

# Calderon hits stride in Mexico election

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**MEXICO CITY** - He wasn't expected to win his party's primary, let alone surge ahead in the latest poll for the presidency. But soft-spoken, conservative Felipe Calderon has managed to overtake his charismatic left-wing opponent, and suddenly the campaign is looking like a roller coaster.

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, until recently the front-runner, still has a full two months to regain the upper hand, but if Calderon wins on July 2, it would break a wave of leftist victories in Brazil, Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America and give Washington a close ally at a time of tense relations over shifting U.S. immigration policies.

Calderon was already slightly ahead in two newspaper polls. Then came a survey published Wednesday in the newspaper Reforma that showed him leading Lopez Obrador by 40 percent to 33 percent, with Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party at 22 percent. The nationwide survey of 2,100 people, conducted April 28-30, had a margin of error of 2.3 percentage points.

Harvard-educated Calderon, 43, touts free-market reforms, conservative fiscal policies and job creation so that Mexicans won't have to cross illegally into the United States to look for work. He is the candidate for outgoing President Vicente Fox's National Action Party, but is more socially conservative than Fox. He strongly supports his party's anti-abortion policy and cites Scripture during stump speeches.

Balding and bespectacled, Calderon is a sharp contrast to the tall, rugged Fox, who ended 71 years of one-party rule in Mexico with his historic victory in 2000. Mexican law limits presidents to one term.

Until Fox defeated Francisco Labastida, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, had won every election since 1929, often enlisting fraud to hang on to the country's top post. The historic change of parties in 2000 dispelled any doubt about Mexico's democratic credentials and paved the way for this year's even more competitive race.

Calderon wasn't Fox's first choice as successor. The two butted heads in 2004 when Calderon began openly campaigning to replace Fox while serving as his energy secretary. The spat led to Calderon's resignation.

Last fall, many expected Interior Secretary Santiago Creel to win the nomination, but Calderon quietly united the party behind him.

Relatively unknown, he distanced himself from Fox by promising to make up for his former boss' "insufficiencies" while saying he would extend popular Fox initiatives, such as a government health program for the poor.

No hard feelings, he said of Fox: "I'm not resentful, nor do I feel offended by him."

The question is whether his lead can last. His biggest boost inadvertently came from Lopez Obrador, who refused to take part in the campaign's first televised debate on April 25, saying he would rather deal directly with voters than squabble with his rivals. Lopez Obrador, 52, will join in the second and final debate on June 6.

But with Lopez Obrador's podium empty in the first debate, Calderon was able to capture center-stage, where he kept his cool under repeated attack from Madrazo, 53, the candidate of the once all-powerful PRI.

Calderon has focused his attention on attacking Lopez Obrador, with ads comparing him to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a self-declared enemy of the United States. The ads have "bloodied Lopez Obrador's nose and got him off-message, so he's been on the defensive," says George Grayson, a Mexico expert at the College of William & Mary.

He said Calderon has kept his campaign focused and his party united, and he has talked the most about what matters above all in Mexico: creating jobs.

"Because of a lack of investment, our workers are going to find jobs where there is investment - the United States," he said this week during a campaign appearance. "But I want it to be the other way around, so that our people don't leave, dividing our families, our towns and our country."

Alejandro Huerta, the 56-year-old owner of an auto parts company, said he's leaning toward voting for Calderon because "he'll deliver what he promises."

But 68-year-old Consuelo Cano, handing out cartoons labeled "the lies of Calderon" in a Mexico City park, said she was confident the tide would turn back in Lopez Obrador's favor in time for election day.

The leftist candidate revels in rallying his supporters in the face of adversity. A year ago, when Lopez Obrador was Mexico City mayor and the Fox administration was pursuing charges against him that would have blocked his presidential bid, he called massive protest marches and managed to stay on the ballot.

Asked about polls showing Calderon on the rise, he laughed and said: "I'd like to see someone who actually believes their polls."

"We aren't worried. We are going to campaign the same as we always have, from the ground up."