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PRI Wins Big in Tamaulipas, Puebla Gubernatorial Races

by LADB Staff

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The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) won resounding victories in two gubernatorial elections on Nov. 14, placing the former governing party in a good position to reclaim the presidency in 2006. The PRI won by landslide margins in gubernatorial elections in Tamaulipas and Puebla states and appeared to take a narrow victory in Sinaloa state. The governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) was the apparent surprise winner in Tlaxcala state, ousting the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

The narrow margin of victory in Sinaloa for the PRI and in Tlaxcala for the PAN prompted opposition parties to challenge the results, which means that the country's top electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion (TEPJF) could end up deciding the outcome of those races. The electoral court also had a hand in deciding the winners in disputed gubernatorial elections in Oaxaca and Veracruz and the mayoral race in Tijuana, all in favor of the PRI. "We won't know who the official winners are [in Tlaxcala and Sinaloa] for several months," said political analyst Jose Antonio Crespo, of the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE).

The PRD, which faced a major rift going into the Tlaxcala election, also suffered losses in the state legislative and municipal elections in Michoacan state. The PRD also fared very poorly in the three other gubernatorial elections, raising questions about the party's ability to compete outside its strongholds in Mexico City and Zacatecas in the 2006 presidential race.

Low voter participation

Abstentionism was high in most elections, with slightly more than half of registered voters casting their ballots in Tamaulipas, Puebla, and Sinaloa. Additionally, the Tamaulipas and Sinaloa elections were riddled by allegations that donations from drug traffickers helped finance the campaigns of the PRI and the PAN.

The hotly contested election in Tlaxcala brought out 60% of the registered voters in the state, but the lack of a gubernatorial race resulted in only 40% participation in Michoacan. Some legislators are concerned that the high abstentionism may extend to the 2006 presidential elections, especially with political scandals capturing the top headlines in the news media.

This has prompted PAN Sen. Rafael Morgan Alvarez to propose legislation to offer incentives to registered voters who show up at the polls for the 2006 presidential race and all subsequent federal elections. The measure has been turned over to two Senate committees for further study. PRI wins landslide victories in Tamaulipas, Puebla The huge PRI victories in Tamaulipas and Puebla were not surprising because public-opinion polls in the two states had projected that candidates for the two parties would score easy wins in the gubernatorial races.

In Tamaulipas, PRI candidate Eugenio Hernandez Flores received 58.4% of the vote, compared with 31% for Gustavo Cardenas Gutierrez of the PAN and about 7% for Alvaro Garza Cantu of the PRD, said the Instituto Electoral de Tamaulipas (IEETAM). Hernandez is a protege of outgoing Gov. Tomas Yarrington Rubalcava. The strength of the PRI in Tamaulipas was also reflected in the state legislative races, with the party taking 18 of 19 directly elected seats, compared with one for the PAN and none for the PRD.

The PRI also performed well in municipal elections, ousting the PAN from the mayoral seat in the port city of Tampico and the PRD from Ciudad Madero. The PRI, however, lost its hold on the mayoral seat in the US-Mexico border city of Reynosa.

In his victory speech, Hernandez emphasized the strong support the PRI received in Tamaulipas compared with this year's elections in Oaxaca and Veracruz, where the former governing party won narrow and disputed victories (see SourceMex, 2004-08-04 and 2004-09-15). "Let's turn the page and look forward because this process has ended," Hernandez said, claiming victory an hour after polls closed. "We'll wait for the official results, but it's apparent the people of Tamaulipas have chosen us."

PAN candidate Cardenas refused to concede defeat, however, and said he would consider challenging the election results. He accused the PRI and outgoing Gov. Yarrington of violating the election code through illegal campaign practices and voter coercion. "We won't allow them to step on the will of the people of Tamaulipas," said Cardenas, who also ran unsuccessfully for governor in 1998. "We will fight them until the end."

The PRI victory in Puebla was just as resounding as in Tamaulipas, although the margin of victory was a little smaller. Representing the former governing party in the gubernatorial race was Mario Marin Torres, who received about 53% of the vote, compared with 38% for Francisco Fraile Garcia of the PAN and just under 3% for Alejandro Villar Borja of the PRD, said the Comision Estatal Electoral de Puebla (CEEP). Marin Torres will succeed fellow PRI member Melquiades Morales.

In addition to winning the gubernatorial race, the PRI also won all six electoral districts and the mayoral election in Puebla City, which is the state capital. The PAN had governed Puebla City for the past two terms.

PAN performance reflects discontent with President Fox

The relatively poor performance of the PAN in Tamaulipas and Puebla was viewed by some analysts as a combination of discontent with President Vicente Fox's four years in office and the strong electoral machinery that the PRI had built up in the two states. "The truth is that the PAN has been unable to utilize its presidential advantage to win state elections," wrote political columnist Isabel Arvide in the daily political newspaper La Crisis. "The sad paradox is that the party has not kept its hands out of state and local elections. It has done the same as the PRI, but with poor results."

Some analysts said the PRI's strong showing in the two states solidified the party's position ahead of the 2006 election, especially that of party president Roberto Madrazo Pintado. This would be

Madrazo's second try at gaining the nomination, having lost the PRI's first-ever presidential primary to Francisco Labastida Ochoa in 1999 (see SourceMex, 1999-11-10). Party officials plan to hold the presidential primary sometime in 2005. "The PRI machine is still working," wrote nationally syndicated political analyst Salvador Garcia Soto. "It will be interesting to see what happens next with the PAN and PRD, which now seem incapable of competing with the PRI."

The PRI's dominance did not extend to Sinaloa, where the party appears to have won an uncomfortably close gubernatorial race over the PAN. Statistics released by the Comision Estatal Electoral de Sinaloa (CEES) indicate that PRI candidate Jesus Aguilar Padilla received 46.7% of the vote compared with 45.6% for Heriberto Felix Guerra of the PAN. Audomar Ahumada Quintero of the PRD received a scant 4% of the vote. Despite the thin margin of victory, PRI president Madrazo declared victory. "I urge the PAN to recognize its defeat," Madrazo said in a joint press conference with Aguilar.

PAN leaders, who plan to challenge the results of the Sinaloa election before the TEPJF, said their internal data showed that Guerra actually won the election by two percentage points. "Roberto Madrazo should adjust his numbers correctly," said PAN president Luis Felipe Bravo Mena, "because false claims serve no purpose." Several public-opinion polls taken in September and October had indicated that the PRI would win the election handily, but the election turned out to be more competitive than anticipated, with the PAN also winning a tight mayoral race in the port city of Mazatlan.

The closeness of the Sinaloa election, along with the surprisingly tight races in Oaxaca and Veracruz this year, could be a sign that the PRI may be vulnerable in some states that had been considered strongholds, some analysts said.

Elections disastrous for PRD

While the PAN turned in a mixed performance in the Nov. 14 election, analysts said the PRD's electoral fortunes could be considered disastrous. The center-left party not only failed to recruit a viable gubernatorial candidate in Tamaulipas, Puebla, and Sinaloa states, but also lost badly in Tlaxcala because of a bitter dispute among party members regarding the candidacy of Sen. Maricarmen Ramirez, wife of outgoing PRD Gov. Alfonso Sanchez Anaya.

The worst sign for the PRD, however, was its mediocre performance in Michoacan, a state where the party had been advancing steadily. In 2001, PRD candidate Lazaro Cardenas Batel won the gubernatorial election, a plurality in the state legislature, and several municipal races. That election ended a string of PRI-led governments (see SourceMex, 2001-11-14).

In this year's election, the PRD lost a net three seats in the state legislature and several municipal races. The party had hoped to win the mayoral race in Morelia, the state's largest city, and enough seats in the state legislature to give Gov. Cardenas Batel a working majority to pass his initiatives. The PAN won the election in Morelia, which had been governed by the PRI. Some PRD members blamed the party's poor performance on the recent corruption cases involving close associates of Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The most damaging of these cases involved Rene Bejarano, the former floor leader of the PRD in the Mexico City legislative assembly (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF). Several videotapes showed Bejarano soliciting bribes from businessman Carlos Ahumada (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10 and 2004-11-10). "The actions of a few members of the PRD affected the image of our party," said PRD Sen. Jesus Ortega.

PRD president Leonel Godoy Rangel offered a different opinion, downplaying the party's poor results in the Nov. 14 election. "No analyst had given us a chance of winning in Tamaulipas, Puebla, or Sinaloa," said Godoy. The PRD president said the party could still turn its fortunes around with strong performances in elections in Baja California Sur, Hidalgo, Guerrero, and Quintana Roo states in 2005.

PAN surprise winner in Tlaxcala

The PAN was the beneficiary of divisions in the PRD and PRI in Tlaxcala, with many members of those two parties casting their vote for Hector Ortiz of the center-right party. The divisions were especially damaging for the PRD, following the bitter dispute on whether Sen. Ramirez should represent the party in the gubernatorial race. Ramirez had actually won an internal primary, despite objections from the PRD executive committee (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN).

PRD leaders tried either to force Ramirez to withdraw or Gov. Sanchez Anaya to resign his post (see SourceMex, 2004-07-14 and 2004-09-15). Both refused the party's ultimatum, forcing the PRD CEN to try to disavow Ramirez's candidacy. PRD leaders then attempted to nullify Ramirez's victory and designated a substitute candidate. Ramirez, however, won a court injunction against the party, allowing her to remain on the ballot. The controversy left the PRD deeply divided, with many members opting to support Ortiz, the popular former mayor of Tlaxcala city.

Ortiz's decision to represent the PAN was also the result of schisms within the PRI. He defected to the center-right party after losing the PRI nomination to the party's eventual nominee Mariano Gonzalez Zarur. The final tally showed Ortiz squeaking out a victory with 36% of the vote, just one percentage point higher than Gonzalez Zarur, according to data released by the Instituto Electoral de Tlaxcala (IET). Ramirez came in third with about 29% of the vote. The tight margin of victory led the PRI to make plans to challenge the results, leaving the TEPJF to make the final determination on the winner of the election.

The PRI contends that electoral authorities failed to count the ballots from 93 polling locations. Ortiz and the PAN pledged to defend their victory. "The citizens' will is expressed in Tlaxcala," he said. "We are prepared to defend our votes if there are challenges." If Ortiz's victory is ratified, he will face a state legislature that is dominated by the PRI and the PRD. Ramirez's candidacy is not the only controversy involving an attempt by a first lady to succeed her husband.

In Nayarit state, Martha Elena Garcia de Echeverria has announced her intention to seek the PAN nomination to succeed her husband Antonio Echeverria in elections scheduled for July 3, 2005. The announcement has made the PAN nervous and prompted the party CEN to ask her to renounce her gubernatorial aspirations. "We are not pleased that the wife of a governor has decided to seek his seat," said PAN secretary Alejandro Zapata Perezgordo. Garcia said the decision on whether

to seek the PAN nomination will be determined by the results of a public-opinion poll she has commissioned for the coming weeks. The Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) has asked Garcia to be its candidate even if the PAN opts not to support her.

The PRD is facing similar divisions in Baja California state, which could hurt the party in the elections on Feb. 6, 2005. Several influential members of the party accused Gov. Leonel Cota Montano of nepotism for using his influence to help his cousin Narciso Agundez Montano win the nomination. Agundez defeated federal Sens. Rodimiro Anaya and Ricardo Gerardo Higuera in a primary held in late September. Anaya tried unsuccessfully to convince party president Leonel Godoy to throw out the results of the election. "It's a shame that Baja California is repeating the mistakes of Tlaxcala, even though the beneficiary this time is a cousin and not a wife," said PRD Sen. Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera. (Sources: The New York Times, 10/11/04; The Chicago Tribune, 11/13/04; Reuters, 11/14/04; Notimex, 09/28/04, 10/29/04, 11/15/04; Spanish news service EFE, 10/05/04, 11/15/04; The Dallas Morning News, Bloomberg news service, 11/15/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 10/04/04, 10/12/04, 11/16/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 10/04/04, 11/05/04, 11/15/04, 11/16/04; Unomasmuno, 10/05/04, 10/19/04, 11/15/04, 11/16/04; Los Angeles Times, El Financiero, 11/15/04, 11/16/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/28-30/04, 10/05/04, 10/14/04, 11/12/04, 11/15-17/04; El Universal, 10/05/04, 10/07/04, 10/18/04, 10/19/04, 10/26/04, 11/04/04, 11/08/04, 11/15-17/04; La Jornada, 10/08/04, 10/22/04, 11/04/04, 11/05/04, 11/15-17/04; La Crisis, 11/15-17/04)

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