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Independent Candidate Wins Mayoral Election in Small Town in Zacatecas State

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In 2011, the Mexican Congress approved reforms to partially overhaul Mexico’s electoral system, including a provision allowing candidates to run for office without having to represent any political party (SourceMex, May 4, 2011, and Nov. 2, 2011). The initiative, which required a change in the Mexican Constitution, was ratified by more than half of Mexico’s states, but not in time for the 2012 presidential elections. The new provision was in place for the July 2013 state elections, and several citizen candidates ran for office, primarily seeking to become mayors of small communities. One of those candidates, Raúl de Luna Tovar, was elected mayor of the community of General Enrique Estrada in Zacatecas state, defeating a rival representing a coalition of two established parties.

De Luna Tovar, who will assume the mayoral post in September, is no stranger to the position. The new mayor is actually the old mayor, having served in that capacity in 2007-2010 as a member of the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). Therefore, many voters in this town of about 5,800 residents cast their ballots for De Luna Tovar because he was already a familiar face. General Enrique Estrada is almost halfway between Fresnillo and Zacatecas, the state’s two largest cities.

De Luna Tovar previously held other posts as a member of the PAN, including city councilor. He held his party affiliation even though he was appointed to the nonpolitical post of technical secretary for the federal Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA) in Zacatecas after his final term as mayor ended.

De Luna's decision to seek the mayoral seat as an independent candidate came after the PAN decided to choose Gerardo Domínguez as its mayoral candidate. Domínguez also represented the center-left Partido de la Revolución (PRD), which formed the Rescatemos Zacatecas coalition with the PAN.

Citizen requests spurred candidacy

In an interview with journalist Leo Zuckermann, De Luna said the citizens of General Enrique Estrada inspired his candidacy. "As recently as December 2012, [De Luna] had no intention of seeking office," Zuckermann wrote in the Mexico daily newspaper Excélsior. "Still, many people in his community approached him with a request that he return as mayor. That is when he asked the PAN municipal committee if they would allow him to register as a candidate, but they denied his request."

Zuckermann, who based his column on an interview with De Luna on Radio Fórmula, said the candidate at that point needed to obtain signatures from 15% of the electorate, a requirement for independent candidates in the new electoral law. This was about 745 signatures. "Without even starting a full-fledged campaign, he obtained more than 1,100 signatures, and authorities then placed his name on the ballot," said Zuckermann.

The election was very close, with De Luna defeating Domínguez by only 268 votes in an election where voter turnout reached 70% of registered voters. "This was a beautiful turn of events because..."
this is evidence that people are the ones who are in charge," the victor said in an interview with Milenio Radio Jalisco.

De Luna said he spent about 100,000 pesos (US$8,000) of his own money for the campaign. "This is not a victory for me but for the people of Enrique Estrada," the winning candidate said.

In an ironic turn of events, Domínguez and the PAN-PRD coalition announced plans to challenge the election, alleging that De Luna used the type of unfair tactics often ascribed to the political parties, such as bringing voters en masse to the polls and surpassing spending limits. "He spent a lot of money on radio and television spots and on three musical bands for his rallies," said Domínguez. "We are going to prove that he surpassed spending limits."

Domínguez also accused De Luna of serving as a proxy candidate for established parties, including the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which controls the governor’s seat in Zacatecas. "De Luna tricked the people," said Domínguez. "His victory was the result of an arrangement with the PRI and the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)."

De Luna was not the only independent candidate running for mayor in Zacatecas, but he was the only one to score a victory. Of the 58 mayoral races in the state, 10 involved independent candidates. "In contrast to the political parties, we do not have a structure, and we are representing the people who signed our electoral petitions," said Israel Espinosa, who ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Sombrerete.

Independent candidates also ran in Quintana Roo, where 14 people not affiliated with parties qualified to run for mayors and city councils in communities like Benito Juárez (Cancún), Cozumel, and Felipe Carrillo Puerto.

There was also an effort in Baja California state to promote independent candidacies in the July election. But electoral authorities in the state, which had the lowest turnout in the July election (SourceMex, July 10, 2013), disallowed the petitions of 14 people to run as independents. The candidates appealed the decision to the regional branch of the electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, TEPJF) in Jalisco, but the tribunal upheld the state decision.

De Luna expressed confidence that his victory was only the beginning for independent candidacies. "We can do this because it is the people who are in charge," said the mayor-elect.

**Analysts see bright future for independent candidacies**

Some political observers agree that the time might be right for more independent candidacies, given the growing disdain in Mexico for the established political parties. "The citizens are tired of the political parties," columnist Ana Paula Ordorica wrote in Excélsior. "The participation of citizens in the political process is occurring increasingly outside the electoral process, from social media to civil-society organizations."

Ordorica alluded to the national values survey (Encuesta Nacional de Valores), which indicated that only 2% of all people who say they are affiliated with a party actually participate in electoral activity. In contrast, she said, 63% of respondents said they participate in social media—whether it involves politics or not. "They use it to send messages, make complaints, or videotape activities that deal with politics or citizen action," said Ordorica.
"Without doubt the great victory obtained in the ballots was the space that opened up for independent candidacies," columnist Marco Antonio García Granados wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio, citing the efforts in Zacatecas, Quintana Roo, and Baja California. "They were received with open arms by the citizenry, and they were useful to measure whether the time has finally come for voters to abandon the political parties and begin to assume the role as the true representatives of society."

One political party whose fortunes appear to be waning is the PRD, which lost a handful of traditional strongholds, and its only victories came as a junior partner in a coalition with the PAN. "The PRD lost practically all the seats under its control [in the elections in 14 states]: the mayor’s seat in Cancún—which it governed since 2008—the capital city of Oaxaca, which it held in coalition with the PAN, and two municipalities in Zacatecas," columnist Jenaro Villamal wrote in a piece published in Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). The columnist noted that the PRD won four mayoral elections in Veracruz but was unable to compete with the PRI-led coalition that swept most of the races in the state.

And when the PRD formed a coalition with the PAN to win the gubernatorial race in Baja California and some races in Puebla and Oaxaca, the center-left party was overshadowed by its conservative partner. "In the north, the PRD won zero mayoral elections in places where the party ran on its own, including local races in Baja California, Sinaloa, Durango, Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas," said the apro columnist.

"The problem is not the balance of mayoral seats that were won or lost, nor was it the number of victories in state legislatures," said Villamal. "The main defeat has to do with the platform and the party’s ability to attract voters. There was not a single memorable proposal from PRD candidates in the campaign and no point of view that distinguished the party from the PAN, the PRI, or even PANAL." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 17, 2013, reported at 12.49 pesos per US$1.00.]