

Mexican Presidential Rivals Both Claim Win in Tight Vote

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MEXICO CITY, July 2 -- Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Felipe Calderón each claimed victory in Mexico's presidential election late Sunday night, even though the country's electoral commission said the race was so close it might not be able to announce the winner until Wednesday.

The dramatic announcements by López Obrador and Calderón shortly before midnight in Mexico City set up what is sure to be a furiously emotional battle over voting results in a nation that had spent tens of millions of dollars to ensure a fair and efficient election. Both candidates appeared on national television within minutes after Luis Carlos Ugalde, the head of the Federal Electoral Institute, announced that the difference between the two "was too narrow" for him to call the race.

López Obrador, a populist beloved by Mexico's poor, struck first, appearing before a bank of microphones and forcefully saying that "according to our information, we have won the presidency of Mexico." He said he would respect Mexico's institutions, but he also called on Mexico's institutions to respect the results. "We triumphed, we won," he said.

Calderón, a free-trade booster who promised continuity with President Vicente Fox's policies, appeared on television screens across Mexico moments later.

"The quick counts signal that we have won the presidential election," said Calderón, whose face was dappled with sweat.

Within minutes of Calderon's announcement, López Obrador was back on center stage, this time speaking to a huge crowd from a stage set up in the Zocalo, Mexico City's huge downtown square. "We will have all the documents to demonstrate that we won," he said, chopping the air with his right arm. "They are going to have to respect our triumph."

The dueling announcements came after exit polls had shown the race too close to call. Party leaders had urged the electoral commission to be cautious about releasing preliminary results, worried that a premature announcement could lead to unrest.

"Be careful . . . you could put the stability of the nation in danger," said Mariano Palacios Alcocer, head of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. The PRI's candidate, Roberto Madrazo, consistently ran third in pre-election polls.

Frontrunners López Obrador and Calderón battled for the presidency in starkly different style. López Obrador charmed voters with a mix of charisma and New Deal-style public works proposals that he promised would create jobs for millions of poor Mexicans and stem illegal migration to the United States. Calderón ran a disciplined, dogged campaign focused on job creation and pledges that he would continue " *Foxismo*."

Enthusiasm in both camps built through the evening as each predicted its candidate was winning. Hundreds of supporters gathered outside López Obrador's home in a modest apartment building in Mexico City's Copilco neighborhood. They mobbed each car that

came out of the garage and chanted, "We're not moving until we're in the National Palace."

Calderón told reporters that he was "sure that this day will pass by in peace, because there is going to be great voter participation. . . . Mexico today is moving forward in its contemporary history."

With the debate over illegal immigration roiling the U.S. Congress, Mexico's presidential election has drawn unprecedented attention in the United States. López Obrador, the candidate of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD, generated the most unease among Americans because of his populist agenda, which includes renegotiating parts of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and left-leaning tendencies that have drawn comparisons to such adversaries of the Bush administration as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales.

All three leading candidates talked of trying to reach an immigration accord with the United States. But none made it a central part of his campaign or offered detailed proposals.

Instead, they used the immigration controversy as a leaping-off point for touting their economic plans. Calderón, the candidate of the National Action Party, or PAN, set his gaze beyond Mexico with promises to attract foreign investment to create jobs that would dissuade Mexicans from leaving. López Obrador turned inward, calling for huge public works projects -- such as a railroad system, new public universities and extensive housing construction -- to stimulate employment and stem migration.

More than 20.6 million people of Mexican origin live in the United States, representing 58 percent of the nation's Hispanic population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. There are also more than 6.2 million illegal Mexican immigrants in the United States, accounting for 56 percent of the illegal immigrant population, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Mexicans living in the United States were eligible to vote in Sunday's election, but the registration numbers came in stunningly low, a trend some blamed on inadequate organization and the fact that a small registration fee was required. Only 32,632 Mexicans in the United States registered to vote, and of those only 28,335 sent in ballots, according to Mexico's Federal Election Institute.

The prospect of a López Obrador presidency made financial markets queasy, with Mexican bond prices dipping in anticipation of his possible victory. His parochial approach -- "First Mexico, later foreigners" -- and penchant for anti-business rhetoric raised questions about his ability to maintain good relations with conservative governments.

Jorge Montaña, who served under PRI governments as ambassador to the United States and the United Nations, said that if López Obrador were elected he would "have to start with a learning curve. I don't think he's aware of the dimension and the complexity of the relationship with the U.S."

But Montaña also described López Obrador as "an astute, pragmatic politician" who would be unlikely to incite the United States. "He will take a cautious line at the beginning," he said.

Calderón had positioned himself as a candidate who understood Mexico's need to engage with the global economy. Nonetheless, as president he would face challenges in shaping a relationship with Washington, some analysts said, because of Fox's failure to accomplish one of his highest priorities: an immigration deal with the United States.

Many in Mexico still express pique that immigration talks collapsed when President Bush tightened border security after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Fox remained on good terms with Bush, prompting López Obrador to call Fox a "puppet" of the United States. Fox's setbacks could hurt Calderón if he were elected, some analysts said.

"It's like a Mexican saying about having a relationship that didn't turn out as hoped," said Octavio Pescador, who was born in Mexico City and is a professor at the C?sar Ch?vez Center at UCLA. "He'll carry baggage."

López Obrador also repeatedly told audiences that he would not honor Mexico's commitment under NAFTA to lower tariffs on U.S. corn and beans. Calderón, who presented himself as a free-trade advocate, spoke of resuming stalled efforts to wrestle more aid from the United States.

Trade between the two neighbors topped \$243 billion in 2003, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The United States is, by far, Mexico's most important trading partner.

López Obrador, wearing a leather jacket with an upturned collar, flashed his signature thumbs-up sign after casting his ballot in his southern Mexico City neighborhood of Copilco. Calderón voted in the upscale Las Aguilas neighborhood with his wife, Margarita Zavala, who is a Mexican senator.

This presidential contest had been the most competitive in modern Mexican history, the first true three-way race in a nation long shackled by one-party rule under the PRI, which was ousted from the presidency by Fox in 2000. Unprecedented numbers of undecided voters, as well as a growing middle class and the permanent class of desperately poor voters, made the outcome difficult to predict in the campaign's final days.

Election officials projected a 60 percent turnout -- more than 40 million of Mexico's 72 million registered voters -- a greater percentage than in typical U.S. presidential elections. Mexico's electoral system has a reputation as one of the world's finest because it employs sophisticated fingerprint and, in some regions, face-recognition techniques to prevent fraud. Still, two recent independent studies suggested that vote-buying and coercion remain problems, particularly in rural areas.

Voting appeared to have gone smoothly in much of the country, though parts of a major Mexico City street -- Avenida Revolucion -- were closed because of protests over a shortage of ballots in some precincts.

López Obrador, who resigned as the capital's mayor in 2005 to run for president, dominated the early opinion polls. His supporters cast him as unstoppable.

But his sheen of invincibility evaporated beneath a withering attack campaign comparing him to Venezuela's Chávez, who has been widely criticized for authoritarian practices and is unpopular in Mexico. López Obrador was slow to respond, an approach his advisers now call a mistake, and Calderón pulled ahead in the opinion polls.

But López Obrador also went negative. In early June, during his only debate appearance, he accused Calderón of helping his brother-in-law get a massive government software contract while Calderón was energy secretary. Calderón vigorously denied the charge, but it seemed to strike a chord with many Mexican voters accustomed to government cronyism, and López Obrador rose in the polls to tie or slightly lead his main rival.

López Obrador, if elected, would have some symbolic hurdles to overcome in his relations with the United States. He would be the first Mexican president in decades who does not speak English and, although he is vague about his travels, it appears he has been to the United States no more than once or twice.

"My sense is that the fact Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Ernesto Zedillo and Vicente Fox were able to communicate in proper English with their counterparts in the U.S. made things easier," Montaña said. "But Lula doesn't speak English, and he's handled his relationship with the U.S. very well," he added in a reference to Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The Calderón-López Obrador showdown was just one of more than 1,000 electoral contests decided Sunday. No single party was expected to win a majority in the legislature, meaning that the next Mexican president will face a daunting challenge in winning approval for his proposals, as well as a formidable check on his power.