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Absence from Debate Hurts PRD Candidate Lopez Obrador

by LADB Staff

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Mexico's first debate of the 2006 presidential campaign drew mixed reviews, but the event was notable not so much for which candidates participated as for the empty chair placed in the studio to symbolize the absence of one of the top contenders: Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

The PRD candidate is also representing the Partido del Trabajo and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) in an alliance known as the Coalicion por el Bien de Todos. Lopez Obrador had announced several weeks ago that he would participate in only a single debate, even though as many as four such events had been envisioned. At that time, campaign officials said the debates would interfere with Lopez Obrador's strategy to travel to as many regions of the country as possible to interact directly with voters (see SourceMex, 2006-03-15).

Despite repeated pleas from the other candidates, Lopez Obrador declined to change his position, preferring to watch the debate at home. Most analysts agreed that the PRD candidate might have made a serious mistake by not participating in the debate. "He miscalculated," said Jose Luis Rubio, director of the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE) in Mexico City. "He thought he had nothing to lose, but we are now in a different moment and showing up would have helped."

The four participants Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of the governing conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Patricia Mercado of the Partido Alternativa Socialdemocrata y Campesina (PASC), and Roberto Campa Cifrian of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) made passing references to the PRD candidate's absence from the studio.

PAN, PRI candidates use debate to attack each other

Calderon and Madrazo spent much of the debate attacking each other, which some analysts said might have ruined the quality of the event. In an editorial, the daily newspaper El Universal said the candidates failed to offer proposals, focusing their discussions more on the areas where they thought the country was lacking. "The participants used the forum to repeat what they have said a thousand times in their television spots," said the editorial.

Other observers said the quality of the debate was not all that bad. "There was actually a fair amount of substance in the debate, despite the attacks. It may have been the first time we saw issues coming to the floor in the campaign," said Andrew Selee, director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. "Calderon has managed to put himself in the spotlight as he didn't previously." The format of the debate might have also affected the quality of the dialogue. "With the tight format discouraging interchanges and limiting comments to two minutes or less, the candidates mostly stuck to scripted comments. Even the insults, often including props, were

obviously planned in advance," said Kelly Arthur Garrett a columnist for the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald.

A telephone poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior immediately after the debate showed the exchange favored Calderon. In the survey, conducted among 630 persons, 38.4% of participants said the PAN candidate won the debate, compared with 16.4% for Madrazo. Mercado, a women's rights advocate, turned in a surprisingly strong performance, obtaining 13.9% of preferences. "[Mercado's] calm defense of minority rights and criticism of Mexico's politics-as-usual may win over some Lopez Obrador supporters," said The Chicago Tribune.

Campa, who left the PRI to represent PANAL in the election, received only 5.4% of the vote. "Two candidates were good and two were bad," said political analyst Ricardo Raphael, citing Calderon and Mercado as the good ones. "Mercado's comments were fresh and well-articulated."

The candidates said little about Lopez Obrador's absence, opting instead to allow the empty chair to signal his unwillingness to engage in dialogue with his rivals. "We know that the PRD candidate did not show up because he has no viable proposals," said Calderon, in one of the few comments referring to Lopez Obrador's absence.

Syndicated columnist Carlos Ramirez said Lopez Obrador attempted to turn his absence in the debate to his advantage, but the strategy seems to have backfired. "The other candidates appeared to understand Lopez Obrador's intention to convert the debate into a discussion about his absence and opted instead to concentrate on their own campaign proposals. Lopez Obrador missed the opportunity to present himself on television as a candidate who is mature and calm," said Ramirez.

More importantly, said experts, the debate would have given Lopez Obrador a chance to set the record straight about his positions and present himself as a reasonable and intelligent candidate. Furthermore, some analysts said participation in the debate would have given Lopez Obrador a chance to appeal to undecided voters, whom he needs to win the election. "Debates are the one factor that could have the most influence on undecided voters," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

The PRD candidate appeared to lose some momentum in public opinion polls shortly after he launched a barrage of attacks on President Vicente Fox, calling the executive a "squawking bird" for using the presidency to indirectly promote Calderon (see SourceMex, 2006-04-05). Lopez Obrador has also been hammered by television advertisements placed by the PAN campaign calling him a "danger to Mexico," and comparing him to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro. Federal electoral authorities have since ordered the Calderon camp to remove the ads from the air. The PAN candidate has complied but continues to bring up the theme during campaign speeches.

Polls reveal tightening presidential race

A handful of polls taken before and after the debate showed the race between Calderon and Lopez Obrador tightening. A poll released by the daily newspaper Reforma on April 24, a day before the debate showed Calderon with 38% support, compared with 35% for Lopez Obrador and 23% for

Madrazo. "Lopez Obrador's decline occurred primarily among voters in the northern and central regions of the country and among some independent voters," said Reforma. Another survey taken before the debate by the polling organization Parametria, however, showed Lopez Obrador holding on to a lead of two percentage points.

A public opinion survey commissioned by the daily newspaper Milenio Diario and conducted by respected pollster Maria de la Heras showed Calderon with a lead of three percentage points over Lopez Obrador and eight points over Madrazo. The poll was conducted on April 26-29, just after the debate. A previous Milenio poll released in early April had shown Lopez Obrador with a lead of three percentage points. The results, say experts, indicate that the election could be one of the tightest in Mexican history. "If the elections were held today, there would not be a clear winner," said Roy Campos, an executive with the polling organization Mitofsky y Asociados.

The tight race could mean an escalation of nasty television and radio advertisements. "This tightening race isn't good news, because the candidates' rhetoric is going to get more extreme," said Milenio columnist Joaquin Lopez Doriga. The position of the candidates in the polls could shift again after the second and final debate, scheduled for June 6, less than a month before the July 2 election. All five candidates said they would participate in that debate. (Sources: Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/25/06, 05/02/06; La Cronica de Hoy, La Crisis, Spanish news service EFE, 04/26/06 Excelsior, 04/25-28/06, 04/30/06, 05/03/06; El Financiero, The Herald-Mexico City, La Jornada, 04/26/06, 04/27/06; Milenio Diario, 04/26-28, 05/02/06; Bloomberg news service, 04/25/06, 04/26/06, 05/02/06; Reuters, 04/25/06, 04/26/06, 04/30/06, 05/02/06; El Universal, 04/26/06, 04/27/06, 05/02/06, 05/03/06)

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