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Independent Study Shows Large Segment of Poorest Mexicans Might Have Voted for Conservative Partido Acción Nacional in July Presidential Election

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One of the central elements in the center-left coalition’s challenge of the results of Mexico’s presidential election on July 1 was that the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) spent millions of pesos to bribe low-income voters with grocery and cash cards to support their candidate Enrique Peña Nieto (SourceMex, July 11, 2012). But an independent review of the result of the election shows that a large percentage of the voters who are considered extremely poor may have actually cast their ballots for the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and not the PRI or the center-left Movimiento Progresista, comprising the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), Partido del Trabajo (PT), and Movimiento Ciudadano (MC). A vote for the governing party was an endorsement of government public-assistance programs implemented under President Felipe Calderón’s administration.

The leftist coalition, which received about 32% of the vote in the presidential election, appears to be headed for a split with the formal decision by Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) to become a political party. Morena was created by center-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador as a vehicle to bring citizens into the political process (SourceMex, Sept. 19, 2012). But Morena’s decision to field candidates in local, state, and presidential elections will put the new party in direct competition with the PRD and the other center-left parties. For now, the PRD and Morena are saying that the two parties can coexist, but analysts believe that conflicts are certain to arise. Some members of the PT and MC have openly embraced Morena, but the two parties remain as separate entities from the new movement.

PRI no longer dominant in rural areas

The election study, La Geografía Electoral de 2012, was a joint effort by the research center México Evalúa and the Program on Poverty and Governance, based at Stanford University in California. Researchers reviewed the results of more the 66,000 electoral precincts. "Our analysis from data obtained directly from each electoral section allows us to identify with greater precision than polls the correlation between rural conditions, extreme poverty, and the vote," said the study by researchers Alberto Díaz-Cayeros, Beatriz Magaloni, Jorge Olarte, and Édgar Franco Vivanco.

The report, released in early October, said there were indications that many voters with the least income cast their vote for PAN candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota, although there were some indications that many of these voters also supported Peña Nieto in states where the governor’s seat is in the hands of the PRI. The study said this segment of voters in PRI-governed states split their vote between the PAN and the PRI. "But in all other states, it was the PAN that was favored," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior, which reported the results of the study.

The study noted that the extreme poor, particularly in rural areas, had for generations backed the PRI, which employed patronage to gain their loyalty through the strategic distribution of
direct supports. "The voters supported the PRI rather than run the risk of becoming permanently excluded from agricultural subsidies, land titles, loans, fertilizers, food supplies, and medicines," said the authors of the report. "The majority of the programs during the period when the PRI was in power [1928-2000] were administered with partisan motives."

But the study's authors set out to answer the following question: After 12 years of a PAN presidency, did the poor remain loyal to the PRI or did their loyalties turn to the new party in power?

"The PRI remains the strongest party among campesinos and the inhabitants of indigenous communities," said the study. "Nevertheless, the results suggest that the PAN and, to a smaller extent the PRD, have attained a penetration in rural areas of the country since the defeat of the PRI in 2000."

President Vicente Fox's victory in 2000, and the rise of Calderón to the presidency in 2006, allowed the PAN to extend its influence beyond urban areas. "Before the PAN came to power, the probability that a campesino would vote for that party was extremely low," said the study.

The study also examined the impact of other poverty-related factors, such as unemployment, on the election. Results showed that voters in areas where the jobless rate was higher tended to support López Obrador, although there were also some gains for Peña Nieto.

A correlation was also seen between the vote and drug-related violence. The study found mixed results in the north, where murders have escalated in recent years. Voters generally rejected the PAN and Vázquez Mota in most northern states with two notable exceptions, Tamaulipas and Nuevo León, which are governed by the PRI. Vázquez Mota did well in the two states, and the PAN gained some seats in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies in the two states. "If you take into account the country as a whole, it appeared that the PRI was punished the most for the violence, and the beneficiary was the PRD," Excélsior said in reference to the report.

The study also found that households that had the most televisions and access to the Internet generally supported Peña Nieto, although some of these voters also backed Vázquez Mota.

The study's authors mostly identified the left as the PRD, but the analysis applies to all parties that were part of the coalition, the PT and MC as well as the newly formed Morena. They said the inability of the left to attract a larger share of support from the poor was an obstacle that the left-leaning parties had to overcome. "The analysis of the ‘effective’ vote points to the difficulty that the left had in capturing the vote of the poor, which mostly cast a larger share of their ballots for Josefina Vázquez Mota or for Enrique Peña Nieto than for Andrés Manuel López Obrador," the study said.

**Morena becomes party, plans protests on inauguration day**

López Obrador and his movement, meanwhile, have taken formal steps to split from the PRD and the other center-left parties. In early November, López Obrador and his leadership team announced that an overwhelming majority of the local councils that had been established in every state in the country voted to convert the Morena movement into a political party. The last consultation took place in López Obrador’s home state of Tabasco on Nov. 3.

The decision to become a party will be formally ratified at a Morena convention planned for Nov. 19-20 in Mexico City. At that time, the movement will begin the process of applying for formal recognition as a party.
Many Morena supporters expect López Obrador to seek the presidency for a third time in 2018, but the center-left leader said he does not know yet whether this will be the case. "I will continue fighting for the good of the country," said López Obrador.

A majority of the early supporters of Morena have been rank-and-file citizens rather than politicians, although some questions were also raised about the composition of the Morena leadership. Some critics accused López Obrador of resorting to nepotism to fill key positions in the movement. López Obrador’s two brothers, Pío and Ramíro López Obrador, are heading the movement in Chiapas, while son Andrés López Beltrán has a high-level position in Tabasco, and his niece Helena Hernández Obrador is a member of the organization’s executive council in Campeche. Some of his closest collaborators or relatives of collaborators have also been given leadership spots.

There was also some concern that López Obrador and his supporters would attempt to enlist politicians and rank-and-file supporters of the PRD and the other parties to join the new party. This is something that López Obrador denied adamantly. "We are not going to openly recruit militants from any other party," he said. "This is a decision that individuals are going to have to make on their own."

Some PRD leaders also denied that a problem exists about converting Morena into a political party. Sen. Dolores Padierna said the evolution of Morena into a political party could only strengthen the center-left front, which is a movement of millions of Mexicans. "We want it understood that this is not a division," said Padierna. "[López Obrador] needed to form his own party, and he has a right to have his own political instrument. We also have our own political instrument. We are not competing against each other."

But some analysts see conflict as inevitable. "López Obrador has a very difficult situation with Morena... The PRD, PT, and Movimiento Ciudadano are trying to find ways to deal with the departure of many of their supporters to the camp of the politician from Tabasco," columnist René Avilés wrote in La Crónica de Hoy. "The end result could be a further fragmentation of the left, something that our country does not need. This would leave power in the hands of two parties [PRI and PAN] that are trying to position themselves in the center."

As one of its first actions after the Nov. 19-20 congress, Morena will organize protests around the country on inauguration day, Dec. 1, to bring renewed attention to what members of the coalition consider a fraudulent election, even though a federal electoral court has ratified the results of the July 1 vote (SourceMex, July 18, 2012, and Sept. 5, 2012). "On Dec. 1, we will hold peaceful demonstrations at Mexico City’s Zócalo square and similar sites around the country to protest the imposition of Enrique Peña Nieto as president," López Obrador.

The protests, however, are not expected to draw much support from PRD leaders like Mexico City Mayor-elect Miguel Mancera and Morelos Gov. Graco Ramírez, who have pledged to work closely with the new president.

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