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PRD, PAN Win First Two Gubernatorial Elections of 2011, but Most Important Races Scheduled for July

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Mexico held gubernatorial elections in January and February that some analysts believe could serve as a weathervane for the all-important gubernatorial election in México state in July of this year and the presidential contest in 2012. For many analysts, the most important result from the elections in the states of Guerrero on Jan. 30 and Baja California Sur on Feb. 7 was that the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) did not win either contest. All eyes were on the PRI because its likely candidate, México state Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto, a highly popular figure, has led very early presidential polls for 2012.

The PRI's failure to win either race does not necessarily spell disaster for the party, even though Peña Nieto took time to campaign in both states. The results do seem to indicate that the PRI did not start the 2011 electoral season with the momentum it had desired. To be fair, the PRI was not the incumbent party in either state, and party leaders underscored this point in comments to reporters. "It's not that we are losing states, we just failed to recover the governor's seat in two states," said outgoing party president Beatriz Paredes Rangel, who will relinquish her post on March 3 to ex-Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira.

Still, some analysts believe that the PRI's inability to regain the gubernatorial seats in two states that it once held is not a good sign for a party that has lost the last two presidential elections. "Something about this situation leads us to suspect that the PRI will once again be left out of the Los Pinos presidential palace," columnist Marco Antonio Torres de León wrote in the daily newspaper. "There is nothing worse for the goals of the PRI than losing two states in less than eight days."

While the PRI is lacking momentum at the start of the electoral season, its performance in the next three gubernatorial elections will be a more accurate measure of its electoral strength. Gubernatorial elections are scheduled on July 3 in the states of México, Nayarit, and Coahuila, all currently governed by the PRI. The gubernatorial election in the state of Michoacán on Nov. 13 could also be an opportunity for a PRI rebound. The center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) has governed Michoacán for two gubernatorial terms, and the state is home to President Felipe Calderón, a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

The México state election is especially important, with the center-left coalition, led by the PRD, and the PAN discussing an alliance to consolidate their efforts to defeat Peña Nieto ([SourceMex, Sept. 29, 2010](#)) and ([Jan. 12, 2011](#)). The coalition effort was successful in gubernatorial elections in Puebla, Oaxaca, and Sinaloa states in 2010 ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)).

Party switchers elected

Two interesting trends came out of the recent election—the blurring of party loyalties and the divisions that led to the defeat of the PRI in Guerrero and the PRD in Baja California Sur. In both cases, the entrenched party machinery imposed its candidate at the expense of a more viable

representative. This led to the candidate who was not chosen aligning himself with another party or coalition and eventually winning the election.

In Guerrero, the PRI state organization decided to go with Acapulco Mayor Manuel Añorve Baños instead of Ángel Aguirre Rivero, who had a long history with the PRI in Guerrero—serving as state party president, interim governor, cabinet secretary, and federal deputy. After the party leadership decided to go with the Acapulco mayor, Aguirre made himself available to the center-left coalition, which welcomed him with open arms. The decision angered the PRI national leadership, who suggested that Aguirre had betrayed the party. "The real PRI members are trustworthy, not traitors," said Paredes.

The PRI national president also called out the center-left coalition for betraying its principles. "I find it incredible that the left, which launched a historic effort to give us more electoral options, decided to pilfer a PRI member to run as its representative," said Paredes, who noted that Añorve Baños was the legitimate agent of change from the outgoing administration of Zeferino Torreblanca, who came from the business sector ([SourceMex, Feb. 16, 2005](#)).

Despite protestations from Paredes and other party leaders, Aguirre swept the gubernatorial elections, running for the Guerrero Nos Une coalition, comprising the PRD, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD). Aguirre obtained about 56% of the vote, compared with about 43% for Añorve, who was representing the coalition Tiempos Mejores para Guerrero, comprising the PRI, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), and the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL).

The gubernatorial election was the only race on the ballot in Guerrero, with mayoral and state legislative elections scheduled for later this year.

In Baja California Sur, the PRD was the party that suffered a defection after outgoing Gov. Narciso Agúndez passed up veteran politician Marcos Covarrubias in favor of his handpicked successor Luis Armando Díaz, a candidate whose only political experience was serving as interior secretary for the outgoing administration. The national PRD leadership was not happy with the selection of Díaz not only because of his inexperience but also because he was involved in several controversial land disputes and was rumored to have links to drug traffickers.

After losing the nomination to Díaz, Covarrubias decided to cast his fortunes with the PAN, which until now has had a weak presence in Baja California state. The PRI fielded Ricardo Barroso Agramont, a promising but fairly inexperienced candidate.

With questions looming over his two rivals, Covarrubias easily won the gubernatorial election on Feb. 7 with slightly more than 40% of the vote. He ran as a candidate for the coalition La Alianza es Contigo, comprising the PAN and the regional Partido de Renovación Sudcaliforniana (PRS). Barroso's Unidos por Baja California Sur, which included the PRI and the PVEM, received 34% of the vote. Díaz, whose Sudcalifornia para Todos coalition also included the PT, obtained only about 21% of voter support.

Baja California Sur voters showed quite strong interest in the elections, with participation estimated at about 60%.

The results were a stark contrast to the 2005 gubernatorial election, when the PAN candidate received only 11% of the vote. The PRI also saw a small improvement in its support, rising to 34% from about 30% in 2005. The PRD was the big loser, dropping from about 42% in 2005 to 21% in 2011.

Covarrubias' enormous popularity also helped the PAN score an overwhelming victory in the state legislative elections. The conservative party won nine of the 16 directly elected seats in the state legislature, compared with no seats in the last congressional race in 2008. The party was allocated two seats in the last legislature based on the proportion of the vote it received that year.

The PRI obtained four seats in the Feb. 7 election, with the remaining three positions going to the PRD. The allocations for at-large seats based on proportion of the vote are yet to be announced. The smaller parties that participated in the various coalitions will receive some of these seats.

Results were more evenly divided in the races for the state's five municipalities. In the mayoral elections, the PRI-PVEM won in La Paz and Loreto, the PRD-PT in Los Cabos and Mulegé, and the PAN-PRS in Comondú.

Covarrubias was pleased with the prospect of having a majority in the state legislature. "The people were anxious for change," said the governor-elect, in an apparent criticism of outgoing Gov. Agúndez.

"This was not an easy race because state governments sometimes concentrate power," added Covarrubias. "It's hard to compete against when they make illegal use of the resources at their disposal."

The PRI also viewed the election as a step forward for the party. "I want to point out that our gubernatorial candidate won the popular vote in La Paz and Los Cabos, and this is no small accomplishment," said Paredes. "This is a sign that the PRI has a strong presence in the state's most important municipalities."

Did PAN and PRD form de facto coalitions?

There were some charges of irregularities and fraud in the two elections, with the PRI threatening to bring challenges before state and federal electoral authorities.

Some PRI officials questioned how Barroso could win a majority of votes in La Paz and Los Cabos, the state's two-most-populated municipalities, and still lose the election. "We are using a magnifying glass to look closely at the trends in this election," said Manuel Cavazos, who oversees national elections for the PRI.

It appears many voters in Los Cabos split their vote, supporting the PRI in the gubernatorial election and the PRD in the mayoral race.

Although the large margin of victory by the winners in Guerrero and Baja California Sur makes it unlikely that the results would be reversed, some critics said there was something fishy about the elections, especially in the way politicians switched parties so easily.

"Is there really an ideological difference between the leftists from the PRD, PT, and PCD and the rightists from the PAN? Can you see a difference among the PRI, the PVEM, and PANAL? In truth, I can see no distinctions among the PAN, PRD, and PRI," said syndicated columnist Ricardo Alemán.

"This was very clear in the election in Baja California Sur, where it was evident that politicians are all the same. Some simply changed their coat of arms so they could continue making a living from politics."

Alemán noted that party switches also occurred in other races in Baja California state. "A good number of the candidates who competed for various posts have belonged to at least two parties before," said the columnist. "And now they are competing under the banner of a third party."

There were some suggestions that both elections represented de facto coalitions between the PAN and the faction of the PRD that currently holds the party leadership. There was even some talk that Calderón and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, along with their respective party presidents, used the two races as part of their strategy to weaken Peña Nieto at every possible opportunity.

Ebrard has made no secret of his ambition to seek the presidential nomination in 2012, but he is also proceeding carefully to avoid divisions in the center-left coalition because former presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador has already announced his intention to run again in 2012. Ebrard has openly supported selected alliances with the PAN, a concept that López Obrador has rejected outright.

"The PAN-PRD coalition, formed by Marcelo Ebrard y Felipe Calderón, managed to hand a new electoral defeat to Enrique Peña Nieto, the PRI's likely presidential candidate," Alemán wrote in the wake of the Baja California election. "This would be the PRI's second electoral defeat in 2011 and the fifth in the last seven months."

Paredes said the PRI lost because of opportunism, defections, and "strange alliances" formed by the opposition parties. "I do not understand the relationship between the PAN and the PRD. Sometimes they pretend to form an alliance and at other times they steal each other's candidates," said Paredes in the aftermath of the Baja California Sur election. "I have no idea whether they have actually succeeded in putting together a common platform."

As evidence of collusion, critics pointed to PAN candidate Marcos Efrén Parra Gómez's decision to pull out of the Guerrero election just days before the voting and throw his support behind Aguirre. Rumors circulated that the national PAN leadership ordered Parra to withdraw from the race and endorse the center-left coalition. Parra denied that such a directive existed.

Still, the national PAN organization openly suggested that the withdrawal could only benefit Aguirre, who agreed to incorporate some of the conservative party's proposals into his platform. "Our party will support the new coalition government headed by Ángel Aguirre," the PAN's executive committee (Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) said in a statement.

There were similar accusations in Baja California Sur, where rumors circulated that the PRD's CEN ordered the state party leadership to cancel all support for Luis Armando Díaz a couple of weeks before the election, especially when the polls showed him trailing badly. That directive, along with PANAL's decision to withdraw from the election, was seen as a maneuver to shore up Covarrubias candidacy.

The PRD denied that such a directive existed, and party president Jesús Ortega even declared in the aftermath of the election, before the results started coming in, that Díaz had won the gubernatorial election.

Representatives of the faction of the PRD that opposes any working agreements with the PAN also viewed the Baja California Sur election with strong suspicion. "The election in Baja California Sur does not represent a loss for the PRD, but rather a sellout negotiated with the PAN," said Dolores Padierna, head of the PRD faction known as Izquierda Democrática Nacional (IDN), which backs López Obrador—a staunch opponent of coalitions with the PAN. Padierna called Ortega, who leads the PRD faction Nueva Izquierda, a "traitor" who negotiated the agreement with the PAN.

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