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Blank-ballot Campaign Could Affect July 5 Elections

by LADB Staff

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Mexican citizens are disgusted with the state of politics and government but are finding no viable alternatives to replace the status quo. The governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) is feeling the heat for its failure to curb drug-related violence and is to some extent also identified with the downturn that has the Mexican economy in the doldrums.

The opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was poised to take advantage of the PAN's woes, but many citizens are not certain whether the party has abandoned its corrupt past. The center-left parties are so fractured and corrupted that many voters do not consider them a viable alternative. This has prompted many voters to strongly consider an independent campaign to vote for "None of the Above" in the upcoming congressional and gubernatorial elections on July 5.

Campaign seeks to send political parties a signal

The campaign, which has become known as the "Voto en Blanco" or "Voto Nulo" campaign, urges citizens to cast blank ballots in the election to send the establishment parties a signal that citizens are not happy with the way things are going. But not all citizens are going to protest the lack of choices by casting a blank ballot; many will simply not bother to vote. Electoral authorities are anticipating very low participation in this year's midterm elections, which has tended to be low through the years. Some polls indicate that as many as 60% of Mexico's registered voters could stay home on July 5.

The campaign appears to be a spontaneous movement emerging through blogs, YouTube, email, and other modern communications tools. The message simply urges voters to draw one big cross on the ballot, which will feature races for all 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, six gubernatorial posts, and hundreds of state and municipal offices, including the mayoral positions in Guadalajara and Monterrey. Jose Antonio Crespo Mendoza, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE) in Mexico City, suggests that many Mexican citizens want to exercise their right to vote but are not at all happy with any of the choices. "I am hearing more support for the blank vote than for abstention," Crespo told reporters. Because of the use of the latest technological tools, many pundits suggest that this is a campaign led by young people in Mexico, but the effort appears to span generations. "It was said that this was a movement of youth, but those making the statements did not understand this from the citizen perspective," said political analyst Federico Reyes Heróles of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and a member of the governing board of Transparencia Mexicana. "They were viewing this from the perspective of authorities or politicians." Many of the organizers are academics, private citizens, and even former politicians. "There have been campaigns like this in the past, but it's never caught fire," Daniel Lund, president of the Mexico City-based polling organization MUND Group, told The New York Times. Crespo is one of the proponents of the blank vote. "Voting for the least bad candidate is like buying the least rotten fruit," said the CIDE analyst. "I prefer to leave a note saying, 'Hey, all your fruit is rotten. I'll come back next time, and I hope you have something fresh and edible.'"

President Calderon's cousin plays a key role

Among those calling for a citizens' boycott of the vote is President Felipe Calderon's first cousin, Gabriel Hinojosa Rivero, who once served as mayor of the city of Puebla, representing the PAN. "By casting a blank vote, we are telling those in power that this system is not working and that we want to change it," said Hinojosa. "We are hopeful that our message is so strong that it forces the politicians to begin the process of reflection in order to reform the system," added the ex-Puebla mayor, who leads the campaign Gobierno de Segunda Generacion (G2G). "I reject all the parties and their candidates, but not democracy," says the G2G Web page. "This is a spontaneous movement that began to take shape in an organized manner in Puebla in March and then extended quickly to several states around the country, especially through the Internet and blogs," said the agencia de noticias Proceso (apro).

There have been some concerns that the blank vote will weaken Mexico's institutions, but Reyes Heroles said the action is directed primarily at the political parties. As the political analyst put it, the voters "are taking the parties by the ears." In recent pieces, several political analysts said voters have good reason to be disgruntled with both the large and small parties and with the system that fosters corruption and incompetence while rewarding elected officials with high remunerations. "And while video evidence has shown prominent politicians stacking wads of dollar bills into briefcases or extorting businessmen, the same candidates keep beating the courts and getting back on the ballot," said Time.com, which pointed to a YouTube video depicting three characters, each representing one of the three major parties, tearing into a cake shaped like Mexico. There also complaints that the system supports the "good ol' boy" networks and family connections, shutting out independent candidates from the process. For example, one big issue in the gubernatorial elections in Sonora is that the two leading candidates, Alfonso Serrano of the PRI and Guillermo Padres Elias of the PAN, are second cousins.

Analysts say political parties to blame

Political observers from all political persuasions agree that the parties have brought this upon themselves. In a piece published in early June, nationally syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento outlined some of the major problems and contradictions that each party is facing. For example, he said PAN president German Caceres has lost support for his party by accusing his rivals of connections to drug cartels without presenting proof. Additionally, the party's overly rigid stance on "moral issues" has turned off many voters. "This is a party that has pushed initiatives that seek to define life as beginning at conception and then seeks prison for victims of rape who are seeking an abortion," said Sarmiento. The PRI, Sarmiento said, remains the ultimate "corporatist" party that left Mexico in poverty after 71 years in office. "This is a party that still pays for votes with building supplies and food. This is a party that is still known for its corrupt officials," said Sarmiento.

In one of the most damaging developments for the party ahead of the election, ex-President Miguel de la Madrid made statements confirming suspicions that the family of his successor Carlos Salinas de Gortari was involved in money laundering and collusion with drug traffickers (SourceMex, May 20, 2009). Sarmiento called the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) a "divided and conflicted" party that supported the prolonged takeover of Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico

City. The action to protest the 2006 election appeared to turn off more citizens than gain supporters (SourceMex, August 30, 2006 and September 20, 2006). "This party questions electoral fraud but has not been able to have its internal elections without charges of irregularities," said Sarmiento.

The PRD has bungled recent internal elections, exposing deep divisions in the party (SourceMex, June 04, 2008 and January 28, 2009). Sarmiento said the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), Partido del Trabajo (PT), Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), and Partido Alternativa Socialdemocrata (PAS) have all experienced problems prompting voters to reject them as alternatives. "The PVEM is a party that pretends to support environmental protection but also backs the death penalty as a means to maintain its political viability," said Sarmiento. Sarmiento also blamed elections watchdog Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), which he said was in collusion with the political establishment. "The IFE has become only an instrument of censure, and its president, Leonardo Valdes, is seen traveling on helicopters borrowed from governors like Enrique Pena Nieto, who have political ambitions."

Pena Nieto, a member of the PRI who governs Mexico state, is widely considered one of the leading prospects to represent his party in the 2012 presidential election. "The blank vote scares the Mexican political class, regardless of their political affiliation or ideology," said Luis Hernandez Navarro, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "Party leaders, intellectuals who support the political establishment, the Catholic Church, and the [state and federal] electoral institutes are all afraid that citizens will not vote for any of the party acronyms that will be printed on the ballots." Hernandez Navarro noted that the political parties were blaming each other for fostering the movement. Said the columnist, "Andres Lopez Obrador and Jesus Ortega are blaming the right. The PAN is pointing the finger at the PRI because it is the party that has the most certain vote. The PRI is asking for an investigation because the campaign appears to have been started by individuals who once had conservative connections. The Catholic Church warns of a failure of democracy and the return of totalitarianism. The IFE suggests that it is the responsibility of all parties to ensure that voters go to the polls." The columnist said all the accusations are missing the mark. "The answer is simple," said Hernandez Navarro. "The Mexican political class has exhausted all its reserve of credibility. The political-parties system has collapsed."

Other prominent analysts weighed in with their opinions. Jesus Silva-Herzog Marquez, who writes a column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma, said it is undeniable that citizens have the power to use their vote to punish or reward politicians. But he disputed the contention that all parties represented "more of the same," that they were all "a big mafia." He noted, however, that this election could turn out to be a vote for the "lesser of the evils." Leo Zuckermann, who writes a column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior, said the danger of the blank vote is that a lack of participation by independent-minded citizens would leave the election to party loyalists. But Zuckermann defended the need for voters to "levy a fine" on the parties. "Democracy can always be perfected, [and the blank vote] is a way to send a message to the parties," said the columnist. One powerful voice, Supreme Court Justice Genaro Gongora Pimentel, also defended citizens' right to cast a blank ballot. "They can submit a blank ballot or not. This is a right like any other right," said Pimentel. "The ideal thing is if they cast a vote [for the candidates on the ballot]."

Political parties denounce campaign

As expected, the established political parties denounced the movement. The PRI, PAN, and PRD congressional delegations described the Voto en Blanco campaign as irresponsible and risky. "It would be irresponsible for any citizen to propose this as an alternative," said PRI Deputy Cesar Duarte, who also presides over the lower house. Still, Duarte agreed that reforms are necessary in Mexico's electoral process. Sen. Carlos Navarrette, who leads the PRD delegation in the upper house, said the blank-vote campaign is "a mistaken proposal that will provide no positive consequence for the country." The senator pointed out that the Chamber of Deputies will seat 500 new members, no matter what percentage of ballots are legitimate. PAN Deputy Cristian Castano Contreras urged citizens to cast their ballot or risk leaving Mexico to be ruled by a small group of people. "When society does not participate, this gives the government the message that it can do whatever it wants," said the PAN legislator.

Candidate Samuel Maldonado Bautista, who is running for a directly elected seat in Michoacan state, offered a similar argument. He agreed that there is a lot of "mediocrity" in the Mexican Congress but also argued that a lack of participation would distance the citizens from the elected officials. The Voto en Blanco campaign has prompted the IFE to undertake a special effort to urge the citizenry, especially students, to participate in the election. "The key to democracy is that the candidate who receives the most votes obtains the victory," said IFE representative Julian de la Paz Mercado. "This is the case even if the candidate has a margin of victory of 10 votes and there are 100 million blank votes, that candidate still wins." Campaign organizers will know how much support they have in the elections. IFE counselor Marco Antonio Banos said the institute plans to count all blank votes, which will technically be placed in the "nullified ballots" category.

One business organization, the Confederacion Patronal de la Republica Mexicana (COPARMEX), recently announced plans to counter the blank-vote campaign in Nuevo Leon state by providing transportation to the polls. Nuevo Leon is one of six states with a gubernatorial race. "We are not promoting a particular political party, we are pro-vote," said Mario Canales, who presides over the Nuevo Leon chapter of COPARMEX.

PRI expected to make gains in Congress

The PRI has been slipping in recent polls, but the party is still expected to make some gains in the Chamber of Deputies in the midterm elections. A poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario projected that the PRI and its electoral partner the PVEM would take 252 of the 500 seats in Congress on July 5. A separate poll by Consulta Mitofsky put the number of probable seats for the PRI-PVEM in the range of 219 to 252. The PRI only has 106 deputies in the current Congress, while the PRI-PVEM together have 123 members in the lower house. The PAN is braced to suffer the biggest losses. The Milenio projection puts the number of PAN seats at 144 in the next Congress, while Mitofsky forecasts a range between 148 and 171 deputies. This compares with 206 deputies in the current Congress. Both polls also anticipate losses for the PRD, with Milenio projecting 84 seats for the center-left party and Mitofsky a range of 80 to 93 deputies. The PRD, which has 127 deputies, allied itself with the PT and PCD in the last Congress under the umbrella of the Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP). The total number of seats for the PRD-PCD-PT is 156, but that number is expected to dwindle in the 2009-2012 Congress. The PRI is favored in most of the six gubernatorial races. In contrast to the negative image of the parties, President Calderon enjoys high personal

popularity, although it's uncertain whether this will have any bearing on voter intentions. A recent public-opinion poll by Grupo Reforma showed Calderon with an approval rating of 6.9 of a possible 10.

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