An Election Short on Hope: Mexico 2012

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ARTHUR SCHMIDT, JUL 4 2012

Headlines proclaimed that the "big story" of Sunday's national elections in Mexico was the victory of Enrique Peña Nieto in the Presidential contest and thus the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (PRI) return to power a mere twelve years after its ouster. "Peña Nieto Is Winner of Mexican Election," read the headline in the *Washington Post*, while the *Dallas Morning News* emphasized "PRI to Lead Mexico Again." According to the preliminary figures released by the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), Peña Nieto's 38 percent of the vote gives him a lead of 6.5 percent over Andrés Manuel Obrador (AMLO) of the left-leaning coalition of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and two smaller parties, a difference substantially wider than the 0.6 percent margin by which outgoing president Felipe Calderón of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) prevailed over AMLO in the highly disputed 2006 presidential election. PAN's 2012 presidential candidate, Josefina Vázquez Mota, the first major-party female presidential candidate, polled a distant third with slightly more than a quarter of the vote.[1]

With 49 million ballots cast, 63 percent of eligible voters participated in deciding the winners for the more than 2100 government posts up for grabs. The big winner was the PRI; the big loser was the PAN. Aside from the presidency, the PRI took three of the six state governorships at stake, including the PAN bastion of Jalisco together with the mayoralty of Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city. Counting the seats of its Green Party ally, the PRI might achieve a slight majority in the Chamber of Deputies, but it is expected to fall short in the Senate.

While this "remarkable comeback" of the PRI may be the feature story, less heralded but equally significant Mexican political issues were reflected in Sunday's elections. Leonardo Valdés, the head of the IFE, has termed the 2012 elections "exemplary," but substantial numbers of Mexicans dispute this claim. They reject his view that Mexicans now experience a "democracy of absolute normality."[2] Peña Nieto's call for "reconciliation" notwithstanding, the 2012 elections at first glance appear to be more of a continuation than a resolution of the severe political divisions that have characterized the country over the last generation. Uncertainty lies ahead. "¡Regresan!", the one-word headline in the Mexico City daily *Reforma*, alludes to a possible democratic taming of the PRI, but it may equally reflect troublesome matters involved in its return after twelve years of supposed "democratic transition."

The 2000 victory of PAN candidate Vicente Fox Quesada that ousted the PRI from the presidency brought widespread hopes for economic improvement and political change that neither he nor Calderón have proven able to fulfill. Fox tended to shy away from bringing to account those responsible for the authoritarian abuses and corruption of PRI rule. No Mexican truth commission emerged, and a Special Prosecutor for Social and Political Movements of the Past proved inept and largely unsuccessful. While macroeconomic policy has brought price stability, annual rates of economic growth have remained uneven, far below the steady high levels needed to create the numbers of jobs the two presidents had promised. Despite some reduction in poverty, Mexico has continued as "oligopolilandia," a society of "mucha riqueza" and "pocos beneficiarios" held captive by a "capitalismo de cuates" ("crony capitalism") in the words of political scientist and columnist Denise Dresser.[3] The World Bank reports that "vested interests" have continued to resist social policy reform and have blunted the impact of elections, leaving regulatory agencies weak and enabling "public and private monopolies and oligopolies" to "constrain the country's economic competitiveness." Throughout the 2012 electoral campaign, economic disappointment and distress have figured strongly in the minds of Mexican voters.[4]

Mexico's three leading political parties—the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD—seem better suited to pursuing their own

narrow interests than to creating the social, economic, and political reforms that the country has long needed. "The worst traits, long associated exclusively with the [old] regime, have been socialized across the entire political class," writes *Guardian* correspondent Jo Tuckman. "The PRI is probably still the worst offender, but corruption, nepotism, clientelism, ineptitude, authoritarianism, cynicism and impunity touch all parties, because all parties hold some degree of power."[5] As a consequence, only 16 percent of Mexicans polled by Latinobarómetro in 2011 thought that their country's democracy had improved. When asked about their preference, 40 percent considered democracy the best form of government, against 14 percent who argued for an authoritarian system. Yet 36 percent, the highest of any country in Latin America, replied "da lo mismo" ("it's all the same"), an attitude captured by the first two words of the *New York Times* story on the 2012 elections: "Weary Voters."[6]

Two interrelated sources of trouble have further disillusioned Mexican voters—flagrant incidences of electoral corruption on the one hand, and on the other, the persistent campaign of the PRI, the PAN, and elements of the mass media to thwart any possibility of a presidential victory by López Obrador. Under these circumstances, the Mexican political left has not been able to believe that Peña Nieto could win legitimately. In their view, any triumph on his part would be the result of corruption and chicanery, possibly justifying a mass disavowal of the electoral process. After the election of 2006, AMLO blockaded the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City for weeks, and for months thereafter he continued to refer to himself as the "presidente legítimo." Distrust remains rampant within Mexican political life. Enough evidence exists of political trickery in the 2012 elections to reinforce any prior presumption that corruption accounts for its outcome. López Obrador has announced his intention to impugn the results and demand partial recounts, declaring that the election at the federal level was "by any lights inequitable and rife with irregularities."[7]

The unbalanced structure of Mexico's three-party system desperately needs the introduction of a runoff vote between the two top presidential vote-getters as occurs in many other multiparty political systems like those in France and Brazil. Mexico's parties have repeatedly failed to implement this reform, however, which has deprived the political system of greater legitimacy, undercut effective cooperation between the executive branch and congress, and left the country vulnerable to entrenched hostilities. It seems unlikely that conditions in 2012 will permit AMLO the level of post-electoral defiance that ultimately proved so politically costly to the PRD and to himself in 2006. López Obrador moderated his tone in the 2012 campaign, even referring to his desire for a "república amorosa." Nevertheless, his denunciation of the 2012 election will renew the breach between the electoral left and the other elements of Mexico's political and mass communications system. As far back as the late 1980s, following the questionable results of the 1988 election, the PRI and the PAN have worked together with powerful economic and media elements to exclude the political left from the Mexican presidency, including an infamous attempt in 2005 to have López Obrador declared legally ineligible to run for public office.[8]

Doubtlessly remembering the contested election of six years ago, José Woldenberg, a former IFE counselor, published a column late in the 2012 election campaign in which he explained the impossibility of rigging a fraudulent presidential election in Mexico today.[9] However, the evidence of fraudulent behavior in the 2012 elections lies not so much in the counting of votes, but in actions whose precise influence over electoral outcomes is notoriously difficult to determine—such as shaping the mass media framework within which the election takes place and buying the loyalty of voters. Television overwhelmingly constitutes the principal means by which most Mexicans receive political information. In June, the London-based *Guardian* newspaper published documents that revealed a secret deal going back to 2005 by which Televisa, one of the two biggest television enterprises in Mexico, committed itself to promoting the political career of Peña Nieto through elaborate favorable coverage, first as governor of the state of Mexico and then as a candidate for president. The same arrangement provided for adverse treatment of López Obrador.[10]

Three weeks later the PAN presented the IFE with a formal complaint that the PRI had surpassed the legal limits on campaign spending. Illicit campaign spending has proven hard for Mexican electoral agencies to investigate and regulate. Charges of the old PRI practice of vote buying have resurfaced in 2012, often with new features such as the use of cell phones by voters to document their having marked their ballot for the PRI in exchange for a subsequent cash payment. Despite the two televised candidate debates, many observers felt the 2012 election campaign seemed overwhelmingly superficial and economically wasteful. While all the parties spent lavishly on advertising, the PRI's outdoor publicity seemed ubiquitous, even including the literal wrapping of buildings to turn

them into multistory, multi-sided campaign posters. Given the history of the PRI in post-World War II Mexico and given recent spending scandals involving PRI governors in Coahuila and Veracruz, it would not be difficult to believe that the PRI used its network of state governors to funnel public funds and those of locally favored interests—both legal and illegal—into political campaigns in 2012.

Even before the publication of the *Guardian* documents, a new university student movement called for an electoral campaign of greater integrity. In May, after Peña Nieto accused students who had questioned him strongly at the Universidad Iberoamericana of being manipulated, 131 students presented themselves on YouTube to deny the offensive charge. Known as "Yo Soy 132," with sympathizers among the public being the symbolic 132nd student, the movement gained moral authority for several weeks through its nonviolent but strenuous opposition to Peña Nieto, the PRI, and the overweening influence of television, particularly Televisa, in the electoral process. Despite the attention they gained, however, the students could not speak for larger numbers of Mexican youth outside the world of higher education who lacked direct memories of *Priísta* rule in the late twentieth century. Facing difficult economic prospects, many young Mexicans may have been drawn to the idea that the PRI, unlike the other parties, possessed the organizational capacity to deliver on its promises.

The 2012 elections appear likely to perpetuate Mexico's political conflict. Peña Nieto has disavowed any attempt to return to the past, but many remain skeptical that the PRI has changed. Despite six years of experience governing a large state, the president-elect bears the image of a pretty boy fronting for powerful special interests. Whether the PRI has changed or not, Mexico has, and no PRI president can dominate political life as they once did. Most likely, Peña Nieto will have to negotiate with other parties to gain support for his initiatives in Congress. His margin of victory was several points below what the polls had predicted. Having lost in what is most likely his last national campaign, López Obrador seems determined to challenge the integrity of the 2012 elections and to confront the new PRI regime. AMLO's protestations notwithstanding, the PRD has emerged from the elections appreciably enhanced. Its coalition retained its hold on the Federal District, winning by over 60 percent, while adding two small state governorships in Morelos and Tabasco. It remains to be seen whether other PRD leaders will follow AMLO's intransigence as in 2006 or whether they will now move out from under his shadow to strengthen the party's governing capacity and to broaden its electoral appeal among independents.

Peña Nieto has promised a push for rapid reforms, but both domestically and internationally his options are slim. Take, for example, the enormous issue of the expanding violence that has plagued Mexico since Calderón began his war on narcotics enterprises six years ago. Estimates place the number of lives lost at 50-60,000, yet the election campaigns never addressed the matter seriously. More than one PRI politician with ties to Peña Nieto is suspected of being involved in drug trafficking. No readily available solution exists given the immense demand for illicit drugs in the United States and the ready supply of firearms that criminal enterprises can purchase and import from the U.S. southwest. Mexico remains subordinate to the United States in many fronts from investment and commerce, to narcotics, migration, and, increasingly, military training. Mexico is a remarkably resilient and creative society. It deserves better governance. The 2012 elections have dramatically changed office holders, but their capacity to transform Mexico's political life appears low.

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Arthur Schmidt *is a Professor Emeritus at Temple University. He has specialized in Latin American history and politics with a particular emphasis on Mexico and is the editor of the Voices of Latin American Life series for Temple University Press.*

[1] Gabriel Quadri of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), an instrument of the notorious boss of the national teachers union, Elba Ester Gordillo, has received less than 2.5 percent of the votes. The headlines come from www.washingtonpost.com, and www.dallasnews.com. The phrase "remarkable comeback" appeared in the Monday, July 2 coverage of The TakeAway, www.thetakeaway.org .

[2] "Da IFE resultados," *Reforma*, 2 julio 2012, www.reforma.com .

[3] "El discurso que casi todos quisieran decir," *Reporte Indigo Brainmedia*, 116 (30 de enero al 5 de febrero 2009), http://www.reportebrainmedia.com .

[4] World Bank, *Institutions and Governance in Mexico. Beyond State Capture and Social Polarization* (Washington, 2007), viii, 41; Damien Cave, "Pocketbook Issues Weigh Heavily as Mexicans Vote," *New York Times*, 1 July 2012, www.nytimes.com.

[5] Jo Tuckman, *Mexico: Democracy Interrupted* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 3.

[6] Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2011* (Santiago de Chile, 2011), 38, 40; Randal C. Archibold, "Weary Voters Turn to Party of Mexico's Past, Polls Say," *New York Times*, 2 July 2012, www.nytimes.com.

[7] "Vamos a impugnar la elección—AMLO," *Reforma*, 2 julio 2012, www.reforma.com.

[8] See Arnaldo Córdova, "La democratización de México. Alternancia y transición," in Octavio Rodríguez Araujo, coord., *México. ¿Un nuevo régimen político?* (México: Siglo XXI, 2009), 89-119; Lorenzo Meyer, *El espejismo democrático. De la euforia del cambio a la continuidad* (México: Oceano, 2007), 11-195.

[9] José Woldenberg, "Por qué es imposible un fraude, " *Reforma*, 14 junio 2012, www.reforma.com.

[10] Jo Tuckman, "Computer Files Link TV Dirty Tricks to Favourite for Mexico Presidency," *Guardian*, 7 June 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/07/mexico-presidency-tv-dirty-tricks?intcmp=239. Tuckman was unable to confirm the authenticity of the documents, although she and the *Guardian* believed them to be valid. In 2009, U.S. diplomatic cables indicated the concern of American diplomats that Peña Nieto was paying Televisa for favorable coverage: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/11/wikileaks-us-concerns-televisa-pena-nieto?intcmp=239.