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Mexico's Presidential Election Was a Significant Event

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After looking at the title of this essay, I decided to leave it, but with an amendment: election day (July 2, 2006) was an event in a still-ongoing process, that of the emergence of Mexico from one-party rule. It has been long in the making; one place to start is the government's suppression of the 1968 student protests. The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) was then in power, and the government made many modifications to the electoral structure over the ensuing years, each one modest enough so as not to imperil the PRI's hold on power. The definitive reform action came in 1996, when both the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and the Electoral Court of the Federal Judicial Power (TEPJF) were established; IFE organizes federal elections, counts the votes, and is empowered to resolve some administrative appeals, while the TEPJF is in charge of acting on appeals and reviewing compliance of the election with legislative and constitutional norms. IFE, after its vote count, declared Felipe Calderón the victor by 0.58 percentage points over Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or by 243,934 votes out of 41,791,322 votes that were cast. The TEPJF has until August 31, 2006, to render its verdict, and until September 6 to release all the pertinent documents.

The victory of Vicente Fox in the 2000 presidential election established that after 71 years of PRI dominance, alternation in power was possible. Yet, there was much speculation that the PRI would return to power in 2006 because it was the best organized party in the country, held more governorships than any other party, and had a plurality in both houses of the legislature. In the event, the PRI presidential candidate in 2006, Roberto Madrazo, came in a poor third, and the PRI dropped to third place in both the senate and chamber of deputies elections. The 2006 outcome proved again that alternation of the party in power is possible—a well-known economist gave as his first rule, "that which exists is possible"—and may now be a fixture of the Mexican political scene. The PRI's future on the national scene is uncertain, but the party still has its national machinery and many able governors.

While the election and its close outcome were remarkable, the contest itself was not inspiring. AMLO, as López Obrador is identified in newspaper headlines, started early and held a solid lead until about two months before the election. AMLO's decline in public opinion polls had much to do with Calderón's heavy television advertising, some of it quite dirty. Calderón charged that AMLO would be a Mexican version of President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela—that he was far to the left, a populist, and a spendthrift. IFE, as it monitored the campaign, forced Calderón's party, the PAN (National Action Party) to remove some of its advertising as being inaccurate. In fact, AMLO is unlike Chávez in his habits and personality; he lives modestly, and his emphasis is in domestic affairs and not in publicizing himself throughout Latin America. AMLO has exhibited no anti-Americanism.

Enrique Krauze, a respected historian and political commentator, argued in articles in the Mexican and U.S. press that AMLO was messianic (the title of his *New Republic* article of June 19 was "Tropical Messiah"), not merely because he deeply believes in what he seeks, but rather as a person who believes that his ideas are destined to triumph and is therefore not easily dissuaded from his positions. George Grayson, a U.S. academic who writes extensively on Mexico, wrote a book published in Spanish that also charged that AMLO was messianic. I confess that I did not find convincing the evidence presented by either of these authors, although I respect both of them, and they came to their views independently. Krauze has been influential. The adjective "messianic" is often used in news stories to describe AMLO (the "messianic" candidate of the "left").

The PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), AMLO's party, is leftist. AMLO's campaign was based on his concern about economic inequality, poverty, and inadequate job creation during the six years of the Fox administration. The charge that AMLO is a spendthrift is not borne out by the budget of the Federal District (Mexico City proper) when he was head of government there. Indeed, the increase in the Federal District's budget deficit during his term was negligible. To be sure, this might have been because the national Congress had to approve borrowings by the Federal District. AMLO did change priorities in spending by transferring funds from other uses in order to benefit poor residents of the Federal District. Two prominent critics of AMLO, Krauze and Jorge Castañeda, the first foreign minister in the Fox government, used the same example when challenged on the spendthrift charge: that AMLO gave priority to double-decking the *periferico* (a crowded north-south artery) over the more essential need to deal with Mexico City's wastewater problem, because double-decking was more visible. This answer merely changed the subject.

AMLO, after he fell behind in the polls, picked up the tenor of Calderón's attacks. In the one debate in which AMLO participated, he attacked Calderón for giving contracts to his brother-in-law when he was minister of energy, but provided little evidence. Based on the IFE vote count, AMLO was not successful in turning the campaign around to regain a definitive lead in preelection polls.

AMLO has now made his appeal to the TEPJF. His objective is to secure a complete recount of all the ballot boxes and perhaps even to nullify the election. Calderón has indicated that he would not object to recounts in those cases where irregularities can be shown, but he opposes a complete recount. The contest thus seems to be based on the extent of the recount—modest or complete. The challenge that AMLO is making has several elements: the "dirty war" launched against him; the use of government institutions and resources to favor the PAN candidate, including campaigning by President Fox in favor of his party's candidate, which is prohibited under Mexican law; and IFE's manipulation of the early vote count to indicate a bigger lead for Calderón than it eventually turned out to be. In addition to these large systemic charges, AMLO has cited specific locations where the vote count was suspicious.

The vote on July 2 brought out how thoroughly divided Mexico is. The middle class, by and large, supported Calderón. So did businesses and high-income Mexicans. AMLO was supported by low-income groups. This split is conventional—those with high incomes and comfortable living standards tend to be conservative, and those living on the margins of subsistence have nothing to be conservative about in their political beliefs. However, the division is also geographic. Calderón captured most votes in northern Mexico, which benefited from NAFTA, and AMLO won in the south, where low incomes are the norm. The Federal District is dominated by the PRD.

Whichever candidate eventually becomes president, he will preside after having won only 35 percent of the popular vote. (Mexico would be well advised to alter its constitution for future presidential elections to provide for a runoff between the two leading candidates in order to confer more legitimacy on the winner. This point is heard often today in Mexico.) There is considerable skepticism among AMLO supporters that the election was impartially conducted and fairly counted. This is evident as one views the crowds, estimated at a quarter of a million, that have assembled in the *zocalo*, the large square in front of the national palace and the cathedral, in support of AMLO. AMLO has a record of encouraging street demonstrations to get his way; this proclivity is one element of the charge of having a messiah complex. Seeking to decide elections by taking to the streets is a poor way to run a democracy, but the widespread mistrust in an election as close as this one will make it hard for Calderón to achieve legitimacy if there is not a full recount. And, if there is a recount and AMLO is declared the victor by an infinitesimal margin, he too will have a hard time governing.

Which of the two men would be a better president for Mexicans? AMLO has proposed new federal expenditures for pensions to old people and income support to people living in poverty. He said he would finance these expenditures by reducing the salaries of senior federal officials (the salaries are indeed high when compared with the United States and other established democracies) and change other budgetary priorities, as he did when he governed the Federal District. He has not provided convincing numbers to demonstrate that this is possible. Calderón comes from the elite establishment that has long run Mexico. Mexico's finances are solid and Calderón would likely keep them that way. Either person, Calderón or AMLO, will try to raise Mexico's GDP growth rate in order to increase job creation. The basic question one must ask, therefore, is which of the two men is apt to prove better in stimulating growth—Calderón by stimulating the business community in Mexico and abroad, or AMLO by focusing more directly on poverty and greater income equality. There is no à priori basis for concluding that either man would be an irresponsible president. AMLO would approach economic and social issues as a reform leader, and Calderón as an establishment leader. Calderón's party, the PAN, is right of center, but not authoritarian.

Mexico-U.S. relations are close, and this is not likely to change. AMLO, as president, would probably revert to an older Mexican governance model of focusing on economic and social issues at home and relegate foreign affairs to a much lower priority than have other recent Mexican presidents. Calderón is more likely than AMLO to give a higher profile to foreign policy and follow in the footsteps of Vicente Fox. Calderón has already said that he dislikes the idea of building fences along the U.S.-Mexico border, and this drew a snide comment from the White House spokesman that when he last looked, Calderón was not a citizen of the United States. Calderón's response was equally tart, that he needs no advice from the U.S. spokesman about what he says. Migration issues will be rough—just how turbulent will depend on U.S. legislation, whenever it comes, whether it is solely restrictive or will also include guest workers and, less likely, some way for regularizing the roughly seven million Mexicans now living without authorization in the United States.

The economy of Mexico is dependent on the United States for exports and investment. NAFTA has stimulated coproduction between countries on both sides of the border. This reality will be evident to any rational Mexican president, as it must be to the U.S. administration. There is no reason to believe that the generally good relations that exist today between the two countries—on just about all major issues other than migration—will not continue into the future under either President Calderón or President López Obrador.

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