

CONFERENCE REPORT

Looking at the 2006 Mexican Elections

Canadian Foundation for the Americas
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FOCAL



Introduction

On July 2, 2006, Mexicans will go to the polls to elect Mexico's next president and to renew the federal Congress (senators and deputies). The composition of Mexico's new government will, no doubt, be of great relevance for Canada, in light of the deep relationship that exists between these two countries as partners in North America.

Despite the importance of these elections, information about the electoral process and the developments in the political race to the presidency have not been covered extensively in Canada.

For this reason, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) in partnership with the Centre for North American Politics and Society (CNAPS) at Carleton University convened the conference *Looking at the 2006 Mexican Elections* to provide some insights about the nomination process of Mexico's main political parties, on the preferences of the electorate as of November 2005, and to discuss some similarities and differences between Mexico and Canada in these themes.

This conference featured:

- **Jean-François Prud'homme**, *El Colegio de México*
- **Jorge Buendía Laredo**, *Ipsos-Bimsa*

With comments from **Jon Pammet**, *Carleton University*

The following is a report on the presentations and the discussions that took place at Carleton University on November 25, 2005. While we will not reproduce literally the questions posed to the members of the panel, we will note the main themes addressed.

ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN MEXICO

The widely accepted idea that more competitive electoral contests eventually force a more institutionalized and open nomination process of candidates was questioned by Prud'homme in light of the developments observed in Mexico. Instead, he argued, what we have seen in 2005 is that parties have met the requirement of institutionalization and openness to different degrees.

Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

In the case of the PRD, the ideology of internal democracy seems to compete with the preference to build unity around a leader capable of holding together the multiple factions within the party. The selection of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) as the party's candidate indicates the continuation of their traditional model that bases party unity on the existence of a charismatic leader. They did so in 1989, when a number of social and political forces coalesced around Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (the PRD's moral leader), and in 2005 around AMLO. The problem of the PRD is that it lacks solid internal rules to withstand a competitive nomination process.

AMLO's candidacy was built from the inside and the outside. During his first ten months as Mayor of Mexico City, AMLO changed in order to please the electorate: he avoided confrontation with President Vicente Fox and centred his attention on public works.

The first attempt to contest his leadership from within the party occurred when Cárdenas stated his interest in competing in



the PRD's primaries, but that came to an end by July 2005 when he officially withdrew from the competition. Without Cárdenas' bid, AMLO became the natural—and only—candidate for the party. With the decision of Congress to strip AMLO of his political immunity to face charges of contempt of court his popularity increased significantly.

His challenge now, however, is that he is more popular than his party. That is why he has created a parallel structure known as “citizen networks of support” (*redes ciudadanas de apoyo*)—just as Vicente Fox did in the lead up to the 2000 presidential elections with “Fox's Friends” (*Amigos de Fox*).

Because he was identified as a candidate much earlier than the rest, AMLO has appeared as the front-runner in most polls. In the last months of 2005, however, the distance between him and the other candidates in the electorate's preferences was not so large anymore.

Tension between the strength of the charismatic leader and the different factions within the PRD is expressed at the local level. Of particular interest were the primary elections in Mexico City of December 4, 2005, where Marcelo Ebrard (close to AMLO) and Jesús Ortega (leader of the faction *New Left* or “*Chuchos*”) were contending for the PRD candidature for Mexico's city local elections.

National Action Party (PAN)

Until 2005, PAN's delegates—elected by party members—used to select their party's candidates through party conventions. However, as elections became more competitive, the party was confronted with the need to widen participation and to become a mass party without losing the reins of the party. The PAN, thus, decided to opt for primaries to select its candidates, and launched a very aggressive campaign to seek new members.

The PAN held discussions about what method to use to undertake their primaries. One option was to have just one round—the preferred option of former Minister of Interior, Santiago Creel.

Another option was to undertake three regional primaries, which would favour the less-known candidate to the electorate (in this case Felipe Calderón). In the end the latter option was selected and Felipe Calderón was able to achieve a solid victory. This process gave the party great legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate, which explains the increasing electoral support for the PAN/Calderón in the last months.

Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI)

The PRI is the most institutionalized party. When it was in power, the not written rule was that the outgoing president could designate its successor (*dedazo*)—a process that was replicated in the nomination processes in the different levels of government. The party's capacity to do so and to retain internal discipline was lost when the PRI lost the presidential elections of 2000.

Currently the PRI's challenge is to try to substitute the president's informal capacity to nominate its successor with some type of formal nomination procedure that would be accepted by most of the party's sectors (including the unions). Tensions between Roberto Madrazo (former President of the party and now its official candidate) and Elba Esther Gordillo (former Secretary General of the party) illustrate the deep divisions that exist within the PRI.¹ Prior to the primary elections, a new faction—*Democratic Union*, better known as “*All united against Madrazo*” or TUCOM—was created to contend against Madrazo in the PRI's internal process. Members of TUCOM organized their own primaries to select their candidate—won by Arturo Montiel (former Governor of the State of Mexico). Montiel withdrew from the contest when his ownership of unaccounted properties in other countries was reported in the media. In the end, the selection of the candidate was done in the same old way and it led to Madrazo's victory.

In general, despite the attempt to create internal rules to select candidates, the PRI has found it difficult to present itself to the electorate as a new party. In terms of structure, the PRI is strong, but it has a questionable nomination process. To reach out to the electorate they will need to design solid campaigns.



LOOKING AT THE 2006: ELECTORAL PREFERENCES AS OF NOVEMBER 2005

According to Buendía, an historical analysis of a series of polls undertaken by the diverse polling companies show (with few exceptions) that AMLO had been the front-runner up to November 2005. In polls taken during the last quarter of 2005 Calderón appeared in second place with 3 to 5 points of difference with Madrazo. The results of the poll conducted by Ipsos-Bimsa between September and November 2005 [<http://www.focal.ca/projects/interamericanaffairs/mexico/CANADA%20VOTE%20CHOICE.ppt>] show that the distance between the three candidates is not that large anymore and that if anything the 2006 elections will be a close three-party race.

He stressed that the key variables analyzed for vote choice in 2006 were:

- Candidates' popularity
- Partisanship
- Independent voters
- Presidential approval and state of the economy

Candidates' popularity

In terms of the *popularity* of the candidates, he mentioned that name recognition of AMLO has remained at high levels through time (over 90%). The most remarkable change is that of Felipe Calderón, whose name recognition rose from levels below 50% in February to 84% in November 2005. This is explained by the PAN's internal nomination process. In both these cases, positive opinions about the candidates outnumber the negative ones. In the case of Madrazo, although the level of name recognition is high (94%), he does not have a good image—explained in great measure because he is the candidate of the PRI.

Partisanship

Party identification (ID) is relevant to identify the partisan vote. According to the results of the Ipsos-Bimsa poll we see that between July 2003 and November 2005 party ID for the PRI declined since May. The PAN's party ID was also negatively affected after the impeachment process against AMLO. Results show that none of the parties can rely exclusively on partisan vote to win

the elections. Independent voters—those that do not identify with any party in particular—thus will be determinant in the outcome of the 2006 elections.

Independent voters

As of November 2005, AMLO had the support of PRD's sympathizers, and the majority of independents. But he had the support as well from certain PAN and PRI sympathizers—something to take note of in the event of strategic voting. This is explained by the perception among these people of AMLO as the embodiment of change. In this sense, Buendía argued, it could be said that AMLO is not the substitute of Cárdenas; rather, he seems to be the substitute of Vicente Fox in 2000.

Support for AMLO from independents reached its peak during the impeachment process, declining afterwards.² Some of that support had gone to the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM). However, if the PVEM formed an alliance with the PRI,³ then part of that support would return to AMLO.

Presidential Approval and State of the Economy

Generally, the poll shows that people dissatisfied with the status quo and who disapprove the current government's performance tend to prefer AMLO over Madrazo. Instead, those who are satisfied with the performance of the current government tend to support Calderón.

A GLANCE AT THESE CHALLENGES FROM CANADA

Efforts to solve the democratic deficit within political parties—*i.e.* the creation of mechanisms to foster greater transparency in the selection of candidates—remain pending in Canadian parties as well, according to Pammet. This lack of internal democracy causes legitimacy problems, expressed in the distrust of the general public to the parties' capacity to overcome the democratic deficit.

Party identification in Canada is expressed differently. To begin with, support for a party is not necessarily long-term, and the concept of “independent voters” does not exist. Another thing that is interesting to analyze is the connection between economic performance and electoral behaviour. It is generally presumed that the state of



the economy will have an impact on the electorate's preferences. However, as the trade relationship with the US has deepened under the North American Free trade Agreement, it has become more difficult to propose a different economic agenda.

What we have seen in the past years is an increasing rate of abstention, which is likely to rise.

OPENING THE FLOOR

The following are questions that were raised to the panel.

- a) Elections and the Federal Electoral Institute's (IFE) capacity to ensure fair and clean elections
- b) Crime and justice and their impact in the electorate's preferences
- c) Potential for disruptions during and after the electoral process
- d) Impact of media coverage in the electorate's preferences
- e) Existence of rules to allow the participation of indigenous candidates

Jean-François Prud'homme

Currently Mexico has the same type of problems of a consolidated democracy in terms of the elections. Referring to Mexican institutions he stressed that these were strong and that they were going to ensure a fair election. The main challenge is party financing. At the beginning of November IFE tried to propose measures to have greater control over expenditures of parties' primary elections, and to increase its oversight capacities. In general terms, although at the state level there may be some irregularities, no major disruption is to be expected in these elections. Overall, IFE is an institution that is well perceived. The doubts cast about the capacity of the new IFE to ensure fair elections come out of the selection of the new electoral councillors by the Congress. However, it is a solid institution.

There have been comparisons between Mexico and Venezuela but neither is AMLO like Hugo Chávez, nor is the Mexican political system similar to that of Venezuela.

Jorge Buendía

There is a tendency to identify AMLO as a brand of populism and that perception may play in the election.

Abstention is also high in Mexico and it has to do with disenchantment, migration and to the fact that a large proportion of the population is young. In 1994 there was a big turnout rate, related probably with the great publicity that was given to the new electoral ID card.

What was noted in the primaries is that the winner will not necessarily be the party that spent the largest amount of money. After a threshold of spending, there is no more impact on the results.

With respect to the inclusion of minorities, three states in Mexico have implemented provisions to establish electoral districts that contemplate the inclusion of indigenous peoples. However, even with the existence of these districts, there is no guarantee as to how this may play in elections. Will parties nominate indigenous candidates to run? And will the electorate vote for indigenous candidates?

Public security does not have a lot of impact in voter's preferences because it is very hard for voters to identify what level of government is ultimately responsible for this.

With regards to the media, now that the rest of the candidates have been selected AMLO will have to share coverage. Moreover, because of the outcome of the PAN's primaries, Calderón is becoming the media's centre of attention. With respect to the potential negative impact that the confrontation between Elba Esther Gordillo and Roberto Madrazo—in a telephone conversation broadcast in a radio show—may have had in the perception of the electorate is not clear. There was only one poll that was undertaken after that conversation and no major changes were observed.



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¹ For background on the differences between Roberto Madrazo and Elba Ester Gordillo see *FOCAL POINT: Spotlight on the Americas*, Vol. 4, No. 8, September 2005 [http://www.focal.ca/pdf/focalpoint_september05.pdf].

² In all the polls conducted during January, support for AMLO seemed to increase again.

³ Which took place on December 2005.



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