahead by fewer than five percentage points over its nearest competitor. The PRI study, obtained by the daily newspaper El Universal, said another 133 districts could become competitive because the leading party is ahead by only five to 20 percentage points over its nearest competitor.

Most nationwide public opinion polls suggest the election could come down to a battle between the PRI and President Vicente Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). In a poll commissioned by the daily newspaper Reforma in mid- April, 40% of respondents expressed preference for the PAN, 36% for the PRI, 17% for the PRD, and 3% for the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). The poll had a margin of error of 2.5%, which means the PRI and the PAN are in a statistical tie.

Additionally, the PRI and the PVEM are running in a coalition known as the Alianza para Todos in many areas of the country. The two parties together obtained 39% of the total vote among respondents, putting the alliance just one percentage point behind the PAN. The PRI predicts that none of the close races will involve all three parties, and will always pit the PRI against either the PRD or the PAN.

PRD banking on popularity of Mexico City mayor

PRD leaders acknowledge that the party is running third in almost every single public opinion poll, but the center- left party expects to pull a major surprise in the July 6 election. "We are in a condition to reverse the situation to obtain the largest percentage of the vote," said Juan Guerra, secretary of electoral affairs in the PRD's executive committee (consejo ejecutivo nacional, CEN). The PRD is counting on a strong performance in Mexico City and Mexico state, which could have an influence on the party's performance in the rest of the country.

Party officials believe the popularity of Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador could have the same effect in drawing votes to PRD as the PAN's Vicente Fox had in gaining support

for his party's candidates in the 2000 election. Fox won the election with 43% of the vote, helping the PAN obtain a large share of seats in the Congress and several governorships (see SourceMex, 2000-07-05). In a recent poll conducted among residents of Mexico City, 83% of respondents approved of the performance of Lopez Obrador, who is considered a likely candidate for the PRD in the 2006 presidential election. "The effect that Fox had on the PAN in 2000 is present for Andres Manuel in 2003," said Marcelino Castaneda, who is in charge of the PRD electoral strategy in Mexico City.

The PRI internal study obtained by El Universal suggests the PRD will have to win big in non-traditional areas to make significant gains in the mid-term election. "The PRD's support is extremely concentrated," said the study. "One third of its potential victories are located in three states." The PRD is also attempting to increase its appeal by allocating at-large seats for prominent politicians and other personalities who were previously not members of the party. The list includes social scientist Julio Boltvinik and former PRI members Socorro Diaz and Manuel Camacho Solis. Camacho once served as Mexico City mayor, foreign relations secretary, and Chiapas peace negotiator.

PAN reaches beyond traditional constituency

The PAN, for its part, contends that President Fox remains sufficiently popular to help the party in the 2003 election. According to a survey conducted by the Office of the President, Fox received a favorable rating among 71% among 800 respondents. Fox's popularity may be tied in part to the president's decision to oppose the US attack on Iraq in March of this year (see SourceMex, 2003-02-26). The president has also continued to visibly support rights for Mexican emigrants in the US, a position that plays well among Mexican voters.

Furthermore, Fox has taken actions that opposition parties consider "electorally motivated," such as the negotiation of an agricultural agreement with the country's major farm groups. The accord includes the possibility of seeking changes in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that would exempt corn and beans from tariff reductions (see SourceMex, 2003-04-23). In addition to going after the agricultural vote, the PAN is making an effort to reach out to indigenous groups that are disgruntled by the PRI and the PRD.

The PAN included the former director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) Huberto Aldaza among its congressional candidates. This gained at least a lukewarm endorsement from the influential Asamblea Nacional Indigena Plural por la Autonomia (ANIPA), which recently hinted it would abandon its support for the PRD because the center-left party did not include any member of indigenous groups among its congressional candidates.

The president is accused of attempting to gain the vote of the poor by announcing a new program of food subsidies. The program, known as "Paquete Alcance" would give 5.40 pesos (US\$0.53) per day to 300,000 of the country's poorest families to acquire basic foodstuffs. Opposition legislators immediately denounced the program as a ploy to gain votes for the PAN in the upcoming election. "The only way to combat poverty is to promote policies of economic and social development," said PRD Deputy Erick Villanueva, who is also the floor leader in the Chamber of Deputies.

PRI Deputy David Penchyna accused Fox of hypocrisy by supporting an economic philosophy that he had previously rejected. "This PAN administration finally understands that [the PRI] was correct in promoting public-assistance programs," said Penchyna. The administration countered that the program does not take effect until after the election, and therefore is not intended to influence the outcome of the vote.

Another factor that could make a difference in the election are the tendencies of women voters, which according to the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) account for almost 52% of the voter list. This demographic led the three parties to reserve a large share of their at-large candidacies for women. According to the daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy, each of the five major parties, which includes the PVEM and the Partido del Trabajo (PT), allocated between 40% and 50% of these candidacies to women.

PRI enters election with deep divisions

A wild card in the election could be the growing divisions within the PRI, resulting from the decision of party president Roberto Madrazo Pintado to impose the party's at-large candidates. Madrazo ignored recommendations from several influential PRI members like Govs. Arturo Montiel of Mexico state and Miguel Aleman Velasco of Veracruz and former presidential candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa.

The list drafted by Madrazo and his executive committee included mostly Madrazo allies and old-guard PRI members like party secretary-general Elba Esther Gordillo; former governors Manlio Fabio Beltrones, Emilio Chuayffet, Alfredo del Mazo, and Enrique Burgos; and Francisco Rojas Gutierrez, former director of the state-run oil company PEMEX.

In addition, the list contained the names of so-called "bebesaurios (baby dinosaurs)," which are the offspring of old-guard PRI members. This list includes Claudia Ruiz Massieu, niece of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), and Alejandro Murat Hinojosa, son of Oaxaca Gov. Jose Murat Casab. Madrazo's son Fernando, who has very little political experience, was originally on the list but withdrew because of criticisms from party rank-and-file.

Madrazo's decision to tightly control the list of at-large candidates attracted a storm of criticism, especially from party members in Mexico state, which will be a key electoral battle ground on July 6. "We are in rebellion, real and political," said Isidro Pastor, the leader of the PRI in Mexico state. Pastor went as far as to demand Madrazo's resignation because the party leader failed to respect his earlier commitment to give state bodies a greater say in naming candidates. The divisions created concerns among some former PRI leaders like former President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-1988), who worried that the PRI was being weakened by a "lack of leadership."

Some PRI members worried that the divisions could significantly affect the PRI's chances in the upcoming election. Sen. Genaro Borrego called the divisions the party's "greatest crisis" since the 1980s, when prominent members like Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and Porfirio Munoz Ledo left the party to form what eventually became the PRD. "The divisions are real and deeper than anyone has imagined," said Borrego. Madrazo's actions are ironic because he prominently campaigned against the practice of PRI leaders anointing successors, known the "dedazo," during the PRI's first-ever

presidential primary election (see SourceMex, 1999-08-18, 1999-09-15 and 1999-11-10). Madrazo lost that election to Francisco Labastida, but later rebounded to win the party presidency in a tight election over Beatriz Rangel Paredes (see SourceMex, 2002-02-07).

The weekly news magazine Epoca said Madrazo's almost tyrannical control over the list of candidates was also designed to punish the PRI hierarchy in Mexico state, which supported Paredes. "Madrazo preferred to work with other PRI groups in Mexico state and not with the party leaders," said Epoca. "This was a punishment for their opposition when he was seeking the party presidency." Madrazo is also said to have presidential ambitions, and some critics say his decision to impose the list of at-large candidates was designed to put him in a better position to gain the party's nomination in 2006. "The forward-looking spin is that Madrazo was out to undercut potential rivals in the party for the 2006 presidential run," political analyst Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) told the Associated Press. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 14, reported at 10.17 pesos per US \$1.00] (Sources: Notimex, 05/07/03; La Jornada, 04/29/03, 04/30/03, 05/02/03, 05/07-09/03; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/28/03, 05/01/03, 05/02/03, 05/05/03, 05/07/03, 05/09/03, 05/12/03 CNI en Línea, 04/28/03, 05/05/03, 05/12/03; Milenio Diario, 04/29/03, 04/30/01, 05/01/03, 05/07/03, 05/08/03, 05/12/03; Reforma, 04/30/03, 05/01/03, 05/06-09/03; 05/12/03; Epoca, 05/05/03, 05/12/03; El Universal, 04/25/03, 04/29/03, 04/30/03, 05/01/03, 05/02/03, 05/05/03, 05/07/03, 05/08/03, 05/12/03, 05/13/03; El Financiero, 04/29/03, 04/30/03, 05/06/03, 05/07/03, 05/13/03; El Sol de México, 04/30/03, 05/05/03, 05/08/03, 05/09/03, 05/13/03; Associated Press, 05/01/03, 05/05/03, 05/13/03; La Crónica de Hoy, 04/30/03, 05/01/03, 05/08/03, 05/09/03, 05/13/03, 05/14/03)

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