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Independent Candidates Could Be a Factor in 2016 Gubernatorial Races, 2018 Presidential Elections

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Public opinion polls in Mexico show that many voters view the established political parties with suspicion and are favoring unaffiliated or independent candidates. The trend is similar to the United States, where candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders—who have labeled themselves as outsiders—have obtained support from large numbers of voters during primary elections. The Mexican presidential election is still two years away, but the antipathy to the established parties—particularly to President Enrique Peña Nieto’s governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)—might manifest itself in the 12 gubernatorial races that are scheduled for June.

A public opinion poll conducted by the respected polling company Consulta Mitofsky revealed that one in three people surveyed does not identify with any of the political parties. The poll was conducted between Feb. 12 and Feb. 14 among 1,000 registered voters nationwide.

Many respondents said they would support an independent candidate over a candidate from one of the smaller parties. A total of 3% of respondents expressed preference for an independent candidate in the 2018 presidential elections. In contrast, highly identifiable small parties—the Partido Verde Ecologista de Mexico (PVEM) and the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC)—each received only 2% support, while the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) only obtained 1%. Among the established parties, 22% of respondents identified themselves with the PRI, 15% with the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), 10% with the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and 8% with Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), a party created by two-time presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Mitofsky pointed out that the level of identification was very close between the PRD and Morena, which could foreshadow a competition between the two parties for the voters who identify themselves with the left.

Still, according to the Mitofsky poll, all parties had a higher percentage of rejection than support. The level of rejection was 43% for the PRI, 36% for the PAN, 35% for the PRD, and 32% for Morena.

“The preferences for Morena were fairly even among demographic groups,” Mitofsky said. “In contrast, others, like the PRD and the PRI, showed weakness among youth, which offered the greatest support for independents.”

Nuevo León governor mentioned as possible candidate

Among potential independent candidates, one of the most identifiable names is Jaime Rodríguez, nicknamed “El Bronco,” who was elected without party affiliation as governor of Nuevo León in June 2015. Rodríguez defeated Ivonne Alvarez of the PRI and Felipe de Jesús Cantú of the PAN in that election (SourceMex, June 24, 2015).

The Mitofsky poll did not ask about any specific independent candidates, but a separate survey conducted by the polling organization Buendía & Laredo found strong support for Rodríguez, Juan Ramón de la Fuente (the former rector of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM),
and Jorge Castañeda Gutman (foreign relations secretary during the Vicente Fox administration). The face-to-face poll was conducted between Feb. 26 and March 2 among 990 respondents.

Buendía & Laredo also asked those interviewed about their opinion of the political parties. The unfavorable/very unfavorable ratings were strong for all parties: 54% for the PRI, 30% for the PAN, 32% for the PRD, and 21% for Morena. However, the unfavorable rating for Morena was balanced by a 26% favorable/very favorable rating.

The poll also served to identify potential front-runners for each party. Among supporters of the PRI, the most popular candidate was current Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong. For the PAN, the most popular name was Margarita Zavala, a former member of the Chamber of Deputies and the wife of former President Felipe Calderón.

The Buendía & Laredo poll also presented a hypothetical three-way race between Osorio Chong, Zavala, and López Obrador. The results indicated a very tight race among the three candidates, with Zavala obtaining 24%, Osorio Chong 23% and López Obrador 20%. These results assume that López Obrador would run only as a representative of Morena. If the other leftist parties—the PRD, the MC, and the Partido del Trabajo (PT)—join in a coalition with Morena, then López Obrador is likely to obtain 28% of the vote, with 26% each going for Osorio Chong (as a representative of a PRI-PVEM-PANAL alliance) and Zavala.

Some gubernatorial races worth watching

Unaffiliated candidates could play a factor in some of the gubernatorial elections scheduled for June 5. Polls show independent candidate Gabriel Arellano running fairly strong against Martín Orozco of the PAN and Lorena Martínez of the PRI in Aguascalientes.

In Chihuahua, independent José Luis Barraza has yet to gain traction against Enrique Serrano of the PRI and Javier Corral of the PAN. “[Barraza] could surge because of support from Nuevo León Gov. Jaime Rodríguez,” columnist Federico Arreola wrote in SDP Noticias.

Arreola said, however, that Corral’s candidacy is worth watching, particularly because he has been perceived throughout his career as a political outsider, at times coming into conflict with members of his own party. In particular, Corral has been a strong opponent of media concentration (SourceMex, May 16, 2007, and July 9, 2014).

“Corral needs the support of independent Barraza, so they don’t divide the ‘discontent’ vote,” Arreola said.

In Sinaloa, polls show PRI candidate Quirino Ordaz with a strong lead, particularly because the PAN and center-left parties are running weak candidates. The level of abstentionism bears watching, however, since this is a state where independents made a strong stand in the 2015 congressional elections. “In Sinaloa, the independent candidates obtained 13% of the total vote. Independent Manuel Clouthier swept the election for the Chamber of Deputies in the city of Culiacán. It wouldn’t be strange to see him as a gubernatorial candidate, emulating El Bronco,” columnist Enrique Quintana wrote in the daily business newspaper El Financiero in June 2015. While Clouthier decided not to run for governor, he could have very well given Ordaz a tough race.

The outgoing governor of Sinaloa, Mario López Valdez, won the 2010 gubernatorial election representing a strange coalition of the PAN, the PRD and the Partido Convergencia Democrática
(PCD), now Movimiento Ciudadano (SourceMex, July 7, 2010). During his time in office, López Valdez has identified himself as an independent.

The PAN and PRD have again joined forces in gubernatorial races in Veracruz, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Durango, and Zacatecas in 2016. “If these alliances are successful, they could encourage those who want the two parties to run together in 2018, possibly forming a coalition for the gubernatorial race in México state in 2017,” columnist Pascal Beltrán del Río wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior.

For the PAN-PRD to win in Veracruz and Zacatecas, they would have to contend with Morena, which is given a strong chance to win in those two states. As a fairly new party, Morena is considered by some as an “outsider” and has a fighting chance to win elections in Zacatecas (with David Monreal) and in Veracruz (with Cuitláhuac García), Arreola said.

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