

# On a Peaceful Election Day Across Mexico, Growing Signs of a Maturing Democracy

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MEXICO CITY, July 2 — If [Mexico](#) is a young democracy, it looked much older than its age during the uncertain presidential elections on Sunday.

Thousands of striking teachers in the southern state of Oaxaca postponed their protests to leave the polling places clear for voters. Subcommander Marcos, the ski-masked leader of the Zapatista rebels who was at the front of machete-wielding mobs just one month ago, led a peaceful march through Mexico City.

The government's Federal Electoral Institute, or IFE, welcomed hundreds of observers from all over the world. The authorities estimated that more than two-thirds of registered voters would show up at the polls. And at polling places that once were scenes of huge voter fraud and intimidation, voting passed without serious disruptions or complaints. And at the end of the night, when President Vicente Fox went on national television to explain that the race was too close to call, a nation gripped by suspense and leery of dirty tricks remained calm.

"I know there is no Mexican who wants to go against democracy," Mr. Fox said after casting his ballot on Sunday. "And for that, I offer recognition to the people of Mexico who have known how to consolidate this democracy, to give it strength."

In 2000, Mr. Fox broke through the old system of fraud to become the first presidential candidate in 71 years to oust the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

Robert Pastor, a Latin America expert at American University, who has observed Mexican elections for 20 years and once helped this country come up with mechanisms for cleaning out corruption, said the situation had changed.

"Mexico created an institution a decade ago which in many ways is one of the most sophisticated in the world today," Mr. Pastor said, referring to the IFE. "They have done so much to prevent fraud, implemented all kinds of safeguards, none of which we have in the United States."

On upscale boulevards and in gritty housing projects across Mexico City, voting was a family affair. Parents filled out ballots and children stuffed them into the boxes. Voters banded together to carry elderly people who showed up in wheelchairs. When a poll worker in Polanco announced it was his mother's birthday, the whole place joined together to sing to her.

That, however, was where the affinity among voters ended.

Well-to-do voters typically said they had cast ballots for the pro-business conservative Felipe Calderón, while voters in poorer districts said they voted for the leftist populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador. José María Morera, 52, said he had decided to vote for Mr. Calderón because he worried that Mr. López Obrador "creates a situation of conflict between the social classes."

"He seems cynical, arrogant, uncultured, with no political skills," Mr. Morera said. "I do not think he's honorable."

That was not what Cuitlahuac Herrera Nolasco, a resident of Ixtapalapa, a working-class section of Mexico City, thought. "López Obrador is the only one who has shown, with acts, that he knows how to govern," Mr. Herrera said, referring to the former mayor of Mexico City, who is known for living in a modest apartment, driving a cheap car and building double-decker freeways. "To me he is the most honest. I like his austerity."

Middle class voters, like those in Ecatepec, a suburb north of Mexico City, seemed divided.

Georgina Martínez, 65, a former textile worker, was helped to the polls and to her political preferences by two sons, one a dentist and another who runs a small textile factory of his own.

They voted for Mr. Calderón, of the conservative National Action Party, PAN.

"I normally vote for the PRI," she said. "But after talking to my sons, I voted for the PAN."

Néstor Santoyo, a single father, said he voted for Mr. López Obrador of the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD.

"We have already tried the other parties," Mr. Santoyo said. "Now we will try the PRD. I hope it is better than the others."

Striking teachers in Oaxaca, which is still dominated by the PRI, took a break from their protests to rally voters to support Mr. López Obrador. The teachers had been striking for months to demand higher wages.

But after the police tried to break their protests by force last month, the teachers began to demand the resignation of Gov. Ulises Ruiz. And they have accused Mr. Fox of the National Action Party of ignoring them.

In the days before the elections, there were reports in Chiapas of PRI leaders using their old tricks to get votes. Residents in the town of Zaachila said party members handed out cement and other construction supplies in an effort to buy votes.

It was unclear whether their tactics had worked.

"The vote is ultimately secret and free," said Marta Rojas Sebastián, a lifelong resident there, "so we'll take whatever they give us and then we'll vote for whomever we want."