

10-18-2006

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PRI Wins Tabasco Gubernatorial Race by Wide Margin

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2006-10-18

On Oct. 15, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) scored a decisive victory in the gubernatorial election in Tabasco state at the expense of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and its coalition partner the Partido del Trabajo (PT). The preliminary electoral report (Programa de Resultados Electorales Preliminares, PREP) released by the state electoral agency (Instituto Electoral y de Participacion Ciudadana de Tabasco IEPCT) showed PRI candidate Andres Granier Melo with 53.3% of the vote, compared with 42.9% for Cesar Raul Ojeda Zubieta of the Coalicion por el Bien de Todos.

Exit polls by TV Azteca, Televisa-Mitofsky, and GEA-ISA confirmed a similar margin. Juan Caceres de la Fuente of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) came in a distant third with slightly more than 3% of the vote. Candidates for the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) and the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) obtained less than 1% of the vote.

Participation in the election, while not overwhelming, was higher than anticipated, with 63% of the registered voters casting ballots. This is in contrast to a public-opinion poll by the IEPCT in late July, which showed that 51% of respondents were not planning to vote. The PRD also lost its slight plurality in the state legislature and suffered some losses in municipal elections. The PRD and the PRI will have an equal number of seats in the state congress when the number of directly elected and proportional positions is added up.

The PRD gained its plurality in the state congress in the 2003 election (see SourceMex, 2003-10-29). In mayoral races, the PRD suffered a net loss of four municipalities compared with 2003. The IEPCT said the PRI managed to retain the seat in the capital city of Villahermosa while taking four other municipalities from the PRD.

A setback for ex-presidential candidate Lopez Obrador

The PRD-PT defeat is considered a setback for former presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who had been counting on a good showing in his native state of Tabasco to promote his opposition movement. Lopez Obrador lost the presidential election to PAN rival Felipe Calderon by less than 1% (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12).

The center-left candidate vowed to set up a parallel government after the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF) declared Calderon the winner of the July election (see SourceMex, 2006-09-06 and 2006-09-20). "Here [in Tabasco] we are going to attain a measure of revenge for July 2, so that [those in power] learn to respect the will of the people," the center-left candidate said while campaigning with Ojeda in Tabasco.

Lopez Obrador put a strong emphasis on his alternative movement in joint appearances with Ojeda around the state. "They robbed us of our victory, but your support will not be in vain," he said

during a campaign appearance last week. "The movement continues....If it fractures, there will be no more hope for millions of Mexicans."

The Lopez Obrador camp had reason for optimism shortly after the presidential election, as the center-left candidate received 56% of the Tabasco vote in the national race. Some signs of trouble were beginning to appear, however, as public-opinion polls in August were already showing the possibility of a very tight gubernatorial race.

Some critics said the strategy of using the Tabasco election to promote Lopez Obrador's alternative government overshadowed local concerns, which may have contributed to Ojeda's poor showing. Still, a spokesperson for Lopez Obrador's alternative movement denied that the results of the Tabasco election would have any impact on the national campaign. "Its success does not depend on a state election, no matter what state it is," said spokesperson Cesar Yanez.

Some concerns also emerged that the Tabasco defeat could cause Lopez Obrador to lose support among members of his party. "It will make some of the PRD leaders start distancing themselves from [Lopez Obrador]," said analyst Rafael Fernandez de Castro, dean of international affairs at the Instituto Tecnológico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM). Even some PRD loyalists in Tabasco expressed discontent with Lopez Obrador because of his confrontational tactics.

A public-opinion poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma in late September indicated that roughly one-fourth of voters who said they cast ballots for Lopez Obrador in the presidential election were planning to vote for Granier instead of Ojeda. "Andres has lost credibility. He has lost respect," Oscar Luis Rodriguez, a founding member of the PRD in Villahermosa, said in an interview. "Here Andres Manuel was born, and here he has been buried."

Granier gains support from some PRD members

Other factors contributed to the PRD defeat, especially the popularity of Granier Melo, who had good marks during his three-year tenure as mayor of Villahermosa, the state capital and Tabasco's largest city. Granier was able to reach across party lines, convincing many PRD members to back his candidacy.

Some PRD members in Tabasco said the party had considered recruiting Granier Melo to be its candidate in case the PRI's national organizing committee (Comite Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) decided to impose its own candidate. Arturo Abreu Ayala, one of the top campaign organizers for the Lopez Obrador presidential campaign in Tabasco, said the party had hoped that Granier would be available because of his strong appeal and his lack of ties to the political machine constructed by PRI presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo Pintado. "With Granier, the PRD would have a golden opportunity to win the gubernatorial race," said Abreu Ayala. "He is popular politician who is respected by the citizens of Villahermosa.

Madrazo had made no secret of his desire to have the party represented by Florizel Medina, the mayor of the small community of Centro. The PRI candidate's poor showing in the polls and then in the presidential election limited his influence in the selection of the PRI candidate in Tabasco.

Many analysts said Granier used good judgment by limiting the number of campaign appearances of Madrazo Pintado, who obtained only 37.8% of support in Tabasco in the July election. In selecting Granier as their candidate, PRI members in Tabasco also avoided a repeat of the election in neighboring Chiapas state, where a popular PRI mayor in this case Juan Sabines Guerrero of Tuxtla Gutierrez defected to the PRD after being bypassed for the gubernatorial nomination.

Sabines, who also represented the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) and the Partido del Trabajo (PT), went on to defeat the PRI's anointed candidate Jose Antonio Aguilar Bodegas by a very narrow margin in the Aug. 20 election (see SourceMex, 2006-08-23).

Aguilar Bodegas also represented the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

Even though the Instituto Estatal Electoral (IEE) of Chiapas declared Sabines the winner, the final results are up in the air, pending a partial review by the TEPJF of some of the ballots that were cast. Critics say PRD should have chosen a different candidate. Some analysts said the PRD's selection of Ojeda was also a contributing factor to the Oct. 15 loss. Ojeda, who recently served as a federal senator, was the party's candidate in the 2000 gubernatorial race and later in a special election in 2001.

In both cases, Ojeda lost to outgoing PRI Gov. Manuel Andrade. The second election became necessary after the TEPJF determined there was sufficient evidence of irregularities and illegal campaign tactics on the part of the PRI to throw out the results of the first election (see SourceMex, 2000-10-18, 2001-03-21, and 2001-08-08). "Many [in the PRD] had thought it prudent to run another candidate and not the same person who represented the party in previous elections," said syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. Ojeda and the PRD-PT said they plan to bring a complaint against the PRI to the TEPJF again this year.

Given the relatively large loss by 10 percentage points, it will be difficult for the PRD and its coalition partners to claim outright fraud. The tactic will be to call into question what they considered illegal support from Gov. Andrade's administration for the Granier campaign. The governor, say PRD members, not only failed to maintain neutrality, as required by the Mexican Constitution, but also supported efforts by the PRI to bribe voters with construction materials, bicycles, and other items in exchange for their support of Granier. "We have a long list of irregularities to present to the federal electoral court," said PRD national president Leonel Cota Montano. "We believe the court will eventually rule in our favor."

Tabasco state is no stranger to controversies involving the PRI and PRD. In addition to the Ojeda challenge in 2000, the federal government was asked to intervene in the 1995 gubernatorial election, in which Madrazo defeated Lopez Obrador amid allegations of widespread fraud (see SourceMex, 1994-12-14 and 1995-01-25). The administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo looked at the allegations but took no action (see SourceMex, 1995-08-30).

Electoral court orders partial recount in Chiapas

Electoral controversy has also marred the recent Chiapas gubernatorial election, with the TEPJF agreeing to partially review the results of the election. In a unanimous decision announced in mid-

October, the TEPJF said there were sufficient irregularities to merit a recount of ballots from 214 precincts.

The TEPJF decision mirrors the court's ruling earlier this summer ordering a partial recount of ballots in the presidential election (see SourceMex, 2006-08-09). If enough votes are reversed, this could endanger the victory of PRD candidate Sabines, who defeated the PRI's Aguilar Bodegas by a mere 6,000 votes. As expected, the PRI and the PRD took opposing sides on the TEPJF decision.

The PRD national executive committee warned that the political crisis that the country is facing could worsen if the election is nullified. Aguilar Bodegas, however, said he was confident that the court review would result in his eventual victory. "I don't see any other scenario than the ratification of the democratic victory I obtained at the ballot box," said the PRI-PVEM candidate.

Aguilar and Sabines said, however, that they would respect the results of the TEPJF review, which must be completed before Nov. 4. The results were expected as early as Oct. 21, said the official news agency Notimex. The next governor of Chiapas will take office on Dec. 8. (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 10/06/06; Diario Transicion, 10/12/06; Associated Press, 10/10/06, 10/16/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 10/11/06, 10/12/06, 10/16/06; Reuters, 10/13/06, 10/15/06, 10/16/06; Bloomberg news service, 10/16/06; El Financiero, 10/16/06, 10/17/06; Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, 10/17/06; Tabasco Hoy, 07/31/06, 10/16-18/06; Excelsior, La Cronica de Hoy, 10/03/06, 10/05/06, 10/06/06, 10/09-13/06, 10/16-18/06; Reforma, 10/03-06/06, 10/09-13/06, 10/16-18/06; La Jornada, 10/04-06/06, 10/09-13/06, 10/18/06; El Economista, 10/05/06, 10/12/06, 10/13/06, 10/16-18/06; Milenio Diario, 10/06/06, 10/09/06, 10/10-13/06, 10/16-18/06; Notimex, 10/13/06, 10/17/06, 10/18/06)

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