

Mexicans go to the polls in tight race

Sunday's election pits leftist leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador against conservative Felipe Calderón.

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MEXICO CITY – Mexicans headed to the polls Sunday in a hotly-contested presidential election pitting a leftist former mayor of Mexico City, who appeals to the poor, against a refined lawyer, who has rallied the country's business set.

It is the first presidential race since Vicente Fox's 2000 victory ended seven decades of one-party rule in Mexico.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-leaning Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) has garnered widespread support by promising to tackle corruption and devising a "New Deal" of sorts for Mexico. Felipe Calderón of Fox's National Action Party (PAN) is neck and neck, promising to bring Mexico new jobs by pushing for more free-trade and foreign investment.

Their different principles have polarized voters. On a quiet, tree-lined street in the upper- middle-class Mexico City neighborhood of Condesa, Maria de Lourdes Olmedo cast her vote with her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter - all of them Obrador supporters. "There is no one better than he," says Ms. Olmedo. "He will work for the whole country, not just one class."

Around the corner, Jaime Arellano expressed the opposite view. "He will take the country into chaos," says Mr. Arellano, who owns a small construction business. He says Obrador's so-called "New Deal" programs will create jobs just for the sake of it - without providing a boost to the economy.

But Calderón's economic priorities are the same as those espoused under Fox, Arellano says. "This is what the country needs." And while he calls Calderón "bland" and "colorless," he says he, unlike Fox, has "the fangs to get the job done."

Trailing in third in the race, according to polls here, is Roberto Madrazo, who is the candidate of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

An Obrador win could dampen US-Mexican relations. "It's really clear that ... he is not going to be a US proxy," says Chuck Collins, a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies, a left-leaning think tank in Washington. Obrador has pledged to renegotiate provisions under NAFTA that would end tariffs on American corn and beans by 2008, and at his final rally in Mexico City Wednesday said he would not be a puppet of any foreign government.

Yet Mr. Collins expects relations will depend more on the the US response to an Obrador victory, than any actions the candidate, as president, might take. "I don't think Obrador is a protectionist or an isolationist.... He has been very cautious," says Collins. "The problem is if the US radical right treats him like a [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chávez and creates a demon across the border."

A Calderón win could put Washington at ease. "Calderón will carry on Fox's role of carrying the banner of US trade," says Collins. "He will go to Central American gatherings and say, 'Let's all get together here and support FTAA [Free Trade of the Americas], or whatever the trade agenda is,' " he says.

But because this election is so close, and is the first in which the opposition parties were not focused on taking control from the PRI - the PAN and PRD could focus on their distinct economic plans, giving rise to rhetoric that could make Calderón more accountable to the poor. "He is under pressure to deal with social inequality problems," says Collins.

"Candidates always 'talk the talk' during the campaign," says Margarita Merlos, an Obrador supporter on her way home from voting in San Angel, a neighborhood in the southeast corner of the city. "But you can never really be sure what you are going to get when they get to Los Pinos [Mexico's White House]. I believe Obrador will be excellent. But the others are not terrible either, to tell you the truth."

Regardless of the winner, the closeness of this presidential race gives it historical resonance. "If one takes a step back, the progress toward a stronger democracy in Mexico has been remarkable," says Michael Shifter, vice president of the InterAmerican Dialogue, a think tank in Washington, DC. "After all, for much of this campaign there was a chance that any one of three candidates, from three political parties, had a chance to win. How many countries can you say that about?"