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Voter Participation in 2015 Elections Surprisingly High

by Carlos Navarro

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Contrary to some forecasts, Mexican voters generally turned out to the polls on June 7 despite discontent with the political parties and with President Enrique Peña Nieto. The threat of violence was an obstacle in some states where conflict has prevailed in recent months ([SourceMex, Feb. 11, 2015](#)), but overall participation in the elections approached 48%, the highest level for a nonpresidential election since 1997.

Voters made their discontent known in other ways—electing an independent candidate as governor in Nuevo León and nonaffiliated mayors in the city of Morelia in Michoacán and García in Nuevo León. In addition, an independent won election to the federal Chamber of Deputies in the state of Sinaloa. The left emerged from the elections more divided than ever, with the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), founded by two-time presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, grabbing a large portion of the vote that would have otherwise gone to the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

PRI does well despite President Peña Nieto's unpopularity

Another important trend in the election was that, despite Peña Nieto's high level of unpopularity, many voters cast their ballot for his Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). While the PRI lost some ground in the Chamber of Deputies, the party and its allies—the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) and Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)—together control 260 seats in the lower house. This majority is beneficial to Peña Nieto as he seeks to implement reforms that were approved during the first half of his six-year term, including opening the energy market ([SourceMex, Dec. 18, 2013](#), and [Aug. 6, 2014](#)). "The reforms that we have achieved together are transforming our country in a positive manner," the president said in the aftermath of the election. "The reforms will continue moving forward."

The PRI had been favored all along to retain control of the Chamber of Deputies, so the party's ability to retain control of the lower house was not a surprise. Still, some analysts point out that the elections failed to offer much hope for a society that is tired of violence, impunity, and social inequality. "As is the case with most countries in Latin America, an adequate response to social discontent lies only in a reduction of poverty and a narrowing of the gap of inequality," Olga Pellicer wrote in the weekly news magazine *Proceso*. "The campaigns in the midterm elections failed to provide debate on the measures to address those problems. We would have required a much stronger expression of rejection of the current economic policies, but that did not occur."

One of the biggest surprises in the election was the relatively high participation, particularly in light of predictions that citizens were planning to boycott the vote. "[The elections] left the impression that social discontent did not find a viable alternative to organize and transform into a movement needed to shake the status quo," Juan Paullier wrote in *BBC Mundo*.

Violence did disrupt the vote in some of the more conflictive states. Because of confrontations and protests, several polling places were unable to open in Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacán.

Guerrero and Michoacán were among the nine states that were electing new governors. Electoral authorities reported, however, that 98% of the voting sites around the country operated normally.

One analyst suggested the new electoral watchdog, the Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE), did a good job of promoting the vote and organizing the elections, which was one of the reasons for the strong participation. The electoral reforms enacted in 2013 created the INE to replace the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), which was highly mistrusted ([SourceMex, Dec. 11, 2013](#)). "The votes, the participation of the citizens and confidence of the voters in the electoral system, and the new arbiter were sufficient to overcome those who had bet on violence and terror to disrupt the elections and also those who had proposed boycotting the elections and scaring off the voters," political columnist Ricardo Alemán wrote in the daily newspaper *El Universal*.

Independent governor elected in Nuevo León

While the turnout did not necessarily reflect the mood of the voters, other factors indicated that citizens wanted the 2015 midterm elections to usher in some form of change. There were many instances where voters cast their ballot for independent candidates, representatives of small parties, or options that represented a change from the status quo.

The biggest headline was the election of unaffiliated candidate Jaime Rodríguez as governor of Nuevo León state. Rodríguez—more commonly known by his nickname *El Bronco*—defeated Ivonne Alvarez of the PRI and Felipe de Jesús Cantú of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). The two parties had been dominant in state elections.

In his victory speech before 500 supporters, Rodríguez emphasized that he would lead an administration of change that would serve as an example for the rest of the country. "[This] victory is an example of an awakening in Mexico, the beginning of a second Mexican revolution that will change the attitude of many people," *El Bronco* said. "Nuevo León has provided evidence that the voting box can be a catalyst for change."

The governor-elect also promised that his would be a government led by and accountable to citizens. "We are giving six years of vacation to the parties that have governed our state," Rodríguez told supporters.

Some political observers said a social media campaign consolidated support for Rodríguez. "El Bronco's [rise] was not as much a spontaneous act of popular discontent but the result of a successful experiment," columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio wrote in the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*. "The social networks raised his profile for those who were disaffected, many of whom reside in the virtual world. It would not have been possible to mobilize people in the real world if this discontent had not been organized in the virtual world."

Riva Palacio said the Monterrey-based daily newspaper *El Norte* also played an important role in bringing the discontent to the forefront.

Change is in the air elsewhere

Rodríguez was not the only independent candidate who benefitted from the discontent in Nuevo León. César Valdés Martínez, a nonaffiliated candidate, won election as mayor of the city of García, where *El Bronco* was mayor from 2009 to 2012 as a member of the PRI. García, a city of 42,000, is just northwest of Monterrey.

The changes in Nuevo León did not extend to Monterrey. Felipe de Jesús Cantú Rodríguez of the PAN won the election in Mexico's third-largest city, succeeding fellow PAN member Margarita Arellanes Cervantes.

There was a change in Guadalajara, however, where Enrique Alfaro Ramírez, representing a center-left coalition formed by Movimiento Ciudadano (MC) and Partido del Trabajo (PT), was elected to govern Mexico's second-largest city, defeating candidates from the PRI and the PAN. The two largest parties in the state had governed the city since 1929.

Alfaro, who described himself as "allergic to corruption and party bureaucracies," was rector of the Universidad de Guadalajara from 1983 to 1989. He previously served as mayor of Tlajomulco de Zúñiga, which is in the Guadalajara metropolitan area, and as a member of the Jalisco state legislature.

The MC also won mayoral elections in several other municipalities in Jalisco, including Zapopan, Tlajomulco, Juanacatlán, Zapotlanejo, Puerto Vallarta, Ciudad Guzmán, Ocotlán, and Tepatlán.

Changes also occurred in other small and large cities around the country. In the conflictive state of Michoacán, nonaffiliated candidate Alfonso Martínez Alcázar won election as mayor of the state's largest city, the capital of Morelia, which has a population of 730,000. Martínez Alcázar, who left the PAN after denouncing corruption among state party officials, defeated his closest rival, Jaime Darío Oseguera of the PRI, by more than 63,000 votes. "We are going to work with the support of the citizens to convert this city into a safe and secure place that generates jobs and addresses inequalities," the mayor-elect said in his victory speech.

In the city of Cuernavaca, in Morelos state, voters elected soccer star Cuauhtémoc Blanco as mayor. Blanco, who only retired officially from Mexico's first division Liga MX at the end of the past season, represented the small Partido Social Demócrata (PSD), defeating rivals from the established parties—PRI, PANAL, PVEM, and Morena. An independent candidate also won the mayoral election in Comonfort, Guanajuato.

Independents also made a small impact in the election to the Chamber of Deputies, with Manuel Clouthier Carrillo winning the race for the District 5 seat in Sinaloa state. Clouthier, son of ex-presidential candidate Manuel Clouthier del Rincón, was once a member of the PAN. The elder Clouthier, who competed in the 1988 election against Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, died in a car crash in 1989 under suspicious circumstances.

Clouthier Carrillo said one of his first acts as a member of Congress would be to propose reducing public funding for political parties and to promote strengthening independent candidates.

While Clouthier Carrillo was the only independent to win a seat in the lower house, nonaffiliated candidates received strong support in other races. Independents came in second place in elections for seats in two other districts in Sinaloa and another in Hidalgo. Four independents in other states received the third-highest number of votes in their districts.

Even in elections where an established party won the race, the victory came at the expense of the incumbent party. This was the case in Guerrero state, where the PRI defeated the PRD, and in Michoacán, where the PRD ousted the PRI. The victors actually recovered the governor's seat for their parties, with Héctor Astudillo of the PRI winning in Guerrero and Silvano Aureoles forging ahead in Michoacán. In Sonora, where PAN Gov. Guillermo Padrés Elías was highly unpopular,

Claudia Pavlovich Arellano of the PRI recovered the governor's seat for the party. Similarly, PAN candidate Francisco Domínguez won election in Querétaro, ousting the PRI from the governor's seat.

Some analysts said the elections in Guerrero and Michoacán reflected voter disgust at recent violence in those states. "I am very pleased that the PRD lost the governor's race in Guerrero," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*, pointing out that a mayor from the center-left party was directly responsible for the disappearance and suspected massacre of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)).

"One must remember that it was the PRD that recruited José Luis Abarca as candidate [of Iguala]," noted Zuckermann. "Even though he won the race as mayor, he and his wife were the heads of the criminal organization [operating in the state]."

Zuckermann had a similar take on the PRI's loss in Michoacán. "One has to remember that it was that party that allowed the Caballeros Templarios to infiltrate the government," said the *Excélsior* columnist, citing photographs that appeared on social media showing the son of ex-Gov. Fausto Vallejo consorting with leaders of the cartel ([SourceMex, July 2, 2014](#)). "The electorate punished the PRI."

Reconfiguration of the left

Another byproduct of the 2015 midterm election was the reconfiguration of the left. While the PRD received almost 12% of the total vote nationwide, the level of support was down from the average of 18% received by the party in elections between 1994 and 2012. This is because many voters opted to back the nascent Morena, which obtained about 9% of the support around the country. A third center-left party, the MC, obtained close to 7% of the vote, also at the expense of the PRD. This has created a three-way split in the left.

The MC's strongest support came in Jalisco, where the party won mayoral elections in three of the state's largest cities: Guadalajara, Zapopan, and Puerto Vallarta. The MC will also have fairly strong representation in the federal Chamber of Deputies, with 26 members of the party holding posts in the lower house, including some at-large seats allocated based on the percentage of the vote that the party received. The PRD obtained 56 seats, Morena 47, and the Partido del Trabajo six, giving the center-left parties 135 seats of the 500 in the lower house.

A big loser among the leftist parties was the PT, which received less than 3% of the vote nationally and will lose its registration for the 2018 election. The PT's disappearance from the scene in 2018 also has implications for the PRD. "In the current context, it is easy to predict that the PRD will face strong competition to keep its position as the third-largest party in 2018, as the party will be forced to compete without the support of the PT in a coalition and also face rivals that are growing in strength, such as the MC and Morena," said the online news site *Animal Político*.

"The reality is that the PRD can no longer consider itself one of the major parties but one of four medium-sized parties, together with Morena, PVEM and the MC," *Animal Político* said.

Some analysts have suggested that the relatively high support for Morena, which was a movement and not a political party a year ago, could put López Obrador in a good position to represent the left

again in the 2018 presidential election if he is able to convince supporters of the PRD and the MC to back him. Morena's greatest accomplishments came in Mexico City, where the party won 18 of 40 directly elected seats in the legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF), compared with 14 for the coalition formed by the PRD with the PT and PANAL. The PAN and PRI won five and three seats, respectively. In addition, Morena candidates won elections as executives of four boroughs (delegaciones) that had been governed by the PRD in the capital.

However, López Obrador does not have a clear path to the nomination, since two prominent center-left politicians have also said they would compete for the post. Former Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who left the PRD to join the MC, and current Mayor Miguel Mancera, who is a committed member of the PRD, have also thrown their hats into the ring.

Still, the election results leave López Obrador as the voice of the left in the next three years to oppose Peña Nieto's efforts to implement his reforms. "López Obrador could become a leader of a broad opposition front," analyst Soledad Loeza of the Colegio de México told BBC Mundo. "Let's see if he accomplishes this, because he has a tendency to be confrontational and single-minded, which could be an advantage for the president and disadvantage for the left."

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