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Carlos Navarro

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Sweep of Gubernatorial Elections in Three States puts Partido Revolucionario Institucional in Good Shape for 2012 Presidential Race

by Carlos Navarro

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A term in Mexican politics describes the goal that political parties attempt to reach during a given election— (full cart). This means sweeping the elections but not necessarily taking every single race. There is no denying that the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) attained the in the July 3, 2011, elections, with overwhelming victories in the gubernatorial elections in México state, Coahuila, and Nayarit, and the municipal election in the city of Pachuca in Hidalgo state. For some, the PRI's resounding victory, particularly in México state, puts the party on track to win the 2012 presidential elections. If there were any negative trends for the PRI, it was that the México state election was won with fairly low voter turnout and the elections in Hidalgo state resulted in a net loss in municipalities for the party.

Turnout extremely low in México state

Many consider the PRI's overwhelming victory in México state the event that will anoint outgoing Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto as the PRI's 2012 presidential candidate. And, with the weakened opposition, there is even more reason to think that Peña Nieto might be one step away from the presidency. Many analysts believe that Peña Nieto's popularity, in a state that has 13% of Mexico's registered voters, was a key factor in the large margin by which PRI candidate Eruviel Ávila Villegas, mayor of the Mexico City suburb of Ecatepec, won the gubernatorial race.

Results released by the Instituto Electoral del Estado de México (IEEM) indicate that Ávila, who was also representing the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) and Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), received almost 63% of the total vote, compared with 21% for Alejandro Encinas of the center-left coalition led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and 13% for Luis Felipe Bravo Mena of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). The center-left coalition comprises the PRD, the Partido del Trabajo, and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).

But other factors beyond the numbers contributed to the overwhelming PRI victory. Voter turnout was disappointing, with participation down in some major communities like Ecatepec, Naucalpan, and Nezahualcóyotl because of flooding caused by heavy rains. The final tally showed that only about 44% of the electorate participated, with voter turnout at about 35% in communities affected by the floods. The flooding forced authorities to move some precincts.

Analysts suggested that voters in many of these communities were angry at the Peña Nieto administration and the federal government for not doing enough to develop the infrastructure that would have prevented the floods, but they showed their discontent by staying away from the polls rather than voting for the only alternative, Encinas of the center-left coalition.

Still, the rate of abstentionism in the México state election was the highest in the last 25 years and perhaps reflected a sense that the result was predetermined because of Ávila's large margin in polls conducted before the election.

"One has to take into account the lack of motivation that people had to participate in a vote in which the difference between the leading candidate and the second- and third-place rivals was so large," columnist Luis Estrada wrote in Milenio.com. He argued that the rate of participation in the flooded communities was not that much smaller than the average for the state.

Others also thought the pre-election polls had a lot to do with the final lack of participation. "Citizens do not believe there is competition, and when there is no competition, there is no interest," said Francisco Gárate, PAN representative to the IEEM.

The lack of other races besides the gubernatorial election in México state might have also contributed to low voter turnout.

Others pointed to a trend, the decline in total votes, at a time when the population of México state is growing. "The voter rolls are growing, but citizens are increasingly staying away from the polls," columnist Alberto Aguirre wrote in the Mexico City daily business newspaper .

Some voices in the PRD suggested that the center-left parties should have worked harder to develop an alliance with the PAN, since this was the only way to provide an alternative to the PRI. There was an early effort to create an alliance, but this effort unraveled when the PAN and the center-left coalition were unable to agree on a unity candidate ([SourceMex, Mach 30, 2011](#)).

Among those who thought that the PRD gave up too early on an alliance is Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who pointed out that coalitions helped defeat the PRI in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Sinaloa states in 2010 ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)). "Alejandro Encinas said he did not want a coalition, that [the left] would participate in this contest by itself," said Ebrard, one of two likely presidential candidates for the center-left coalition's nomination in 2012. "The results are in. We couldn't compete against a huge political machine in an environment where the odds were against us."

Others mentioned factors such as the poor electoral strategy of all the opposition and an unappealing PAN candidate in the person of Luis Felipe Bravo Mena. "The México state elections did not necessarily represent a victory for the PRI, but a loss for the opposition," columnist Carlos Ramírez said in the daily business newspaper .

Some argue that Encinas also failed to make the case that he was a good alternative to Ávila. "Alejandro Encinas was not even able to win in his own district," political analyst Luis Estrada wrote in Milenio.com.

The losses were even more painful for the PRD and the PAN, since both parties suffered defeats in traditional strongholds. The PAN lost big in the Mexico City suburb of Tlalnepantla, in the center of a region known as the blue corridor, in reference to its primary party colors. The center-right party had won handily in that area in elections in 1999 and 2005. The same is true for the PRD, which saw a crushing defeat in Nezahualcóyotl, in the heart of its stronghold known as the yellow belt ().

Party president Humberto Moreira considered a big winner

In addition to Peña Nieto, the big winner in the elections was PRI president Humberto Moreira Valdés. Moreira not only presided over a very successful electoral campaign, but the PRI won big in his native state of Coahuila. In that election, his brother, federal Deputy Rubén Moreira Valdés, took

the election with about 59% of the vote, compared with 35% for Guillermo Anaya of the PAN. Jesús González Schmal of the PT and Genaro Fuantos of the PRD each received marginal support.

The Coahuila election had one thing in common with México state—pre-election polls showed Moreira and the PRI far ahead of the opposition. The difference, however, was that, despite the appearance that results might have been pre-ordained, voter participation was relatively high. The state's electoral agency, the Instituto Electoral y de Participación Ciudadana (IEPC), reported that slightly more than 61% of the state's registered voters cast ballots.

The opposition parties were also shut out in the elections for the state legislature. The PRI won 13 of the directly elected seats to the state legislature, while its coalition allies—the PVEM, PANAL, and Partido Primero Coahuila (PPC)—each took one seat. Another nine at-large seats will be distributed based on the percentage of the vote. According to calculations, the PRI and its allies will get three of those seats, leaving the opposition parties with only six seats.

"In contrast to recent disasters, the PRI emerged from the last election—the first test for Humberto Moreira—with a sense of unity that had not been seen for a while," wrote columnist Luis Gutiérrez-Esparza in *Gaceta.Mx*, the online site for the newspaper

The only election where the PRI victory was a mild surprise was in Nayarit, since polls had indicated that the opposition might take the race. An alliance between the PAN and the center-left coalition appeared very feasible in this election. The problem was that the two parties could not agree on whether such a coalition would be led by ex-PRD deputy Martha Elena García, who was running under the PAN banner, or by ex-PRD party official Guadalupe Acosta Naranjo.

The failure to agree might have cost the opposition an upset over the PRI, which took 45% of the vote under candidate Roberto Sandoval Castañeda. García received 38% of the vote, while 10% of voters cast their ballot for Acosta. A coalition candidate might have received 48% of the vote, enough to score a narrow victory over the PRI.

The PRI was the dominant party in the Nayarit state legislative elections, taking 14 of the 18 directly elected seats, with the other four going to the PAN. The PRI lost ground in the mayoral races, taking nine of the 20 seats. In the 2008 election, the party won 12 municipalities. The PAN won nine mayoral races, compared with four in the last election. The PRD and the local Partido de la Revolución Socialista (PRS) each took one seat. The Instituto Estatal Electoral de Nayarit (IEEN) said 59% of registered voters cast ballots, a percentage similar to the one in Coahuila.

In contrast to the three other states, the PAN and PRD managed to hold together a somewhat successful coalition in the municipal elections in Hidalgo state. This alliance, known as Hidalgo Nos Une, lost to the PRI in the gubernatorial election in July 2010 ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)).

While the PRI obtained a narrow victory in the Hidalgo capital of Pachuca as part of its , the party actually suffered a net loss of 11 municipalities. The PRI scored victories in 41 of the 84 cities, compared with 52 in the 2008 municipal races. One municipality that changed parties was the state's second-largest city of Tulancingo. "We obtained truly important victories in Ixmiquilpan, Tulancingo, Huichapan, Huejutla, and Mineral de Reforma," said Xóchitl Gálvez, who represented the PAN-PRD coalition in the 2010 gubernatorial election. "These municipalities had been governed by the PRI."

Is Enrique Peña Nieto the next president?

The election left Peña Nieto with a very strong hand going into the 2012 presidential race. The favorable results leave his only potential PRI rival, Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones, with little chance of getting the nomination.

"Everything turned out extraordinarily well for Peña Nieto's presidential ambitions," said Joy Langstone, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE). "He is now able to launch his campaign without having to face any rivals. His campaign gave the PRI results that it had not seen in decades."

The trends were taking shape even before the election. In a survey by the respected polling organization Consulta Mitofsky in June, a solid 39% of respondents said they intended to vote for Peña Nieto, compared with about 14% for Finance Minister Ernesto Cordero of the PAN and 13.9% for Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the center-left coalition.

The poll also showed Peña Nieto as the governor with the most name recognition in Mexico. About 69% of respondents could identify him.

Peña Nieto's high popularity might force the opposition parties to revisit the possibility of forming a coalition for the presidential election, a notion that both the PAN and PRD had discarded. "Enrique is a strong contender in the 2012 election," said former PRD president Jesús Ortega Martínez.

"Because of that, we have to construct a great citizen alliance, a democratic and progressive coalition with all those who oppose the return of the old-style [PRI] regime."

Opinions differ on the best formula to halt Peña Nieto's march to the presidency. "The undecided voters are key if we have a tight election and we find a candidate with possibilities of winning," wrote *Ciro Gómez Leyva* in *Milenio.com*.

The columnist said only one person fits the profile. "The only one who has enough public acceptance to try to attract at least three-quarters of the traditionally 20% of voters who are undecided is Marcelo Ebrard," said the columnist.

Others suggest that Ebrard's association with the PRD might be a big hindrance. "Regarding the 2012 election, only the PAN has the possibility of fixing its mistakes because the PRD has begun to sink as a result of the internal struggles among its factions," wrote *Carlos Ramírez* in .

Ramírez argued that the PRI's return to Los Pinos presidential palace should not yet be considered a done deal. "If this were the case, how would you explain the PRI losses in Oaxaca, Puebla, Sinaloa?" Ramírez asked.

And the contenders for both the right and the left also caution against anointing Peña Nieto as the next president. Ernesto Cordero, one of the favorites to take the PAN nomination, pointed out that the results of the July 3 election only indicated that the PRI was able to retain three gubernatorial posts that it already had.

Deputy Josefina Vázquez Mota, another potential PAN candidate, suggested that the results in the México state election should not be used to predict the federal election in 2012. "Without diminishing the importance of this electoral process, I want to point out that the PAN has shown

a capability to win two presidential elections without having won the gubernatorial seat in México state," she said.

There was not much talk among PRD officials about 2012, but the left's divisions were exposed in some statements to the press after the election. Members of the Nueva Izquierda faction of the PRD, which supported broad coalitions to counter the PRI, pointed an accusing finger at López Obrador for vehemently opposing such alliances.

Ebrard put the blame on Encinas but did not fault López Obrador, his rival for the center-left nomination. The Mexico City mayor took a pragmatic stance, suggesting that the left's task was to examine the reasons for the low voter participation, especially for the PRD and its allies. The left received almost 1.2 million votes in the 2006 presidential race, but the total dropped to 863,000 votes in the federal congressional election in 2009 and 907,000 votes in 2011. "We have to understand what occurred, find explanations for the low level of participation," said Ebrard.

López Obrador concentrated his attacks on what he described as the "mafia in power," including ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and long-time teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE) leader Elba Esther Gordillo for manipulating the election. He also mentioned television network Televisa and Peña Nieto as co-conspirators. "They won with money and control of the communications media," said the PRD leader.

Conservative syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento also voiced some complaints about the recent evolution of the political process. "We have done something wrong. We had six electoral reforms from 1977 to 1996 that gradually made elections more competitive, took away control of Congress from the presidency, allowed an opposition party to take the presidency in 2000, and that resulted in the most competitive election in history in 2006," said Sarmiento. "Now we are talking again about the ."

Only one test remains for the three parties before the 2012 election, the gubernatorial election in Michoacán state on Nov. 13 ([SourceMex, June 1, 2011](#)). The PRD, which has governed the state for two terms, is slightly favored in early polls to retain the governorship, but the PRI would consider an upset victory another feather in its cap heading toward 2012. For the PAN, the race is important from both a practical and a symbolic standpoint. A victory would allow the party to get back on track for the 2012 election, particularly since the likely candidate is President Felipe Calderón's sister, former federal Sen. Luisa María Calderón Hinojosa.

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