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Three Gubernatorial Elections to Test Strength of Mexico's Governing Party

by Carlos Navarro

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Upcoming gubernatorial elections in three Mexican states could serve as important barometers for the presidential race in the summer of 2018. Political observers expect the upcoming votes to test the strength of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), particularly in light of the growing unpopularity of President Enrique Peña Nieto ([SourceMex, May 13, 2015](#), [Sept. 7, 2016](#), [Jan. 4, 2017](#)). To a smaller extent, the election will also measure the strength of center-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (National Regeneration Movement, Morena), who is leading in the very early polls for 2018 ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)).

Gubernatorial elections in México, Coahuila, and Nayarit states are scheduled on June 4. The election in México state will be watched closely to determine how the PRI and Morena perform. Morena is not expected to be a factor in the Coahuila and Nayarit the elections, which will feature contests between the PRI and the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) and their coalition partners. The center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) is running as part of the coalition led by the PAN in both states.

In Coahuila, a poll conducted by the newspaper Reforma in March showed Miguel Ángel Riquelme of the PRI leading Guillermo Anaya of the PAN by about four percentage points. Riquelme's relatively strong showing in the poll should be encouraging news for the PRI, which has been hit not only by an unpopular president but by charges of corruption and mismanagement on the part of Humberto Moreira Valdez, who served as governor between 2005 and 2011 ([SourceMex, Jan. 27, 2016](#), [March 9, 2016](#), [Aug. 17, 2016](#)). The ex-governor's successor, his brother Rubén Moreira Valdez, has also faced accusations of corruption.

In Nayarit, the parties and their coalition partners have just completed the process of selecting their candidates, which means there are yet no public opinion polls. PAN candidate Antonio Echeverría García, an entrepreneur, will face PRI Sen. Manuel Cota Jiménez and independent candidate Hilario Ramírez Villanueva.

Close race in México state

A public opinion poll conducted by the daily newspaper Reforma on March 9-13 showed PRI candidate Alfredo del Mazo Maza with 29% support from voters in México state, compared with 28% for Delfina Gómez Álvarez of Morena and 25% for Josefina Vázquez Mota of the PAN. Taking into account the poll's margin of error, the three candidates were in a technical tie. The close nature of the race does not bode well for the PRI, which has won the gubernatorial seat in the state by wide margins in recent elections, including a landslide victory by Peña Nieto in 2005 ([SourceMex, July 20, 2005](#), and [July 6, 2011](#)).

“Although there is no guarantee that a PRI victory in México state will assure a win in the 2018 presidential elections, a PRI loss in this symbolic state will greatly reduce the party’s chances in the presidential contest,” columnist Ángel A. Guerra wrote in the online news site EnLíneaDirecta.info.

México state is the home of the so-called Grupo Atlacomulco, a powerful faction within the PRI that is said to have exerted significant influence over recent elections in the state and in federal races. Several prominent PRI politicians have been linked to the group, including former Gov. Carlos Hank González, Emilio Chuayffet, Arturo Montiel, Alfredo del Mazo Vélez (grandfather of the current PRI gubernatorial candidate), former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), and Peña Nieto. The existence of this group, founded by former Gov. Isidro Fabela, has never been confirmed publicly, but there have been plenty of media references to its existence over the years. “Until now, all the politicians who have been alleged to belong to the group have denied its existence,” the weekly news magazine Proceso said in 2009.

In a 2008 edition, Proceso noted that Fabela’s philosophy had permeated the attitude of PRI politicians associated with the group. “A politician who is poor is a poor politician,” are words attributed to Fabela.

A loss by del Mazo Maza in June, therefore, would be considered a big blow to the Grupo Atlacomulco and the PRI, which has held the post for more than eight decades. “Alfredo del Mazo ... is charged with keeping the governor’s seat in the hands of the PRI,” Martha Martínez wrote in the daily newspaper Reforma. “If he loses, the PRI would have taken one more step toward a probable defeat in the 2018 presidential election.”

Women representing PAN, Morena in México state

The México state election is also significant because two of the three major candidates are women. The PAN candidate, Vázquez Mota, became the first woman to represent a major party in a presidential election in Mexico ([SourceMex, Feb. 8, 2012](#)), eventually losing to Peña Nieto and López Obrador ([SourceMex, July 11, 2012](#)). In an interview with Imagen Radio on March 8, which was International Women’s Day, Vázquez Mota said her candidacy was another step for women in the march to gain a space in the political landscape.

“Women continue to fight for positions in leadership, but we still have to contend with questions and challenges that men do not have to face,” said Vázquez Mota, who also served in the Chamber of Deputies for a three-year term. “We are here to open up new spaces and dispel all those questions.”

A victory by Vázquez Mota would boost the candidacy of Margarita Zavala, who is the frontrunner to earn the PAN’s nomination for the 2018 presidential election ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)). Zavala, who served in the Chamber of Deputies in 2003-2006, is the wife of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012).

For Vázquez Mota, the strategy to promote herself as a strong female candidate is complicated by the presence of another woman in the race. In fact, her opponent from Morena, Gómez Álvarez, is a few percentage points ahead of her in the Reforma poll. Gómez Álvarez has strong support from López Obrador and other Morena politicians, but her challenge will be to persuade members of PRD to support her instead of their own candidate, Juan Zepeda, who was only designated in mid-March.

An advantage for Gómez Álvarez is her humble background, which should appeal to voters fed up with the establishment parties, including the PRD. The Morena candidate is the daughter of a construction worker and a former teacher who served as mayor of Texcoco for three years. She was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2015 and took a leave of absence from Congress in January to run for the governorship in México state.

López Obrador's support appears to be giving Gómez Álvarez's candidacy a strong boost. "It is very clear that the López Obrador effect is giving the candidacy of Delfina Gómez a push, in the same way that the unpopularity of Peña Nieto is dragging down del Mazo," Guerra wrote in [EnLíneaDirecta.info](#). He pointed to a public opinion survey that indicated that two out of every three respondents in México state disapprove of Peña Nieto.

Gómez Álvarez, for her part, believes that her gubernatorial candidacy should be viewed through the lens of her own accomplishments as a mayor and federal deputy. "I'm the lawmaker with the most votes nationally," said Gómez Álvarez, whose tenure as mayor of Texcoco was successful, even though she inherited a debt of 20 million pesos (US\$1 million) from her predecessor, Arturo Martínez Alfaro, a member of the PRI.

A victory for Gómez Álvarez would certainly give a boost to López Obrador's candidacy in the 2018 presidential race. López Obrador broke from the PRD after the 2012 election to form Morena as a citizen movement ([SourceMex, Sept. 19, 2012](#)). In 2014, electoral authorities gave Morena major party status ([SourceMex, July 30, 2014](#)).

Women prepare for 2018

Beyond the México state election, the candidacies of Vázquez Mota and Gómez Álvarez appear to be part of a trend highlighting the participation of women in the 2018 presidential contest. In October 2016, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army, EZLN) and the Congreso Nacional Indígena (National Indigenous Congress, CNI) announced they would promote the independent candidacy of an indigenous woman to represent the indigenous movement in the 2018 presidential election ([SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2016](#)). They said the name of the candidate would be announced in May.

In Oaxaca, a group of women announced the creation of the first all-female political party in Mexico, the Partido de Mujeres Revolucionarias (Party of Revolutionary Women, PMR), to participate in that state's elections in June 2018. The PMR would become the 11th political party in Oaxaca, pending official recognition from the state electoral institute (Instituto Estatal Electoral y de Participación Ciudadana, IEEPCO). In 2015, the Oaxaca state legislature approved a measure to synchronize the state legislative elections with the elections for the federal Congress. Deputies who ran in 2016 were elected for a two-year instead of the normal three-year term, which means that a new state legislature will be elected in 2018.

Guadalupe Díaz Pantoja, president of the PMR, said the main objective of the party is to advocate for the right of women to enter politics, run as candidates, and hold public office. According to Díaz Pantoja, more than one-half of the 3.5 million registered voters in Oaxaca are women, and it is they who "define change and who should rise to power."

A number of modifications and updates to state laws created a more open electoral environment, but the playing field is not even for women, because Oaxaca continues to hold sexist attitudes that give preference to men in the political arena, she said.

“[Women want to] participate in politics, to vote and to rule without being stigmatized or discriminated against,” Díaz Pantoja said. “Political parties no longer belong to the people but to family elites, sects, and political groups that only seek to enrich themselves.”

According to Díaz Pantoja, the party’s platform will be centered on three themes: gender equality, care for the environment, and restoring the people’s trust in political action. Another goal is to promote public policies that put a stop to violence against women.

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