

Mexico's Election Pits Promise Against Fear

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MEXICO CITY,— [Mexico's](#) polarizing presidential campaign ended officially on Wednesday and, with four days to go before the vote, it has come down to a contest between a gritty, charismatic advocate for the poor and a well-educated technocrat.

Like many elections, this one is a struggle between promise and fear and remains too close to call. On one side is Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the former mayor of Mexico City who has traveled little outside Mexico and says he is inspired by Gandhi and [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#). On the other is Felipe Calderón, the former energy minister with a [Harvard](#) degree who talks of fitting Mexico into the globalized economy.

But for many voters the choice is complicated because Mexico only emerged six years ago from seven decades of single-party, autocratic rule and there are some who say that what is at stake on Sunday is the survival of still-fragile democratic institutions.

"My fear is that with López Obrador we could end up very soon with an all-powerful president again," Enrique Krauze, an author and historian, said Monday at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) in New York, adding that Mr. López Obrador was "very ignorant" and "inward looking" and "dismisses the rule of law as something made by the bourgeoisie to oppress the poor."

Such accusations and concerns — and many consider them nothing short of fearmongering — have defined the race for many voters.

Mr. López Obrador has been hit with advertisements depicting him as a spendthrift populist with a tendency to foment violent protests. His opponents have compared him to President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela and have suggested that he is an autocrat. Many of Mr. Calderón's supporters acknowledge they are voting out of fear of what a maverick leftist like Mr. López Obrador might do, rather than enthusiasm for Mr. Calderón, a dapper man who speaks with all the fire of an economist.

"It's more of a vote against López Obrador than for Calderón," explained Jorge Valenzuela, a cab driver in Mexico City. "López Obrador seems to me like a well-intentioned person, but he's very violent."

The most recent polls last week showed that Mr. Calderón and Mr. López Obrador each had about 35 percent of the vote, with a third candidate, Roberto Madrazo, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, trailing behind with the support of fewer than a quarter of likely voters.

Recently, Mexico's most important business group has released advertisements suggesting that Mr. López Obrador's slate of welfare programs will bankrupt the state and lead to an economic collapse like the ones in 1982 and 1995. He has promised to crack down on tax evasion and waste, and reduce government salaries to pay for \$20 billion in social programs and public works.

Mr. Calderón has offered a starkly different vision, promising to create jobs through private investment. He calls for sticking with the tight monetary, free-trade and pro-business policies of President Vicente Fox. He also proposes cutting income tax rates for businesses and the rich to spur investment.

Still, at his last campaign rally here in the capital on Sunday, speaking to more than 80,000 people, Mr. Calderón spent much of his speech attacking Mr. López Obrador, suggesting he was a throwback to the populist presidents of the 1970's and 1980's and charging that his plan would lead to financial collapse.

"This picture we have already seen, and it was a horror show, for which all Mexicans paid dearly," Mr. Calderón said. "The lesson is clear. Those peoples who do not remember their history are condemned to relive it."

Mr. López Obrador, who leads the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution, has dismissed these assertions. He notes that he balanced the budget of Mexico City during his five years as mayor, paying for new social programs with better tax collection, just as he wants to do on the federal level.

Indeed, in recent days, he has charged that Mexico's big businesses are in league with President Fox's National Action Party in trying to scare voters, calling them "white-collar criminals" who have gotten rich through influence peddling.

"What are they afraid of?" he asked supporters in Toluca on Tuesday. "That they'll lose their privileges. I would tell them, 'Calm down, be serene, nothing's going to happen.' Vengeance is not my forte. I'm not going to invent crimes. We're not going to hunt down anyone. The only thing that will happen is that Mexico will not be a country of privileges, the government will not be at the service of a minority.' "

Mr. López Obrador finished a grueling whistle-stop campaign Wednesday with a giant rally here in the central square. While he has been more charismatic on the stump, his opponents have outspent and outflanked him on television and radio.

Mr. Madrazo has tried to position himself as a moderate alternative, emphasizing his experience as former governor of Tabasco State and ability to "get things done."

But his Institutional Revolutionary Party, the machine that ruled Mexico with only token opposition for seven decades until losing the presidency in 2000, has been plagued with infighting and defections.

Mr. Calderón, meanwhile, has garnered the support of a handful of the county's most prominent intellectuals, among them the former foreign minister, Jorge G. Casteñeda, and Mr. Krauze, the historian.

These critics worry a charismatic figure like Mr. López Obrador, who has said he identifies with Christ and talks about the need for "the purification of public life," could roll back the democratic changes Mexico has made in the last decade by ignoring Congress and courts and appealing directly to the masses for support.

Others, like Homero Aridjis, a poet and environmentalist, worry that Mr. López Obrador's sharp talk about the gap between rich and poor could provoke civil unrest. "The peace of Mexico is held up by toothpicks," Mr. Aridjis said.

Other intellectuals note that in the past two decades Mexico's central bank, supreme court, electoral commission and Congress have become strong, independent institutions.

"I am confident that were he to try, our institutions, constructed in the last 20 years, and the citizens at large would not allow for that to happen," said Rossana Fuentes Berain, the editor of the Spanish edition of Foreign Affairs. "I am not one of those who thinks he's a danger for the country."

Mr. López Obrador said it was absurd to contend that he would undermine a democracy he had spent much of his life fighting to build.

"It's not true," he said in a recent interview. "One must respect the institutions. I am in favor of the division and the balance of powers. I have said many times I come from the opposition who asked for this. I have written it. It's a conviction."

"But moreover, no one in Mexico can put himself above the institutions, not even being a general and mounting a coup, not even that way," he added. "This country would not permit it."

