

## Mexico's Uneasy Choice: The 2006 Presidential Election

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Mexico's democracy has freed itself from its authoritarian past, yet it is faltering in its quest to become a modern nation. The country shed the one-party system that Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa once described as "the perfect dictatorship," only to witness its new multiparty system descend into political paralysis. It escaped the cycle of economic crisis that bankrupted previous generations, only to watch as financial stability was steadily eroded by shifts in the global economy that have drained jobs and investment. Improved living standards and longer life expectancy have changed its demographic profile, but Mexico may never grow wealthy enough to pay for its citizens who reach old age.

Despite shared underpinnings of free trade and democratic values, Mexico has not forged the relationship with the United States that both countries claim to desire. While Mexicans still identify with Porfirio Díaz's remark of more than a century ago—"Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States"—a tenth of Mexico's population has turned this truism upside down by moving north. Lacking economic opportunities, many Mexicans are voting with their feet by relocating in the United States. The resulting war of attrition along the border has unsettled the politics of both countries as the migration phenomenon moves into uncharted territory. Both abroad and at home, citizens of Mexico, the land of deep Aztec and Mayan roots, are leaving behind their troubled past for an even more uncertain future.

This has been a season of especially deep anxiety for Mexicans, with their country hovering on the verge of yet another contentious and potentially epoch-making presidential election. Despite relatively scant attention in the United States to date, Mexico's election in July is likely to emerge as a front-burner issue when juxtaposed against the high-profile concerns about border security, drug trafficking, and illegal migration that dominate the U.S. daily news. The Bush administration, which has been uncharacteristically silent about Mexico's political stirrings, is likely to watch the race with morbid fascination. In congressional testimony last year, CIA chief Porter Goss included Mexico in a review of "areas of potential instability," placing the country in the company of Colombia, Venezuela, and Haiti as one of the "flashpoints" in the Western Hemisphere. Latent concerns that the leftward tilt that has swept across Latin America is about to arrive on America's doorstep will stoke fears in the administration that the region is continuing to part ways from Washington.

The elation that accompanied President Vicente Fox's historic victory in the summer of 2000, ending more than 70 years of one-party rule, has become a vivid but distant memory. Over the last five years, Mexico's three largest political forces—the vanquished Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Fox's National Action Party (PAN), and the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)—have struggled to understand and shape the new rules of the democratic game. Against a backdrop of lukewarm eco-

conomic performance, congressional gridlock, and rising voter disillusionment, Mexico's main political actors are now looking forward to the presidential elections on July 2 to test what they have learned about winning and wielding power at this precarious stage of the country's democratic transition.

Early signs are not promising. For a month last spring, Mexico's body politic was rocked by a shrewd maneuver to bar the country's most popular politician from the presidential race, propagated by an unlikely alliance between the conservative Fox administration and savvy leaders from the once dominant PRI. Fox and his interior minister Santiago Creel—with the support of PRI leader Roberto Madrazo—tacked against public opinion in their quest to neutralize a key adversary. Their target was the mayor of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD, who has emerged as the man to beat. In May 2004, government prosecutors asked Congress to take away López Obrador's immunity from prosecution for disobeying a 2001 court order to halt the construction of an access road to a private hospital on expropriated land. Last April, Mexico's Chamber of Deputies voted to remove the legal protection granted to López Obrador as a public officeholder. This potential punishment—known as *el desafuero*, or “stripping of immunity”—would have effectively barred him from the political race.

The negative public reaction was immediate and intense. Supporters of the besieged mayor organized massive protests throughout Mexico City under the rallying cry “*No al desafuero!*” One peaceful march in the capital, which attracted more than a million people, was described as the largest in the country's recent history.<sup>1</sup> International opinion pilloried the Fox government for scheming to exclude a popular politician from running for president. PRD legislators began a rotating hunger strike outside Los Pinos, Fox's official residence, while other protesters heckled the president at public events and demonstrated outside his private ranch.

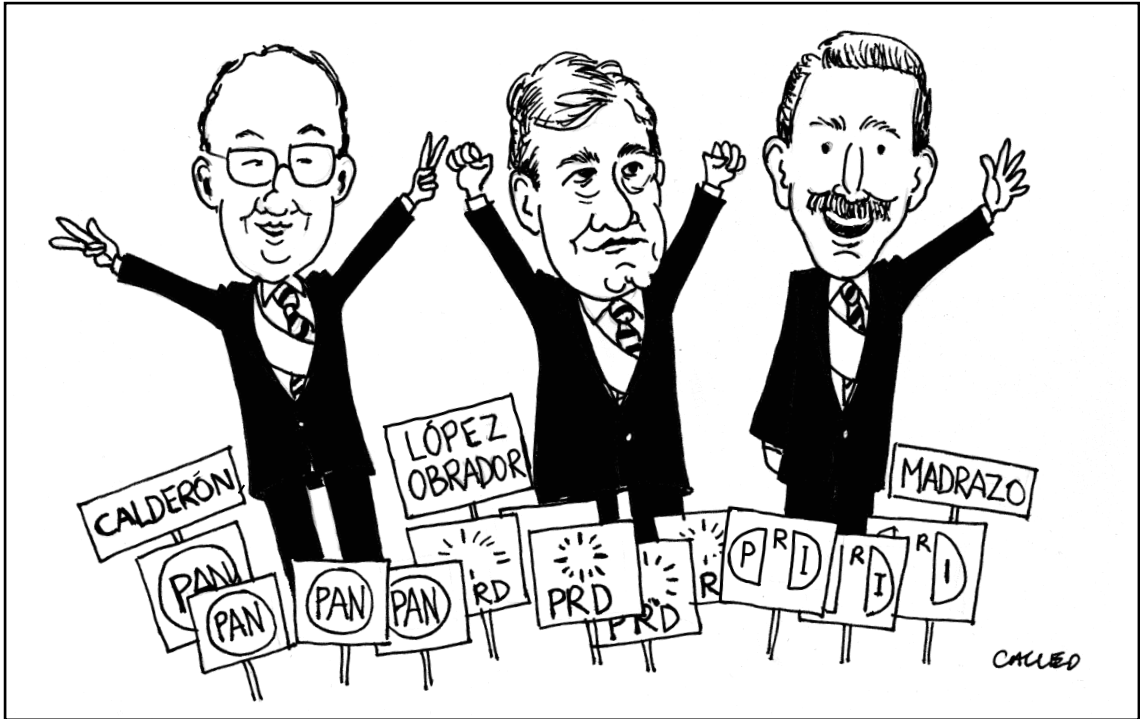
The potential instability sparked concern among foreign investors, and the Mexican stock market lost 14 percent of its value during a seven-week period.<sup>2</sup> Even members of Mexican society who disliked and mistrusted López Obrador were troubled by the perception of selective prosecution. For his part, the mayor vowed to conduct his presidential campaign from a prison cell if necessary, declaring: “They're trying to deprive the people of the right to freely elect their representatives. This is a step back for Mexico's incipient democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

Caught off guard by the intensity of the outcry, the Fox administration pulled back from the brink. Mexico's attorney general—a key protagonist who had overseen the collection of 16,000 pages of evidence in the case against López Obrador—resigned in a televised address, stating his desire to “open a space for the president so he can make the decisions he thinks are best to lead the country.” In separate remarks that same evening, Fox said, “My government will not impede anyone from participating in the next federal contest.”<sup>4</sup> Several days later, the Mexican government dropped the case against López Obrador, and the political storm subsided.

The high-stakes battle over *el desafuero* was only the opening salvo in the competition among the sharply divergent political personalities vying to lead Mexico. The effort to derail López Obrador revealed how much his adversaries wished to undermine his candidacy, and the scale of the challenge before them. Still, it is by no means certain that the former mayor can sustain his lead in the polls until July. Under the leadership of Roberto Madrazo, a resurgent PRI remains Mexico's strongest national party and is positioning to mount a surprising comeback. The PAN candidate, former energy minister Felipe Calderón, emerged as the surprising winner in last fall's bruising primary contest over President Fox's favorite, Santiago Creel. Whatever the outcome, the presidential race will be among the pivotal events in Latin

America this year. It will reveal whether the string of electoral victories by the region's political left is about to extend to the U.S. border. Most significantly, López Obrador and Madrazo, the two leading candidates,

and Washington upended U.S. foreign policy, temporarily closed the U.S.-Mexico border, and crushed any hope of advancing the migration agenda. Fox's clumsy response to the attacks, and his government's later op-



share a taste for divisive politics that will challenge Mexico's tenuous democratic consensus over the next six years. Their ascendance suggests that Mexico's political experiment faces a rocky road ahead.

#### *The Incredible Shrinking President*

As an opposition candidate in 2000, Vicente Fox rode a deep desire for change to the presidential palace. His victory was a revolution, but his presidency suffered from death by a thousand cuts. The first cut was the cruelest. In early September 2001, Fox was given a state dinner by President George W. Bush at the White House, where the two leaders discussed the outline for a sweeping migration accord and the U.S. leader described Mexico as "our most important relationship in the world." Less than a week later, the 9/11 attacks on New York

position to the U.S.-led war in Iraq, cast a chill over the bilateral relationship. Strong relations with the United States were supposed to undergird Fox's political strategy, but ties instead have weakened.

In Mexico, the honeymoon quickly ended. While Fox is seen as well intentioned and relatively honest, his governing style is weak, vacillating, and ineffective. Fox did make some progress on enhancing government transparency and strengthening democratic responsiveness. He allowed international human rights monitors into the country, and burnished Mexico's democratic foreign policy credentials. But his cabinet was plagued with infighting and bickering among senior officials like Creel, Finance Minister Francisco Gil Díaz, and Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda and his successor Luis Ernesto Derbez. Fox's high-profile wife,

Marta Sahagún, attracted media scrutiny and alienated members of his inner circle. The heady promises of his campaign soon evaporated in the midst of tumultuous domestic politics and broader shocks to the international system.

Fox's reform agenda was challenged by a combative legislature exercising new authority in the democratic process. Fox never had a clear strategy for dealing with Congress, in which no party had an outright majority, and he faltered in dealing with the former ruling party that had not yet abandoned its shadowy ways. Faced with the choice between cutting political deals with the PRI or using the bully pulpit to confront the defeated party, Fox dithered. Much-needed reforms to modernize the energy sector and improve tax collection never got off the ground. In his first 18 months, members of his own party described the relationship between the executive and legislative branches as "tortured, difficult, and painful."<sup>5</sup>

Fox's authority was further reduced in the legislative elections of July 2003, when voters cut the PAN's representation in the lower house by a fourth to 155 seats out of a possible 500. By contrast, the PRI gained 15 seats to solidify its congressional plurality of 223, while the reenergized PRD nearly doubled its congressional showing to 96 seats.<sup>6</sup> Thus Fox became a lame duck at the midpoint in his *sexenio*, a striking anomaly in a country where presidents historically enjoy unrivaled power until their final day in office. Although Fox remains a popular political figure—with approval ratings exceeding 60 percent—he will end his term with few concrete accomplishments.

Meanwhile, as Fox's conservative government struggled, this sense of executive drift found its contrast in the country's most visible and active politician: Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

### *The Enigmatic Populist*

Mexico City is both a logical and unlikely platform from which to launch a national

presidential campaign. Despite its newly democratic trappings, Mexico remains a highly centralized country where *el D.F.*—the Federal District—is the seat of the nation's political, economic, and cultural life. Yet *los chilangos*, as the denizens of the city are called, complain famously about the seemingly irreversible blights of urban living—pervasive crime and corruption, choking pollution, water shortages, and endless traffic snarls. In recent years, a succession of mayors has presided over this seething metropolis without making any noticeable progress.

During his nearly five years at the helm, López Obrador also made scarcely a dent in the major challenges facing the estimated 20 million people who live in the capital region. Although crime levels have dipped slightly, public fears have arguably increased, and even provoked mass demonstrations against violence and delinquency (despite the highly publicized decision to hire the expertise of former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani). Corruption charges nipped at López Obrador's heels during most of his tenure, claiming several close associates, although he was never directly implicated. Nevertheless, the mayor somehow succeeded in setting a tone of concern and competence that overcame the fatalism of many of his most hardened constituents.

Elected in 2000 with 34.5 percent of the vote, López Obrador instituted a daily 6:30 A.M. press conference that allowed him to shape the media agenda of the city—and, by extension, of the country—in part because he was so good at it. He became familiarly known by his initials, "AMLO," to residents who appreciated his hands-on approach. A widower with three sons, the mayor adopted a modest profile—a welcome change from that of many Mexican officials who live like sultans. His rhetorical attention to the poor, a longstanding staple in Mexico's politics, was accompanied by popular social programs that made a difference at the household level. He created a pension

scheme that provides the elderly with about \$60 a month, offered grants for the disabled, and improved access to education for the children of single mothers. He opened more than a dozen new schools in the capital and established a new university.<sup>7</sup> He also reached out to the city's middle class by building a new level for the Periférico, one of Mexico City's main traffic arteries, in an effort to alleviate pervasive traffic jams.

Now 52, López Obrador was born in the dusty southern state of Tabasco, the son of shopkeepers of modest means. He began his political career there in the late 1970s at age 23, when he lived among the Chontal Indians and served as the state coordinator for indigenous affairs.<sup>8</sup> In those days, López Obrador often awoke to find Indians seeking his help on his doorstep, and he developed the habit of beginning his workday before dawn, a practice that became a signature of his political career.<sup>9</sup> After rising through the ranks of the PRI, he broke with the party in 1988 to help form the PRD. He twice sought the governorship of Tabasco, in 1988 and 1994, but was defeated both times amid credible allegations of massive electoral irregularities committed by the PRI. López Obrador responded to these losses by organizing campaigns of civic resistance, including marches, sit-ins, and roadblocks that paralyzed portions of the state for weeks. In 1994, his triumphant opponent was future PRI leader Roberto Madrazo. The rivalry between the two men has persisted and will culminate in this year's presidential election.

López Obrador served as the national president of the PRD from 1996 to 1999, and his leadership coincided with its maturation into a viable third party. Its representation in the Chamber of Deputies grew from 71 in 1994 to 125 in 1997, and its share of senators doubled from 8 to 16.<sup>10</sup> The party also captured several governorships during López Obrador's tenure as party head. In winning the mayoralty of Mexico City in 2000, he handed a stinging de-

feat to the PAN candidate, Santiago Creel, who instead became Fox's interior minister and was the president's choice of a successor until his upset in the primaries.

López Obrador is known for deploying his considerable rhetorical gifts against entrenched interests. He has been highly critical of the "neoliberal" economic policies favoring deregulation and private enterprise that formed the basis of the Washington Consensus reforms adopted by many Latin American countries in the 1990s, arguing that "the market by itself cannot meet the demands of society."<sup>11</sup> While he opposes opening Mexico's state-run energy sector to private investment, his plans for national macroeconomic policy remain disconcertingly vague. López Obrador arouses suspicion and unease among some of Mexico's elite, who fear he may bring the politics of class warfare to Los Pinos. As mayor, however, he forged pragmatic alliances with figures like Carlos Slim, a powerful Mexican billionaire, in an effort to restore Mexico City's historic center.

López Obrador's inner circle has been tarnished by scandal. He was forced to dismiss his finance secretary, who was videotaped gambling in Las Vegas, allegedly with public money. Another close ally, the PRD leader in the Mexico City Congress, resigned after being filmed accepting bribes from construction entrepreneur Carlos Ahumada. López Obrador reacted by denouncing the revelations as part of a "right-wing conspiracy" to destroy his credibility, and convened a rally of 50,000 supporters in a show of strength.<sup>12</sup> The mayor also accused Washington of conspiring with the PAN to publicize these alleged misdeeds, at one point waving U.S. Treasury documents before television cameras to make his point. His charges prompted the American embassy to issue a statement rejecting "the continued false allusions to U.S. involvement in this matter."<sup>13</sup>

López Obrador's run-ins with the Mexican judiciary have been tempestuous. It was

his defiance of the courts that led to the *desafuero* debacle. In October 2003, he spurned a different order by the Mexican Supreme Court to pay compensation for land expropriated by the municipal government in 1989, declaring that its ruling was based on a corrupt legal process. He has also been criticized for inconsistency. For example, he has often criticized high government salaries, but while he was mayor it was revealed that his driver earned \$9,000 a month.<sup>14</sup> This conflicted conspicuously with his image as an austere public servant who chose to drive his Nissan Sentra to work.

Can “AMLO” be stopped? This is the political question that will preoccupy Mexico in the coming months. On July 31, López Obrador voluntarily stepped down as mayor of Mexico City to launch a full-fledged presidential campaign. Opinion polls consistently place him ahead of the other major presidential contenders, but his lead has steadily diminished from his ten-point margin of last summer. He still faces formidable obstacles. Although he easily won his party’s primary, the PRD remains little more than a strong regional party with a weak national infrastructure outside of central Mexico. And although López Obrador has started to reach beyond his progressive base, he has alienated a broad swath of the country’s powerful business class.

In the United States, López Obrador remains an unknown quantity. The mayor has spoken proudly of not having a passport and is largely unfamiliar with U.S. politics and society. He has sent conflicting messages, ranging from cooperative to inflammatory, about how he might handle the bilateral relationship. Despite demonstrating an anti-American streak, he has advocated using the North American Free Trade Agreement as a basis for broader economic cooperation. Many Mexicans are hopeful about López Obrador’s ascendance, but few have a clear idea of what kind of president he would be. He is frequently compared with Hugo Chávez, the populist military figure who has

led Venezuela since 1999, and with Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the former steelworker and labor leader who captured the presidency of Brazil in 2002. López Obrador has dismissed the comparisons: “There’s been a campaign against me that compares me with Chávez, with Lula, that accuses me of being a populist.... It doesn’t bother me, it’s part of the political confrontation.”<sup>15</sup> As the presidential election approaches, AMLO’s intentions remain obscured by the blend of demagoguery and ambiguity that have served him well in the past.

### *The King of the “Dinosaurs”*

Aside from President Fox, perhaps no man deserves more credit for the reinvigorated electoral viability of the PRI than Roberto Madrazo Pintado. Elected party leader in 2002, Madrazo helped the PRI recover from the shock that followed Fox’s unexpected triumph in 2000. After initially allying himself with the influential head of the teacher’s union, Elba Esther Gordillo, to capture the leadership post, he waged and eventually won an aggressive party struggle that temporarily drove her from public life. Through shrewd grass-roots politics, Madrazo has helped the party win important regional elections, including seven of the ten gubernatorial contests in 2004.

Madrazo’s skills also helped him avoid the fallout from the failed effort to disqualify López Obrador. After delivering the votes needed to strip the mayor of his immunity, the PRI leader let the Fox administration stumble through the resulting public dispute and then sharply criticized its sudden reversal that freed the mayor from his legal woes. While Fox and the PAN appeared to have been acting expediently, Madrazo and the PRI were, paradoxically, seen to be standing for the rule of law. This was no small feat for a man who has criticized Fox as “too transparent for Mexican politics.”<sup>16</sup>

Madrazo, who will turn 54 in July, has never been far from the halls of power. The

son of a former PRI governor of Tabasco, he became active in the party as a teenager. After serving as president of a Mexico City borough, he returned to Tabasco as senator and state party leader in 1988, and fended off a challenge by fellow native son López Obrador to win the governorship in November 1994. To win, Madrazo purchased extensive media coverage and reportedly gave cash handouts for votes, while López Obrador's thinly financed campaign focused on mobilizing grass-roots support. In the official tally, Madrazo's margin was 56 to 37 percent, representing a difference of 97,000 votes.<sup>17</sup> Allegations of fraud followed, but though a federally ordered assessment documented irregularities, it did not call for annulling the vote.<sup>18</sup>

The bitter rivalry between Madrazo and López Obrador gave voters a foretaste of things to come. López Obrador's supporters moved to occupy facilities of the Mexican oil company PEMEX throughout the state, disrupting its operations. By January 1995, the struggle peaked, with massive demonstrations by PRD activists threatening to prevent Madrazo from claiming office. In *Opening Mexico*, the *New York Times* reporters Julia Preston and Sam Dillon described the climactic confrontation that occurred when the victor finally took office on January 19, 1995: "'Today,' Madrazo said, 'I will sit where my father sat.' At just the same time hundreds of PRI toughs armed with rocks, clubs and torches surrounded López Obrador's followers in the main square, led by the highest-ranking PRI congressman, who brandished a baseball bat. Over several hours the *priístas* beat and kicked the PRD protestors until, bloodied, they fled the square." For López Obrador, this setback served as a launching pad for sustained attacks on the PRI that enhanced his national profile. Although Madrazo took his seat as governor, accusations that he spent \$70 million—more than 60 times the legal campaign limit—to win this privilege have shadowed his career.<sup>19</sup>

Madrazo ruled Tabasco in the traditional top-down style that favored handouts and pork barrel projects; a party colleague remarked that he governed the state "like a cattle ranch."<sup>20</sup> In 1999, when outgoing president Ernesto Zedillo eliminated *el dedazo*—the traditional process that allowed Mexican presidents to nominate their successors—Madrazo sought the PRI's presidential candidacy in the party's first-ever contested primary. He lavished \$25 million in state funds on a publicity campaign to promote Tabasco that prominently featured his name and image. His public recognition soared, but he was nevertheless trounced in the primaries by Francisco Labastida, who led the PRI to its first presidential loss in seven decades. Madrazo was thereafter elected the party's national president and is now its presidential nominee.

Madrazo's optimism brimmed at an enthusiastic rally early last year in Cancún: "We are winning back the spaces we lost. We are going to win here too, and keep winning all the way to the presidency."<sup>21</sup> In July, the PRI candidate won by a landslide in the race for governor of Mexico State, the country's most populous with nearly 15 million residents. Last fall, Madrazo faced down internal party challenges to win the PRI presidential nomination, brokering a truce with the short-lived opposition faction of powerbrokers known as TUCOM, for *Todos Unidos Contra Madrazo* ("Everybody against Madrazo"). The simmering blood feud with Elba Esther Gordillo, the powerful leader of the 1.4 million member teacher's union, has the potential to inflict more lasting damage. Gordillo blames Madrazo for thwarting her efforts to become president of the PRI, and she appears determined to exact revenge in the 2006 election. Meanwhile, many Mexicans associate Madrazo with the darker side of the former ruling party. Independent analysts frequently describe him as "a crook," "an anti-democrat," and "a dinosaur"—referring to his ties with the closely knit old guard of the PRI and suspicious PRI figures

such as Tijuana's mayor, Jorge Hank Rhon, who has been investigated by the United States for allegedly laundering drug money. Moreover, Madrazo's strategy to portray himself as a more moderate figure than the populist López Obrador is complicated by the emergence of a viable third contender in the presidential race.

### *The Unexpected Challenger*

The PAN's primary contest delivered the first surprise of Mexico's electoral season, when President Fox's former energy minister, Felipe Calderón, surged from a 20-point deficit in the polls to snatch an unexpected victory from the presumed frontrunner, Santiago Creel. As Fox's close ally, Creel was by far the most favored contender heading into last fall's campaign. But his clean image was blemished by reports that he had authorized profitable gambling permits for companies linked to Televisa—Mexico's largest television company—as well as for other important corporate allies. By contrast, Calderón performed well in nationally televised debates and offered a fresh face that appealed to voters. After scoring an upset victory at the beginning of the PAN's three-round primary process, the political momentum shifted in his favor, and by October he had secured the nomination.

For most of its history, the PAN has been an opposition party with deep roots in the Catholic laity and the private sector. Its base was in the northern states, where it wrested a series of important governorships from the PRI. Unlike Creel, who only joined the PAN in 1999, Calderón is a long-time party stalwart. He served as an opposition legislator in the Mexican Congress during the early 1990s and went on to serve as national president of the PAN from 1996 to 1999. His tenure as Fox's energy minister lasted only eight months before the two fell out in June 2004 over Calderón's increasingly evident presidential ambitions.

Aged 43, Felipe Calderón is nearly a decade younger than his two main oppo-

nents. A trained lawyer, he knows the United States well and received a graduate degree in public administration from Harvard. With his strong support for free market policies and foreign investment in Mexico's natural energy resources, Calderón brings a conservative pro-business profile to the 2006 political race. He clearly savors his status as the "comeback kid" of the primary season and for having won without the backroom dealings that produced nearly unanimous victories for López Obrador and Madrazo. "That gives me democratic legitimacy," he has said. "That is worth a lot in a country that is developing democratic values." Recent polls show that Calderón's ascendance may transform the presidential contest into a tight three-way race. In some polls, he is within striking distance of the frontrunner.

Still, Calderón lags far behind the main candidates in name recognition, and his business-friendly views may not strike the right political notes in a season of discontent. Moreover, his ties to the Fox administration remain cool, and the incumbent president may keep his distance from the upstart candidate. Fox's wife, Marta Sahagún de Fox, once considered a presidential bid but dropped the idea due to negative public reaction. However, she remains a popular and influential figure who is viewed by many as a cross between Hillary Clinton and Dick Cheney, the ambitious political wife combined with a Svengali-like presidential advisor. Other independent candidates, such as the former foreign minister Jorge Castañeda, may siphon votes from Calderón.

Shortly after his nomination, Calderón traveled to the border town of Tijuana to reach out to the Mexican migrants who will constitute an important new voting bloc. In June 2005, the Mexican Congress voted allowed Mexicans living overseas to cast absentee ballots in the presidential race. While about 10 million Mexican citizens live in the United States, the new rules apply to



the 4 million who already have voting credential cards issued by their homeland. These voters must have requested ballots by this past January to participate, and Mexico's federal electoral institute expects to spend \$100 million on mail-in balloting. An additional 15 million Americans of Mexican descent may also vote if they can prove one of their parents was born there and are able to travel to Mexico to complete the voter registration process.<sup>22</sup>

Felipe Calderón disputes the notion that the contrast between his free market approach and the populist measures offered by other candidates will polarize the rich against the poor in Mexico. However, more than ten years after the passage of NAFTA, social tensions still run deep. One wild card lurks in the Lacandon jungle of southern Mexico where, more than a decade since their audacious incursion in the state of Chiapas captivated world attention, Zapatista rebels are also eyeing the presidential race. Their leader, Subcomandante Marcos, has spoken of a new phase in the movement, even as he assails the political establishment.<sup>23</sup> While the Zapatistas and other peasant groups will be unable to define the terms of debate, their presence is a graphic reminder that a fourth of Mexico's 100 million citizens are still mired in poverty.

#### *A Decisive Vote*

The pitched battle for the presidency has now begun in earnest. The long primary season revealed important facts about the main contenders. Faced with adversity, López Obrador relied on his ability to mobilize citizen discontent, while Madrazo triumphed through shrewd backroom dealing. Calderón will struggle to escape from the shadow of the clean but ineffective governing style that has characterized much of Vicente Fox's presidency. With so much at stake, Mexico's vested interests will attempt to curry favor among the competing candidates and almost certainly violate campaign finance laws in the process.

Mexico's next president will face decisions on immigration, security, and economic policy that will require breaking the persistent gridlock that has become the downside of the democratic transition. The Mexican election is evolving into a contest among sharply different alternatives: the ascendance of the populist left, represented by López Obrador; a PRI restoration, led by Madrazo; and the fresh potential for an effective PAN government led by Calderón. Some analysts initially characterized the struggle for the presidency of Mexico as "the man versus the machine," with the resourceful López Obrador up against a PRI bureaucracy hungry to return to power. Indeed, it would be ironic if the missteps of Mexico's first democratically elected government created a political environment that allowed the PRI or its heirs to win the presidency in an honest election. Felipe Calderón's presence in the race may change this political calculus. His surprise victory in the primaries left his party divided, yet many in the Fox administration see the PRD's López Obrador as the most potent threat on the political horizon, and they will likely unite around the PAN's new standard bearer.

Whatever the outcome, López Obrador seems likely to set the tone for Mexico's presidential race this year. Leaders from the PRI and the PAN will do their best to cut into his political support. It will be a difficult but not insurmountable challenge to sway poor Mexicans attuned to the PRD candidate's energetic populism. For his part, López Obrador has said that he will leave politics and return to Tabasco if he loses the presidential race: "If the people say no, then I'll do something else. I'll go home and give classes in history."<sup>24</sup> But the former mayor would surely prefer to make history than to teach it. ●

#### Notes

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