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PRD Gains Ground in Legislative, Municipal Elections in Mexico State

by LADB Staff

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The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) appears to be the big winner in the March 12 Mexico state municipal and state legislative elections, making strong gains since the last similar election in 2003. More importantly, the results give a boost to PRD presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who campaigned heavily in the state in the days before the election along with rivals Roberto Madrazo of the long-governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

Mexico state, which has one of the largest concentrations of voters in the country, could play a key role in the presidential and congressional election on July 2. In actual numbers, the PRD came in a narrow second, taking 31% of the total vote compared with 32% for the PRI and 28.5% for the PAN.

At first glance, the numbers attained by the PRI and the PAN are not disastrous, with the center-right party receiving about the same percentage of votes as in the previous election and the PRI dropping by only a few percentage points. However, the PAN lost seats in the state legislature and the PRI suffered losses both in the state congress and in mayoral races.

Support for the former governing party also slipped considerably from the July 2005 gubernatorial election, when PRI candidate Enrique Pena Nieto received 48% of the vote, compared with 25% and 24%, respectively, for his rivals from the PAN and PRD (see SourceMex, 2005-07-20).

PRI suffers net losses in state legislature, municipalities

The decline of the PRI in Mexico state, along with high abstentionism, may have reflected voter repudiation of former governor Arturo Montiel, who dropped out of his party's presidential primary following allegations that he illegally used his office for personal enrichment (see SourceMex, 2005-10-26). The PRI was defeated soundly in the mayoral elections in Toluca and Ecatepec, where allies of Montiel were representing the party.

The PRD's strong showing in the election will mean a stronger presence in the state legislature. The party and its coalition partners, the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), took 17 of the directly elected seats. This compares with 10 seats in the 2003 election, when the PRD ran without a coalition partner. The PRI and its coalition partner the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) scored victories in 19 electoral districts, five fewer than in the 2003 election, when the PRI-PVEM also ran as a coalition.

The PAN, running without any alliances, won in nine electoral districts, a decline of two seats from 2003. Each of the parties, including the coalition partners, will be allocated additional seats based on the percentage of the total vote. The election results mean that the PRI's power in the state

congress will be greatly diluted. "Gov. Pena will have to adopt a more cautious attitude with the new legislature," said political analyst Lorenzo Meyer of the Colegio de Mexico.

The PRI's decline was also evident in the municipal elections, where the party lost about 15 seats. Preliminary figures from the IEEM said the PRI-PVEM coalition won only 53 of the 125 mayoral elections, compared with 68 in 2003. The PRI made some inroads in the communities surrounding the eastern sections of Mexico City, defeating the PAN in Tepotzotlan and Nicolas Romero.

The PRD went solo in many mayoral elections, but ran in coalition in others. The party won 24 mayoral seats in elections where it ran on its own, but won another 18 races in coalition with other parties, including two with the PAN. One of the PRD's most important victories was in Ecatepec, which had been a PRI stronghold. Other important cities that went to the PRD were the densely populated communities of Nezahualcoyotl, Ixtapaluca, and Texcoco, which could translate into votes for the party in July.

The PAN's best showing was in the mayoral elections, where the party won 25 races, including in its traditional strongholds of Tlalnepantla, Naucalpan, Atizapan de Zaragoza, and Toluca, the state capital. In Toluca, the PAN won by a wide margin despite pre-election polls that showed a statistical tie with the PRI.

PRD in good position for July presidential election

With the PRD already strong in Mexico City, increased support in Mexico state would greatly enhance the chances that Lopez Obrador would win the presidential election on July 2. The two areas, which comprise the Valle de Mexico, account for 15 million voters, about one-fifth of the total voter registry.

Columnist Jorge Alcocer of the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma said Ernesto Zedillo and Vicente Fox, the victors in the 1994 and 2000 elections, both won because of a relatively strong showing in the Valle de Mexico. "The explanation is very simple," said Alcocer. "The advantage for the winner [of the Valle de Mexico] would be too difficult to overcome with votes from other regions." For example, said Alcocer, Fox obtained more than 4 million votes in Mexico City and Mexico state in 2000, accounting for 26% of the total vote. His margin of victory over his nearest rival, Francisco Labastida of the PRI, was 2.4 million votes.

Daniel Lund, president of the Mexico City-based marketing and opinion research firm MUND Americas, attributed the PRD's strong showing to the influence of Lopez Obrador, who is sometimes known as El Peje. "It's good news for the peje effect," Lund told The Dallas Morning News. "It looks like the places he campaigned are the places that bumped up" in favor of the PRD, said Lund.

Low voter turnout mars election

While the electoral results bode well for the PRD, analysts and politicians alike were concerned by a troubling trend: the continuing high rate of abstentionism in the Mexico state election. The IEEM said less than 40% of registered voters participated in the election, repeating the pattern from the 2003 election and the 2005 gubernatorial race (see SourceMex, 2003-03-19 and 2005-07-20). "We are concerned about the high level of abstentionism," said presidential spokesperson Ruben Aguilar.

Presidential candidates Madrazo, Lopez Obrador, and Roberto Campa Cifrian of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) expressed similar sentiments, raising concerns that internal party conflicts and negative television campaign advertisements have turned off voters. "We have to abandon personal attacks and strengthen our proposals," said Campa. Lopez Obrador urged voters not to give up their right to choose the next president, regardless of whom they choose. "We have to participate and cast a ballot for that candidate who comes closest to our way of thinking," the PRD candidate said on his weekly paid television program.

Gov. Pena Nieto, however, minimized the abstentionism concerns, saying that voter participation was within the historical trend of 40%, at least for the last two elections. Pena instead praised the electoral authorities for ensuring an "orderly" election. Analyst Salvador Garcia Soto said voter participation might have been limited because Mexico state just had the gubernatorial election at the end of 2005. "We had a gubernatorial race six months ago, and now we have state and municipal races, which is very costly," Garcia told *El Universal*. Additionally, he said, many voters, particularly those who would have cast ballots for the PRI, stayed away from the polls because of the Montiel scandal.

Parties haggle over presidential debates

With the Mexico state election behind, the various parties are haggling about the number of televised debates ahead of the presidential election. The PRI, PAN, PANAL, and the Partido Alternativa Socialdemocrata y Campesina (PASC) have asked the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) to schedule four televised debates, one each in the months leading to the election.

Lopez Obrador has said, however, that he would only participate in one televised debate even if four were scheduled. Sen. Jesus Ortega, Lopez Obrador's campaign coordinator, explained that the process of preparing for four debates would interfere with the PRD candidate's campaign strategy, which is to travel to as many regions of the country as possible to interact directly with voters. "Four debates are excessive, and we don't want to paralyze our campaign," Ortega told reporters.

Lopez Obrador offered a more strategic reason for declining to participate in more than one debate. "I will not tolerate any ambushes," said the PRD candidate. Ortega said the PRD would accept a debate on one of three dates: May 30, June 6, or June 13, and only if the issues involve governability and social development. Opposition parties criticized Lopez Obrador's refusal to debate as anti-democratic. "[The decision not to debate] shows contempt for dialogue and contempt for the citizenry, by not wanting to submit his proposals to comparison," said PAN campaign spokesman Jose Espina.

Other critics accused Lopez Obrador of hypocrisy. "Just last Aug. 25, when his candidacy was not yet official, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador called for 10 debates to be broadcast on the electronic media, so that citizens could learn about the various proposals and make an informed vote," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Cronica de Hoy*. The prospect of four debates may not be very appealing to the Mexican public, however. In a poll conducted by *Reforma*, 46% of respondents said four debates would be excessive. Many of those same respondents acknowledged, however, that such an exchange of ideas would be useful for them to determine whom to vote for.

Regardless of the number of debates, the five parties agreed to leave the decision on the format to the IFE. The proposal for four debates could be a moot point, as the Camara de la Industria de la Radio y Television (CIRT) has suggested that it might support only two debates. The CIRT, which has a strong influence on the decisions of the major television and radio networks, cited "technical matters" for its proposal to hold only two debates.

The broadcast media is already profiting from the electoral season, with the various parties spending large sums for radio and television advertisements. During a 12-day period in February, the parties bought 1,562 spots on television and 21,223 on radio. More than half of those ads were bought on behalf of Calderon, with Lopez Obrador's campaign also accounting for a large share of the media buys, said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Economista. (Sources: Associated Press, 03/12/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/20/06, 03/02/06, 03/07/06, 03/09/06, 03/13/06; La Crisis, 02/21/06, 03/01-03/06, 03/13/06; Spanish news service EFE, 03/13/06; El Economista, 02/21/06, 03/01/06, 03/08/06, 03/10/06, 03/13/06, 03/14/06; La Jornada, 03/01/06, 03/02/06, 03/13/06, 03/14/06; Reforma, 03/01/06, 03/03/06, 03/13/06, 03/14/06; El Economista, 03/01/06, 03/08/06, 03/10/06, 03/13/06, 03/14/06; El Financiero, 03/01/06, 03/06/06, 03/08/06, 03/13/06, 03/14/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 03/02/06, 03/08/06, 03/10/06, 03/13/06, 03/14/06; Los Angeles Times, 03/11/06, 03/14/06; The Dallas Morning News, 03/14/06; El Universal, 03/01/06, 03/06/06, 03/08/06, 03/09/06, 03/12-15/06)

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