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MEXICO INSTITUTE

Mexico's 2009 Midterm Elections: Winners and Losers

On July 5, Mexicans elected the five hundred members of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of Congress), six governors, and hundreds of mayors and local legislators throughout the country. At the midpoint of President Felipe Calderón's term, the opposition Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) made important gains in the Chamber of Deputies, as well as in gubernatorial and local elections. The election results carry important implications for pending domestic reforms and for the 2012 presidential elections.

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The Elections

On July 5, voters elected the five hundred members of the Chamber of Deputies, six governors, and hundreds of mayors and local legislators. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ended its seven decades of near total dominance of the political system in 2000, fared better than polls predicted, carrying almost 37 percent of the overall vote over the 28 percent earned by President Felipe Calderón's National Action Party (PAN). The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which came within less than a percentage point of winning the presidency in 2006, garnered just 12 percent of the vote.

The PRI won key municipal elections and captured two governorships that had been controlled by the PAN and kept its hold on three others, though it lost Sonora to the PAN. In Congress, the PRI more than doubled its seats with an increase from 106 to 241, and now holds 49% of seats.

It will have majority in Congress with an alliance with the Green Party (Verdes), which took 3% of seats. The PAN slipped from 206 seats to 147, leaving it just under 29% of seats, and the PRD will have 14% of seats.

The PRI dominated the election despite a high approval rating for President Calderón himself, due in part to its campaign promises of greater stability in a time of economic turmoil and security questions and to its party machine that appears very much intact. President Calderón will now need to negotiate with the majority bloc of the PRI and its allies on every piece of legislation. The relationship President Calderón is able to forge with the PRI will determine the future of crucial pending reforms, particularly to the country's fiscal and energy sectors.

The state and local elections will also shift the balance of political power in Mexico; the winners and losers that have emerged from this election will shape the 2012 presidential campaign.

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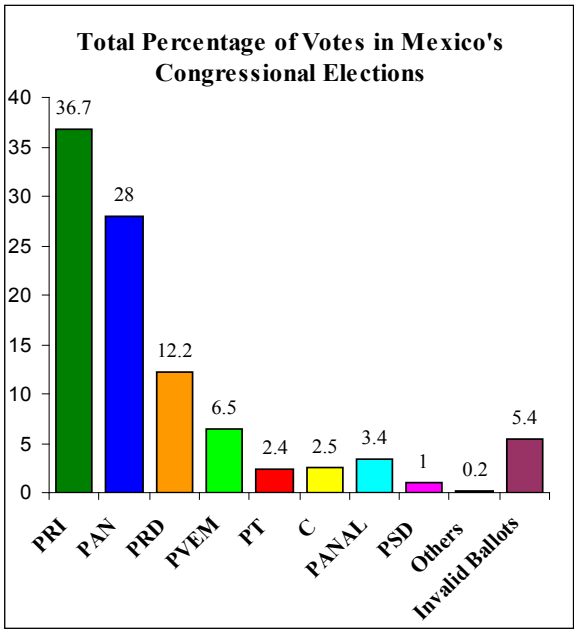


Source: *El Universal,* accessed July 7, 2009.

The Winners

The biggest winner in the election was, of course, the PRI. Even though the party only won a little under 37% of the vote, it was able to win close to a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and it will likely be able to form a coalition with its long-time ally the Green Party to have a majority in the Chamber. This will, in turn, allow the PRI to chair the most important committees, control all legislative debates, and audit public finances.

The lower house has little direct influence in foreign policy, which is more the province of the Senate, but it has significant authority in the budgeting process since the federal budget has to be approved only in the Chamber of Deputies.

The PRI also took two governorships that were in the hands of the PAN (Queretaro and San Luis

Potosí) and reaffirmed its control of Nuevo León, which is home to the country's most important economic center, Monterrey.

Within the PRI the clear winners were Beatriz Paredes, the party's president, and Enrique Peña Nieto, the Governor of the State of Mexico and a likely candidate for president in 2012. Under Paredes' leadership the PRI has returned from its distant third-place finish in the 2006 elections to become the country's largest political party again. In addition, Paredes was elected a member of Congress and is likely to serve as the PRI's leader in the Chamber of Deputies. If she does this, she could become the most powerful member of Congress in the country's recent history, since the PRI will control a majority coalition and will be able to negotiate all legislation directly with the President.

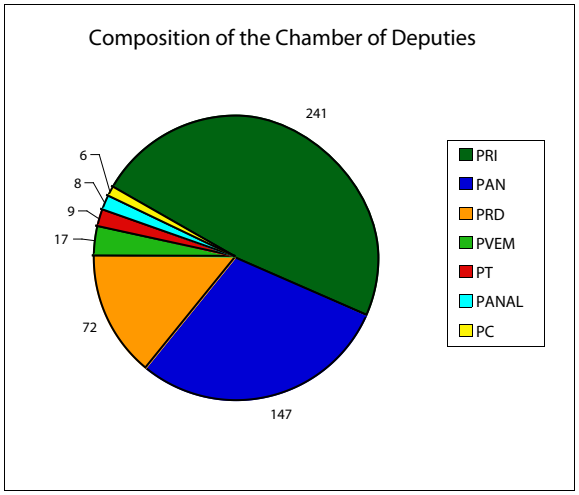
Peña Nieto, on the other hand, showed that he has absolute control over his state, the country's most populous, by helping the PRI win 95 of 125 cities in the State of Mexico, including all the largest cities around Mexico City. In particular, the PRI wrested control of both Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl and Ecatepec (the largest urban bastions of the PRD) and Naucalpan and Toluca (major urban bastions of the PAN).

Other clear winners in the elections include Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Elba Esther Gordillo, and the Green Party. López Obrador, the PRD's 2006 presidential candidate, showed his party that they need his support.

Without leaving the party, he threw his weight behind candidates in the smaller PT (Workers Party) and Convergencia (Convergence Party) and these two parties won over 6% of the vote, while the PRD claimed only 12%.

Several of his closest advisors won election to Congress in Mexico City under the PT. In particular, the PT also won the Delegación (borough) of Iztapalapa, the largest in Mexico City, after López Obrador called for his followers to support the PT candidate over the PRD candidate.

For her part, Gordillo, the head of the teachers' union, won almost three and half percentage points for her small New Alliance Party (Panal), ensuring several seats in Congress. The Green Party, a group closely allied with the PRI, won almost 7% of the vote on party platform that emphasized the youth vote and the death penalty (but no environmental issues).



Source: *El Universal,* accessed July 7, 2009.

The Losers

The clearest loser is, without a doubt, the PAN and with it, President Calderón. The PAN only mustered a little over a quarter of the vote, lost two key governorships, and failed to pull off a win in Nuevo León, despite having a candidate with strong support from the business community there. The PAN also lost its major municipal strongholds of Guadalajara, Merida, and Naucalpan.

There were a few bright spots for the PAN: the party won the governorship of Sonora after a scandal over a fire in a daycare center engulfed the state's PRI, and the PAN held the two Delegaciones (boroughs) it had in Mexico City and picked up one more from the PRD. But these victories paled in comparison to the losses. The PAN's leader, Germán Martínez, one of Calderón's closest allies, tendered his resignation to the party after the defeat.

Perhaps the most onerous result of the election will be that Calderón will now have to negotiate all legislation directly with the PRI in Congress. To date he has often done this, but he had the option of negotiating instead with the PRD (as he did last year on energy legislation).

The other clear loser is the PRD, which won only 12% of the vote, the lowest in its recent history, and lost the major urban centers of Ecatepec and Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl (the country's fourth largest city, which it had governed since 1996). The PRD also lost votes in Mexico City, losing one Delegación to the PAN and another to its erstwhile ally, the PT. In a complex arrangement worked out before the election, the PT is likely to cede the Delegación of Iztapalapa, Mexico City's largest, to the PRD, but to a candidate close to López Obrador and opposed by the party's current leadership.

For the first time, the PRD will be left almost entirely without a meaningful legislative role in the Chamber of Deputies since the PRI will have a de facto majority with the Green Party. Moreover, PRD leaders face a difficult task of trying to pull together a new coalition to give the party a chance to compete in 2012.

Some party leaders would like to jettison López Obrador once and for all after he openly supported candidates in other parties; however, others argue that excluding him would only further weaken the party and lead to a repeat of this year's disaster in the 2012 presidential contest.

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The Future

It is unclear what this election means for Mexico's future. The country is facing a steep economic decline that may mean as much as a 3 to 6% drop in GDP this year and continues to face a strong challenge in addressing organized crime and public security.

In addition to a series of long-term challenges (generating equitable development, implementing judicial and police reforms, designing new regulatory frameworks for a competitive market, and achieving a sustainable energy policy, among others), these immediate challenges will require collaboration between the President and Congress and with the state governors. It remains to be seen whether the new PRI-dominated Chamber of Deputies and the PAN administration can work together on these issues.

However, the most likely scenario is that the PRI will have an interest in showing that it can be a party that governs – and will take credit for any legislative advances – while President Calderón will use his political skills to reach agreements with the Congress. In addition, the PRI has an interest in stabilizing the economic situation for a possible return to the presidency in 2012. This could provide a window of opportunity for legislation over the next year-and-a-half or so, though perhaps primarily for the kind of gradual legislative advances that have been seen over the past three years.

It is unclear what this election means for the 2012 presidential election. All three major parties – PAN, PRD, and PRI – are likely to be major contenders and much will depend on the quality of the candidates selected and whether their political proposals convince citizens to vote for them.

Despite doing well in the 2003 midterm elections, for instance, the PRI ran an unpopular candidate and lost disastrously in the 2006 presidential election. However, it is certain that the PRI is now back again in contention after the 2006 loss, and it will enter 2012 with the logistical advantages of holding key state and city governments. The PRI will also be able to create a legacy of policy achievements in the Congress, if it chooses, which would allow it to show what ideas it stands for as a political party.

Nonetheless, the PAN continues to hold the presidency and the PRD the Mexico City government, both of which are powerful positions from which to advance ideas as well. The most likely scenario will be a highly contested race among all three parties, and much will depend on whether leaders in all three parties show the maturity to govern in the interests of the citizens who elected them.

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