



Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington, D.C.

## EVENT SUMMARY

### **Who will be Mexico's Next President? What will be the Composition of Mexico's Congress?**

#### **A Mexican Public Opinion Perspective**

**May 25, 2006**

On May 25, 2006, the CSIS Mexico Project hosted panel of five of Mexico's most renowned pollsters at an interactive roundtable discussion titled "Who Will be Mexico's Next President? A Mexican Public Opinion Perspective". The panelists were Francisco Abundis, of Parametría, Ulises Beltrán, of BGC, Jorge Buendía, of Ipsos-Bimsa, Roy Campos, of Consulta Mitofsky, and Rafael Giménez of ARCOP.

Francisco Abundis opened the discussion by commenting on the oscillations of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's poll numbers and attributed the his decline from the peak of support at 43 percent in the summer of 2005 to a current low of 34 percent to candidate Felipe Calderón's negative advertisement campaign. Dr. Abundis noted that López Obrador's period of absence from media spots and his failure to respond in a timely manner to accusations launched against him by rival candidates significantly shifted public opinion against him - even as Calderón's public image remained flat. Still, he observed that López Obrador's polls had demonstrated a point of stability at 33-34 percent of support. In reference to the potential impact of the upcoming June 6 debate on voter preference, Dr. Abundis stated that the first presidential debate had minimally affected voters' political preference, with only 4 percent changing candidates after the debate. Lastly, he described the growing regional polarization of the campaign, highlighting that López Obrador's base of support is in the two voting regions located at the center of the country, while Calderón's base remains more evenly distributed across regions.

Dr. Beltrán began his presentation by giving an overview of polling data and describing how López Obrador's fall in the polls over the past few months from a 10-point lead to being either tied or slightly below Calderón should be attributed to Calderón's increasing popularity and strong media campaign and not López Obrador's lack of participation in the first presidential debate held on April 25. Beltrán used polling data to show that Calderón has increased in the polls by broadening his voter base to a wide socio-economic spectrum, increasing support in traditionally non-PAN regions, and increasing his name recognition and public opinion ratings through the effective use of media campaigns. Polls also show that Calderón and López Obrador have been very successful at creating media campaigns which register high in peoples' memories, as compared to Madrazo's media spots. Dr. Beltrán warned against trying to make predictions on the outcome of the July presidential elections because, similar to the 2000

presidential elections, voter preferences have not crystallized. Beltrán argues that although public opinion polls probably do not directly impact voter choices, they do impact the candidates' campaign strategies which, in turn, can impact voter opinion. In the weeks leading up to the elections there are many factors which have the potential of impacting the election outcomes, including: the second presidential debate, which will be held on June 6, changes in media campaigns, and local campaigns. Local campaigns may prove to be very important in the composition of Congress because a voter may vote for a candidate from one party for president but vote for different parties in local elections. Dr. Beltrán explained that voting patterns such as this could lead to a divided government, regardless of the outcome of the presidential race, and make it more difficult for the eventual winner to govern effectively.

Jorge Buendía's presentation focused on the rise of partisan polarization in Mexico in the past two years and noted that political cleavages, particularly between the PRD and other parties, have been the most dramatic schisms within Mexican society - even more than social class differences. This is important as it demonstrates that political polarization has not evolved into social polarization. Mr. Buendía also discussed the likelihood of post-electoral conflict and political mobilization among the candidates' political bases. He concluded that López Obrador's constituency was more prone to contest election results and protest and mobilize in response. Although, he reckoned that the chances of mobilization would be relatively low, at only 9 percent, and that it would likely depend on the closeness of the results, as well as who was elected.

Mr. Campos shifted the focus from the presidential elections to the state-level elections. He argues that distribution of votes for the PRI, PAN, and PRD gubernatorial candidates has not changed much since the PRI lost power in 2000 and that despite President Fox's relatively high public approval ratings, the PAN continues to fall behind the PRI in the state-level elections. Mr. Campos noted the irony that the PRI, the strongest party in state elections has the most unpopular presidential candidate and that the PRD, the weakest party in the state governments has the most popular presidential candidate. He commented that the PRD would benefit the most from strong gubernatorial candidates with the potential to eclipse their party's reputation of being weak.

Following his analysis of the state-level elections, Mr. Campos discussed the presidential elections. He attributed the negative spike in López Obrador's popularity to other candidates' negative campaigning and the lack of response by López Obrador to such advertisements. He stressed that López Obrador will have few options but to respond with negative campaigns of his own in the coming weeks. Mr. Campos addressed the comparative effectiveness of López Obrador's and Calderón's respective media coverage. Despite a greater number of promotions in March, the presence of López Obrador has often been restricted to localized media outlets, whereas Calderón has appeared much more frequently on national programming. Mr. Campos emphasized that the number of López Obrador promotions dropped significantly in April, when the candidate most needed to respond to negative campaigning. Towards the end of his presentation Mr. Campos emphasized the likeliness of a close July presidential election outcome, stating that a mere 3 percentage points could determine the election's outcome. Mr. Campos predicted that no party would attain a majority in the July congressional elections. Finally, Mr. Campos argued that the probability for challenges to election results is quite low because Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, the body responsible for administering Mexico's elections, enjoys a high-level of public support and trust.

Rafael Giménez cited security, employment, and external debt as benchmarks of the campaign, and attributed López Obrador's decline in the polls in mid-March to the growth in public confidence in Calderón on these issues. He stated that the PAN's success in the primary elections, not the acquisition of media spots, also accounted for the shift in poll numbers. Mr. Giménez cautioned against prematurely declaring winners in what is now a very contentious election, with Calderón able to withstand López

Obrador's early lead. He explained that the regional weakening of PRI in key states like Veracruz, Puebla, and Tazcala (in contrast to the 2000 elections) had led to a less predictable election. Mr. Giménez ended his presentation by suggesting that a majority in congress would be difficult to achieve, regardless of the winner of the presidential elections, and that a coalition is to be expected.

The panel of pollsters responded to a variety of questions from the audience. When asked to what extent polls shape public opinion and not just reflect it, the pollsters agreed that polls, in their own respect, have little impact on shaping public opinion because people tend to believe the polls that reflect their own political beliefs. However, they acknowledged that political campaign teams use polling data as part of a strategy to sway public opinion. The panel also warned that it is especially important, given the close polling data on the presidential election, that polls not be used as tools of prediction, but as instruments to help understand the public's response to the election process.