Students Add New Dynamic to Presidential Race, but PRI Remains Ahead in Polls

Carlos Navarro
The plan by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to cruise into the presidency appears to have hit a bump, with university students around the country trying everything to prevent PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto from winning the July 1 election. The students have launched a campaign on social media to mobilize against the PRI candidate, but it is uncertain whether this will be sufficient. Peña Nieto appeared to hold his own in the second official debate among the top four presidential candidates, which might have consolidated his position as the front-runner. Still, the university students, led by a group at the Universidad Iberoamericana (also known as Ibero) have not given up. They organized a large demonstration on the weekend of June 9-10 to coincide with the second debate. Additionally, they have made extensive use of social media to express their anti-Peña Nieto views and to promote a third debate they have organized for June 19.

Even though the debate is unofficial, three of the four candidates—Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the center-left Movimiento Progresista coalition, Josefina Vázquez Mota of the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and Gabriel Quadri of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)—have agreed to participate. Peña Nieto declined on the premise that the debate is stacked against him.

Second debate fails to change status quo
The four presidential candidates squared off in the second and final official debate on June 10, and the exchange appeared to do little to move voter preferences. The two front-runners—Peña Nieto and López Obrador—both have a solid base of support. They both appeared conciliatory and avoided confrontation as part of a strategy to attract undecided voters.

PAN candidate Vázquez Mota launched most of the verbal attacks against all of her rivals. She criticized Peña Nieto for "hiding in the bathroom" when the students at the Ibero sought to talk to him. She brought up López Obrador's early affiliation with the PRI, saying that he and Peña Nieto were "different sides of the same coin." She repeated the charge that Quadri answers to Elba Esther Gordillo, leader of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE). Gordillo, who has a reputation of being extremely corrupt, founded the PANAL, under whose banner Quadri is running.

"The attacks had little relevant impact," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior, citing an interactive survey by the polling organization BGC in partnership with Grupo Imagen Multimedia during and immediately after the debate. "Josefina Vázquez Mota levied numerous criticisms on her rivals, but these rarely received a favorable reaction. Even the mention of the Peña Nieto incident at the Universidad Iberoamericana failed to gain much sympathy for her candidacy."

In fact, Quadri got a big boost when he showed a photograph of a cordial encounter between Vázquez Mota and Gordillo.

But some observers suggested that the PAN candidate had nothing to lose by going on the attack. The one who beat expectations most was Josefina. "We found a Josefina who was fresh and
aggressive and this will make her followers proud to support her, and she could start getting some votes back," said Roy Campos, president of Consulta Mitofsky.

There was some agreement that the debate ultimately appeared to be most favorable to the PRI candidate, mostly because he did not trip and was able to offer a couple of impact statements. "Peña Nieto was able to attract sympathy, particularly when he talked about the disconnect between a recent increase in democracy and the lack of well-being [for the Mexican people]," said Excélsior.

Others came to the same conclusion. "Pena Nieto achieved his objectives of looking capable and not making any big mistakes," Jorge Buendía of the polling organization Buendía & Laredo said in an interview with Reuters.

Peña Nieto received an especially favorable response in the BGC-Grupo Imagen Multimedia survey when he talked about the programs he would implement as president, including proposals to reform the energy sector, lower the cost of electricity, and reduce the size of the Congress, said Excélsior. The move to downsize Congress could occur sooner rather than later, as all the major candidates have offered support for this proposal.

The center-left candidate left little negative or positive impression among the viewers, according to the BGC-Grupo Imagen Multimedia survey. "López Obrador did not make a significant impact on the viewers when he offered his points about a lack of growth as well as his proposals to boost the economy by combating corruption, reducing the salaries of top bureaucrats, and ending tax benefits for the upper class," said Excélsior,

But there were other measures with varying results. Grupo Reforma—which surveyed 450 "citizen leaders" in Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara—found that Vázquez Mota received the most favorable rating. Reporte Índigo, which conducted a telephone poll among 1,200 respondents, found a slight edge for López Obrador over Peña Nieto. And respondents to the poll by Demotecnia gave López Obrador the nod over second-place winner Vázquez Mota.

Quadri—who made a major impact in the first debate in May (SourceMex, May 9, 2012)—was overshadowed by his three rivals. He attempted with little success to engage them in discussions on social issues like abortion and gay marriage and the possibility of creating a special institute to showcase Mexican culture around the world.

**López Obrador gains in one poll, but is still far behind in others**

Some observers were puzzled by López Obrador’s civil demeanor during the second debate, having expected the center-left candidate to come out swinging to consolidate the support he had gained in recent weeks. The Movimiento Progresista candidate had made great strides in the polls after the first debate, supported in part by widespread protests by university students. Those protests were directed at the PRI and Peña Nieto (SourceMex, May 23, 2012).

López Obrador’s momentum had strengthened to the point that one poll, by Grupo Reforma, showed the center-left candidate just four percentage points behind Peña Nieto. In that poll, the PRI candidate still led, with 38% of support, followed by López Obrador with 34% and Vázquez Mota a distant third with 23%. The Reforma poll said 32% of voters were undecided.

Other public-opinion surveys showed a wider gap between Peña Nieto and López Obrador. A Consulta Mitofsky poll had the PRI candidate with about 44% of support, compared with 29% for López Obrador and 25% for Vázquez Mota. A poll commissioned by Milenio.com and conducted by
the polling organization GEA showed similar results: Peña Nieto with 45.5% of support, followed by López Obrador with about 26%, Vázquez Mota with close to 25%, and Quadri with less than 4%.

Many López Obrador supporters are appealing to the faction of the PAN that detests the PRI to cast a voto útil (practical vote) for the center-left candidate, and perhaps that is why the Movimiento Progresista candidate took a more measured tone during the debate. With his base of support consolidated, López Obrador must go after the undecided voters and crossover PAN supporters if he is to run a competitive race against Peña Nieto.

López Obrador’s supporters argue that Vázquez Mota cannot win, and, therefore, if they do not want the PRI back, they should back the center-left candidate rather than abstain from voting or waste their vote on the PAN candidate. "Many members of the PAN are unhappy with their party, as was apparent in the 2009 election," columnist Octavio Rodríguez Araujo wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "The PRI swept those elections, but you have to take into account the high rate of abstention that year, which reached 55.5%, the second-highest in the past 100 years."

But a faction of the PAN despises Lopez Obrador much more than the PRI. That faction, led by ex-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), has urged the PAN rank-and-file members not to waste their vote on Vázquez Mota and instead support Peña Nieto. Former presidential candidate and ex-Senate leader Diego Fernández de Cevallos is also supporting the PRI candidate. Two prominent politicians who were expelled from their parties have also come out in support of Peña Nieto: ex-PAN president Manuel Espino Barrientos and former interim Mexico City mayor Rosario Robles, formerly of the PRD.

But Fox is couching his support for Peña Nieto as a "pro-democracy stance" and not necessarily as direct support for the PRI candidate. He argues that supporting a front-runner is not necessarily anti-democratic. "If we rally in favor of a front-runner, and this front-runner obtains victory, then we can exercise our right to demand a good government, a government that listens to the will of the people," said the ex-president.

Still, some believe that Vázquez Mota’s decision to go on the attack in the second debate was intended to keep her supporters from defecting to the other parties or abstaining. A strong PAN turnout could help the party in the congressional races and competitive gubernatorial elections in Jalisco, Guanajuato, Morelos, and Yucatán. Voters will also elect a new governor in Chiapas and a new mayor in Mexico City.

#YoSoy132 gains momentum on Twitter

In contrast to Fox’s position, the university students who led the protests against Peña Nieto have moved into full-court-press mode to prevent the PRI candidate from being elected to office. The students, unhappy with what they see as a bias by the corporate media, have organized their own debate for June 19. Organizers are using social media, not only to promote the debate but also to provide a theme for the event. Using the Twitter hashtag #YoSoy132, the students are following up on the protests against Peña Nieto that took place at the Ibero in May (SourceMex, May 23, 2012).

The protests at the Ibero reportedly involved 131 student participants, so the Twitter hashtag #YoSoy132 was developed to symbolize "student 132" and the continuation of the protests.

Three of the four major presidential candidates have agreed to participate in the debate: López Obrador, Vázquez Mota, and Quadri. As expected, Peña Nieto declined to participate on the
premise that he would not get a fair opportunity to offer his viewpoint because the process is already biased against him.

It is not certain how much Pena Nieto’s absence will hurt the PRI candidate. In the 2006 presidential election, Lopez Obrador declined to participate in an official debate, and some observers suggest this might have been a factor in his narrow loss to Felipe Calderón (SourceMex, May 3, 2006).

Still, the students do not appear to be very organized beyond the decision to hold an alternative forum to have the candidates discuss their issues. A week before the debate, the students had not announced a site. One organizer noted, however, that for security reasons the location would not be announced until a few hours before the debate. Additionally, organizers had not agreed on a format three days before the debate.

Despite insisting that they do not endorse any candidate, many of the #YoSoy132 are behind López Obrador, simply because he represents the one clear alternative to the very establishment that the students are opposing.


"To be clear, similar to the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Yo Soy 132 movement is not a movement that endorses any one particular candidate that is currently running for president. It is primarily a movement that is challenging the system currently dominated by corporate greed that undermines democracy in Mexico," said Mata. "Specifically, it is pushing back against that country's oligarchs' manipulation of media to favor Peña Nieto, thereby setting the ground to, potentially once again, ram down people's throats a political candidate chosen by corporate interests."

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