



MEXICO ALERT

Tabasco Election and its National Repercussions

George W. Grayson
Armand Peschard-Sverdrup

Introduction

Political observers are paying close attention to the October 15 Tabasco gubernatorial competition in oil-endowed Tabasco state. This race holds major significance not only for the state, but also for the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which in mid-year lost the presidency to Vicente Fox Quesada of the center-right National Action Party (PAN). In addition to selecting their state's chief executive, Tabasqueños may enhance the clout of outgoing governor Roberto Madrazo Pintado by electing Manuel Andrade Díaz, a Madrazo protégé and PRI standard-bearer. Although Madrazo finished second in last November's PRI presidential primary, he is the odds-on favorite to become the next leader of his deeply-fractured party. The victory of Andrade would increase from 90 to 99% the likelihood of Madrazo's capturing the PRI presidency.

Overview

- If PRI candidate Manuel Andrade Diaz wins in Sunday's election, current governor of Tabasco, Roberto Madrazo, is the odds-on favorite to become the next leader of a deeply-fractured party.
- Among the eleven candidates running for office, Andrade's strongest challenge comes from Cesar Raul Ojeda Zubieta, a priista who switched parties to run as a candidate of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD).
- Andrade and Madrazo's foes have tried to employ an opposition alliance strategy with Ojeda as candidate, but thus far, to no avail.
- Madrazo's leadership of the PRI would help more than hinder the Fox regime.

Who are the major players in the Tabasco showdown, and how do they stand in public-opinion polls? How will the results of this Sunday's vote affect the PRI and the nation? And what are the state's economic, social, and political characteristics?

Major Players

Eleven candidates are criss-crossing the state in hopes of winning the Quinta Grijalva gubernatorial palace. In some ways, the campaign represents a PRI intramural conflict, because five of the contenders once belonged to the revolutionary party. Most Tabasco-watchers believe Andrade, 36, is the man to beat. He won national oratorical contests as a law student; headed the PRI Youth in Villahermosa, the state capital; gained election to the state legislature while in his twenties; and has served in key posts in the Tabasco government, as well as in the local, state, and national PRI. Critics have lambasted Andrade as a "puppet" of the incumbent, charging that if Andrade triumphs, Madrazo will manipulate him from behind the scenes. While strongly backed by Madrazo, Andrade can stand on his own merits. He has distinguished himself in administrative, party, legislative, and administrative positions. In addition, he revealed his political savvy, when President Ernesto Zedillo and his inexperienced government secretary, Esteban Moctezuma Barragán, attempted to oust the wily Madrazo from his governorship in 1995. This move sprang from compelling evidence that Madrazo had spent upwards of \$65 million in his

1994 victory in a Massachusetts-sized state with fewer than 1 million voters. Because Andrade organized pro-Madrado marches, demonstrations, and media coverage so adeptly, Zedillo and Moctezuma were forced to throw in the towel.

Andrade's strongest challenge comes from César Raúl Ojeda Zubieta, 48, a priísta who switched to the leftist-nationalist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). Ojeda graduated from the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1976 and pursued further studies in the administration of state enterprises. He parlayed this background into ever-more important posts in the state and federal bureaucracy. He also found time to amass a fortune, derived from his ranching, cattle production, real estate holdings, and co-ownership of the Villahermosa Hyatt Hotel. Ojeda has also served in the state legislature (1986-1990), the federal Chamber of Deputies (1994-97), and was elected to the Senate last July 2.

Foes of Andrade and Madrazo urged other parties to cast their lot with Ojeda. They pointed out that he (1) was the first to declare his candidacy, (2) had the resources to mount a formidable campaign, and (3) could take advantage of the strategy employed by Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía in Chiapas. Salazar, the nominee of an eight-party coalition, nosed out the PRI nominee to win the governorship of Chiapas on August 20, 2000.

Entreaties to forge a Salazar-like front in Tabasco fell on deaf ears. The PAN, for example, was emboldened by Fox's impressive showing of 20% in Madrazo's bailiwick, where it had traditionally garnered anemic support-in part, because of the state's marked anti-Catholicism. Consequently, National Action recruited Deputy José Antonio de la Vega Asmitia, 37, to run for governor. De la Vega had studied law at Tabasco's Juárez Autonomous University and at the New Sorbonne in Paris. Moreover, he applied his expertise in constitutional and political questions in a half-dozen key state and federal agencies. Before running for the Chamber of Deputies, de la Vega served as private secretary to Arturo Núñez Jiménez, a ranking priísta from Tabasco, who endorsed Francisco Labastida Ochoa over his erstwhile bosom buddy Madrazo in the party's presidential primary. Núñez's later bid for the PRI gubernatorial nomination inspired Madrazo to work even harder for Andrade, who won by a nearly two-to-one margin. Núñez, who cried foul upon learning of the results, took pleasure in de la Vega jump to the PAN in order to challenge Andrade. Only a few dewy-eyed optimists believe that de la Vega has a chance to win. Still, this may be a trial run for a man who embodies many characteristics of successful PAN gubernatorial aspirants-namely, he is young, handsome, articulate, and head of an extremely photogenic family.

Gubernatorial Candidates

Party	Candidate
PRI	Manuel AndradeDiaz
PRD	Cesar Raul Ojeda Zubieta
PAN	Jose Antonio de la Vega Asmitia
PT	Hector Arguello Lopez
PVEM	Nicolas Haddad Lopez
PDS	Luis Rey Carrasco Linares
PCD	Jose Eduardo Beltran Hernandez
PARM	Ruben Gary Castro Garcia
CD	Silvia Damiana Correa Garcia
PSN	Maria Luisa Hernandez Morales
PAS	Antonio Roman Alvarez

Observers credit Madrazo for stimulating the record number of contenders. He obviously wanted to divide the electoral pie into as many slices as possible.

A late-September Indermerc-Louis Harris poll, conducted for Crisis magazine, showed Andrade with a commanding lead. Respondents favored the PRI candidate by 16 points over the PRD standard-bearer (31.02%) and by 30 points over his PAN opponent (18.48%). Good news for Andrade also appeared in Madrazo's 71% approval rating, which included majorities among supporters of the PRI (87%), PAN (79%), and even the PRD (51%). Andrade's strong standing notwithstanding, opposition parties have excoriated Madrazo for spending public funds, mobilizing state employees, and manipulating the media on behalf of his fair-haired boy. Rumors have abounded that either Ojeda or de la Vega would protest these alleged abuses by pulling out of the contest. In early October, however, PRI and PAN leaders blasted Mexico City's PRD mayor and mayor-elect for diverting resources from the Federal District's budget to boost Ojeda's prospects. Furthermore, the PRI president warned that the PRD's strident rhetoric shows the party's readiness to launch post-electoral demonstrations.

Still, Ojeda, who is trumpeting the "change" message that Fox articulated so effectively in the presidential face-off, may wind up giving Andrade a run for his money. He's been the target of egg-throwers in the countryside, and a recent Reforma poll showed Ojeda pulling even with him. As a result, the PRI is lavishing food, drink, building equipment, and other dispensas on potential voters and their families. For his part, Ojeda welcomed a host of PRD heavyweights to his closing rally. Among the participants was PRD presidential nominee Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, party president Amalia García, Zacatecas governor Ricardo Monreal, Mexico City mayor Rosario Robles, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Apparently, López Obrador, the party's popular mayor-elect of Mexico City and Madrazo's chief opponent in the 1994 election, forgot that he once excoriated Ojeda for being an egregiously corrupt businessman, who-with a group of entrepreneurs-ousted PRD militants from the Plaza de Armas in Villahermosa in January 1995.

Significance of Tabasco Election for the PRI and Mexico

Even though still in the ring, the PRI has suffered severe blows in recent years. It has lost eleven governorships, the Mexico City mayorship, a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and-above all-the presidency, to which Fox will ascend on December 1. This pummeling has converted the hegemonic, disciplined, and powerful party into a series of warring groups. The factions include Zedillo and the technocrats, whom Madrazo and his followers blame for the party's decline. Other contingents are made up by governors, the current PRI party and legislative leadership, elements of the trade-union movement, the national peasants organization, federal bureaucrats, and supporters of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who was hugely discredited by the 1994-96 economic crisis.

Lame-duck President Zedillo and failed-candidate Labastida played instrumental roles in naming the PRI's current top figures: Dulci María Sauri Riancho (president), Enrique Jackson Ramírez (Senate leader), and Beatriz Paredes Rangel (Chamber of Deputies leader). Madrazo's entourage and many militants view these figures as neither effective nor legitimate. Thus, a robust Andrade victory would ensure Madrazo's replacing Sauri as the party's head. This changing-of-the-guard would affect the PRI and Mexico in several ways:

1. The PRI would have as its president the most legitimate figure among priístas in the country. His ascent might drive many technocrats from the party. While important to any administration, these bright men and women can deliver few votes. Meanwhile, the Tabasco leader enjoys broad-based backing from governors, mayors, state party presidents, and grass-roots activists. Indeed, on October 7, the 21 PRI governors assembled in Villahermosa in an act of solidarity with Madrazo and Andrade.

2. Madrazo, who sees the party presidency as a stepping stone to Los Pinos presidential residence in 2006, would support Fox's initiatives to (a) devolve more power to states and municipalities, (b) earmark more of the federal budget to education, housing, medical care, and other social programs, (c) promote regional ventures like the proposed Puebla to Panama development corridor. At the same time, the Type-A Tabascan would fight perceived efforts to diminish the nation's sovereignty such as selling off existing state firms and opening the energy sector to private ownership.
3. His populist nationalism aside, Madrazo's leadership of the PRI would help more than hurt the Fox regime. Clearly, the two men would cross swords over aspects of the next president's free-enterprise, reform-focused agenda. Nonetheless, Fox would find in Madrazo a legitimate interlocutor for the PRI—namely, someone with whom he could negotiate deals secure in the knowledge that his counterpart could deliver on any promises made. At present, the PRI hierarchy embraces no such person.
4. Given Madrazo's political pragmatism and aspirations, he is likely to see eye-to-eye with Fox on certain issues. Madrazo is astute enough to recognize that times have changed in Mexico's political landscape, and that he must either adapt or falter. Perhaps the best illustration of this pragmatism and adaptability is when Madrazo (accompanied by five other southern governors) unexpectedly welcomes president-elect Fox upon arriving in Costa Rica for a quasi state visit on Monday, Sept. 11th. In fact, Fox and Madrazo even embraced—clearly an abrazo among two very pragmatic politicians, cognizant of each other's political brawn.

Demographics and Economic Characteristics of Tabasco

Demographic Highlights	
Capital	Villahermosa
Main Cities	Cardenas
Land Area	25,267 sq. kms. (9,756 sq. miles)
Population	1,817,703 (1997)
Percentage of National Population	1.86
Labor Force	41.1%
Share of G.N.P.	1.5%
Firms	27,844
Roads	7,912 kms. (4,914 miles)
International Airports	1
Main Export Products	Oil, petrochemicals, sugar, and coffee
Electric Power	91.4%

Source: Mexican Investment Board and Instituto Nacional de Estadística, geografía e informática (INEGI)

Gross State Product	
Economic Sector	Percent
Agriculture and Livestock	7.4
Mining	13.0
Manufacturing	7.5

Construction	4.0
Trade	10.9
Transportation and Communications	6.4
Finance and Insurance	32.4
Other Services	18.4

Source: Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior

About the Authors

George W. Grayson, the Class of 1938 Professor of Government at the College of William & Mary, has made fifty research trips to Mexico since 1976, and lectures regularly at the National Defense University and the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State. He is an adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and an associate scholar of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is also Senior Adviser on Mexican Affairs for the Washington D.C.-based Capital Insight Group. Professor Grayson earned his Ph.D. at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of The Johns Hopkins University and his J.D. at the College of William & Mary. He has served as a member of the Virginia state legislature for twenty-five years.

Armand B. Peschard-Sverdrup is the Director of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), responsible for analysis of Mexico's domestic politics, trade, investment, and U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations. He frequently lectures at both the Mexican Advanced Area Studies Seminar at the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State and at the National Defense University. His primary research interests are Mexican domestic politics and U.S.-Mexican relations.