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Carlos Navarro

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Mexican Voters Send Message to Incumbent Parties, particularly PRI, in Gubernatorial Elections

by Carlos Navarro

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The independent wave that lifted an unaffiliated candidate to the governor’s seat of Nuevo León in 2015 was glaringly absent from the 2016 gubernatorial, municipal, and state legislative elections in 2016. Even though Mexican voters elected independent candidates in a handful of mayoral races this year, the general trend was to replace the incumbent party with a major opposition, a pattern that generally benefitted the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). In many of those races, the PAN ran in coalition with the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), but most of the media coverage of the results rated the elections as a victory for the PAN.

**Anti-Peña Nieto vote**

For many analysts, the elections mostly served as a referendum on President Enrique Peña Nieto and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The PRI lost gubernatorial elections in four states where it had previously had a seemingly iron grip: Tamaulipas, Durango, Quintana Roo, and Veracruz. The PAN also defeated the PRI in two states where the conservative party had held the governor’s office at least once before: Aguascalientes and Chihuahua. The PAN also retained the governorship of Puebla. Conversely, the PRI won in states where an opposition party had governed, scoring victories in gubernatorial races in Sinaloa and Oaxaca. The PRI also retained the gubernatorial seats in Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, and Zacatecas.

Analysts said the PRI’s lackluster performance was partly the result of citizen anger against Peña Nieto, whose administration has been dogged by numerous allegations of corruption ([SourceMex](http://www.sourcemex.org), Dec. 3, 2014, April 29, 2015, and March 9, 2016) and by the perception that the government is tolerating, if not outwardly promoting, impunity. The administration’s inability to solve the case involving the disappearance of 43 students from a teachers’ college in Guerrero state and its refusal to allow a full independent probe of the case have also caused resentment among Mexican citizens ([SourceMex](http://www.sourcemex.org), Oct. 15, 2014, Sept. 16, 2015, and April 20, 2016).

“There is a sense of disgust against corruption and impunity,” José Antonio Crespo, an analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), said in an interview with the online news site Alto Nivel. “This public sentiment is what resulted in a change in government in half of the states that held elections.”

According to Alto Nivel, the states of Quintana Roo, Durango, Tamaulipas, Veracruz, and Oaxaca, where the party in power was voted out, all ranked very high on the Índice Global de Impunidad México (IGI-MEX). The PRI had governed the first four states, while a coalition formed by three center-left parties and the PAN had governed Oaxaca. Hidalgo and Sinaloa, two states where the PRI was victorious, were also fairly high on the IGI-MEX index. The current governor of Sinaloa had been part of a left-right coalition, while Hidalgo had been led by the PRI and remained under its control.
“The PRI lost seven gubernatorial races because of discrentional and mistaken decisions taken by Peña Nieto,” columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio wrote in the daily newspaper El Financiero. “[Party president Manlio Fabio Beltrones] acknowledged that the voters had sent a message to the PRI and the administration that changes were needed. Perhaps the one who needs greater introspection and self-criticism is the president. “

Roman Catholic authorities offered an additional reason why the voters were frustrated with Peña Nieto, suggesting that the president was punished for proposing an initiative to legalize gay marriage throughout Mexico (SourceMex, May 25, 2016). In an editorial in its weekly newspaper, Desde la Fe, the Archdiocese of Mexico City, led by conservative Cardinal Norberto Rivera, said the president had received a “well-deserved punishment vote,” not only because of its corrupt practices but also because of its support of gay marriage.

PRI loses in traditional strongholds

In some of the states where the opposition won, pre-election polls either had given an edge to the PRI or had suggested a tight race. For the PAN, the victories in the northern states of Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, and Durango give the party a foothold in states where the PRI had governed for generations.

“Tamaulipas will have a change. For the first time in 87 years, the PRI—founded as the Partido Nacional Revolucionario in 1929—lost in the state of party founder President Emilio Portes Gil,” columnist Pascal Beltrán del Río wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior. “Beginning on Jan. 1, 2017, the state—which has been hammered by violence—will be governed by the PAN.”

The Tamaulipas election was not even close, with Sen. Francisco Cabeza de Vaca of the PAN defeating Baltazar Hinojosa Ochoa of the PRI-Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM). Hinojosa, currently a member of the PRI governing council, previously served as mayor of Matamoros and as a member of the Chamber of Deputites. Cabeza de Vaca inherits a state with one of the highest rates of drug-related violence and insecurity in Mexico over the past decade (SourceMex, July 26, 2006, June 30, 2010, April 13, 2011, and Feb. 20, 2013).

In Chihuahua, the independent-minded candidate Javier Corral Jurado, a former PAN senator, easily won the gubernatorial race, defeating Enrique Serrano of the PRI by a comfortable margin of eight percentage points. Corral’s victory was somewhat of a surprise, since an average of public opinion polls had shown him trailing Serrano by six points before the election. Corral will be the second PAN member to govern Chihuahua. The PAN’s Francisco Barrio Terrazas governed the state from 1992 to 1998.

Corral, who has been perceived throughout his career as a political outsider, has been a strong opponent of media concentration (SourceMex, May 16, 2007, and July 9, 2014). Serrano, who is concluding his three-year term as mayor of Ciudad Juárez, previously served in the Chamber of Deputies.

In Durango, PAN Sen. José Rosas Aispuro, who was representing a coalition between his party and the PRD, took the governor’s seat with a narrow victory over former Durango City Mayor Esteban Alejandro Villegas Villarreal of the PRI, who was also representing the PVEM, Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) and the local Partido Duranguense in the election. According to analysts, Villegas was the chosen candidate of outgoing Gov. Jorge Herrera, against the wishes of many in the party.
“The imposition [of Villegas Villarreal] caused divisions in the PRI and resulted in the electoral loss, which was the most surprising of all the races,” Riva Palacio said.

Anti-Duarte vote in Veracruz

In Veracruz, the election involved a race between two cousins: federal Deputy Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares (PAN-PRD) and Sen. Héctor Yunes Landa, who represented a coalition between the PRI, PANAL, PVEM, and the local party Alternativa Veracruzana (AVE). Following a bitter campaign, Yunes Linares won by four percentage points over Yunes Landa. About a quarter of the voters, unhappy with the two main candidates, backed university professor Cuitláhuac García Jiménez of the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), a party led by two-time presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. García Jiménez received a respectable 26% of the vote, compared with slightly more than 34% for Yunes Linares and just under 31% for Yunes Landa.

Yunes Linares will assume the leadership of a state where violence and impunity has increased significantly in recent years, particularly during the administration of outgoing Gov. Javier Duarte (SourceMex, April 24, 2013, Jan. 14, 2015, and May 11, 2015). The citizens of Veracruz were also aware of reports that Duarte allegedly misappropriated at least 13 billion pesos (US$685 million) in federal funds that had been intended for education, public works, security, and other services. That information came from a report published by the Auditoría Superior de la Federación (ASF), the auditing agency created by the Mexican Congress. According to the online investigative site Animal Político, Duarte also appropriated an additional 645 million pesos (US$34 million) through public contracts awarded to shell companies affiliated with his associates.

The alternative to the PRI in Veracruz was not necessarily free of controversy. Yunes Linares was elected despite allegations that he engaged in pedophilia. The governor-elect was said to have close connections to Jean Succar Kuri, a convicted pedophile who was featured in a book by investigative reporter Lydia Cacho (SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2006). Cacho became the center of controversy when then-Puebla Gov. Mario Marín, another friend of Succar, ordered Cacho’s abduction and imprisoned her in Puebla (SourceMex, April 26, 2006, and Dec. 5, 2007).

Yunes Landa was generally free of controversy but had the misfortune of being affiliated with Duarte’s party. “PRI candidate Héctor Yunes Landa, who had an impeccable record as a public administrator and legislator, was ‘defeated’ by Javier Duarte de Ochoa, who was universally known for his corruption, inept governance, and dishonesty,” said the daily newspaper El Diario de Coahuila.

The PAN recovered the gubernatorial seat in Aguascalientes after losing the post to the PRI in 2010. Sen. Martín Orozco Sandoval won a narrow victory over Lorena Martínez Rodríguez, who represented a coalition formed by the PRI, PANAL, PVEM, and the Partido del Trabajo (PT). Martínez Rodríguez recently served as head of the federal government’s consumer protection agency (Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor, PROFECO). Before losing the 2010 election, the PAN had governed the state for two consecutive terms under Felipe González (1998-2004) and Luis Armando Reynoso Femat (2004-2010). Carlos Lozano de la Torre of the PRI held the post between 2010 and 2016.

PAN-PRD alliance wins in three states

In another somewhat surprising result, the PAN-PRD alliance scored a decisive victory in the gubernatorial election in Quintana Roo, which had been governed by the PRI since 1975. Pre-
election polls had put PAN-PRD candidate Carlos Joaquín González, an official with the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR), 12 points behind PRI-PVEM-PANAL candidate Mauricio Góngora Escalante, mayor of the municipality of Solidaridad. In the end, González won the election by 10 percentage points. According to observers, the number of voters in Quintana Roo who participated in the 2016 election was 12 percentage points higher than in the 2010 gubernatorial race, which helped boost the PAN-PRD candidate.

In addition to Quintana Roo, the alliances between the PAN and the PRD proved to be a major factor in Durango and Veracruz. Conversely, the PAN and PRD fared poorly in two states where the two parties were victorious as a coalition for the 2010 elections: Oaxaca and Sinaloa (SourceMex, July 7, 2010). The PAN-PRD alliance also won in Puebla in 2010, but the PAN participated in the 2016 election without a coalition and won by a comfortable margin. According to electoral authorities, PAN candidate José Antonio Gali Fayad, outgoing mayor of Puebla City, received 45% of the vote, compared with 34% for Blanca Alcalá of the PRI. Alcalá, who works at the federal social service agency Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF), also served as Puebla mayor between 2008 and 2011.

Some analysts noted that despite the losses, the PRI remains a major political force in Mexico, even though it now has to share more power with the PAN. “Three of the victorious candidates who replaced the PRI were recently members of that party,” the columnist Raul Trejo Delarbre wrote in Cronica.mx. “Therefore, it would be difficult to consider that the recent elections in Durango, Quintana Roo, and Veracruz represent authentic change.”

The PRD’s alliance with the PAN was not sufficient to give the party the electoral strength it needs, and Morena scored some victories, but in the end also came out fairly weak. A major problem, said Beltrán del Río, is that Morena and the PRD are dividing the vote on the left. “By themselves, the two parties are diminished,” said the Excélsior columnist. “Morena failed to take the big victory it expected in Zacatecas, and it cannot break away from the PRD [as the preferred party for the left-leaning voters].”

Morena’s only true victory came in Mexico City, where the party attracted the largest number of votes to determine the members of the body that will be writing a Constitution for the new state of Mexico City (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2016, and March 9, 2016). According to electoral authorities, Morena won 22 of the 60 seats up for election in the Constitutional Assembly, compared with 19 for the PRD, seven for the PAN and five for the PRI. The other six seats will be distributed among small parties.

**Independents fall short**

While Mexican citizens voted for alternancia (a change of party in power), opposition parties, and not independent candidates were the beneficiaries. The 2015 election represented a milestone in Mexico, as an independent candidate won the gubernatorial election in Nuevo León and nonaffiliated mayors in the cities of Morelia in Michoacán and García in Nuevo León. In addition, an independent candidate in the state of Sinaloa won election to the federal Chamber of Deputies (SourceMex, June 24, 2015).

The number of independent candidates who registered in 2016 was comparable to 2015 (SourceMex, April 6, 2016), but the success rate fell short of last year’s elections. There were some important victories in the state of Chihuahua, with non-affiliated candidates Armando Cabada and Alfredo Lozoya winning the mayoral elections in Ciudad Juárez and Parral, respectively.
Ismael Figueroa Flores, a firefighter in Mexico City, received enough support to gain a seat on the Constituent Assembly in Mexico City.

José Luis Barraza González performed best among the independent candidates running for governor, attracting about 18% of the vote in Chihuahua. However, non-affiliated candidates received only single-digit support in Durango, Aguascalientes, Puebla, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, and Zacatecas.

Independent candidates were also on the ballot in four of the mayoral races in Baja California, but none succeeded in attracting much support. The traditional parties also won municipal elections in major cities, including Mazatlán and Culiacán in Sinaloa state; Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, Tampico, and Matamoros in Tamaulipas state; Cancún in Quintana Roo state, and Oaxaca City in Oaxaca state.

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