

Electoral Crisis in Mexico as Top 2 Declare Victory

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MEXICO CITY.— Election officials declared Sunday that they could not immediately determine a winner in the tightest presidential race in the country's history. Minutes later, the two front runners each declared victory, setting in motion an electoral crisis.

The contest pitted Felipe Calderón, a conservative former energy minister backed by business leaders, against Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the firebrand leftist former mayor of Mexico City, supported mostly by the poor.

Mr. López Obrador said at a downtown hotel he would respect the decision of the election institute even if he lost by one vote. Yet in the same breath he maintained he was convinced he had won by 500,000 votes. "This result is irreversible," he said.

Appearing before supporters a few minutes later at his party headquarters, Mr. Calderón rattled off the results of several surveys of voters leaving the polls and counts of key districts that showed he had won. "There is not the slightest doubt that we have won the election," he said.

Surveys of polling stations by election officials showed the contest was too close to call, and they urged people to remain calm until official results could be reported. The only thing clear was that a third candidate, Roberto Madrazo, the former governor of Tabasco State, was trailing the two front-runners.

At 11 p.m., with a quarter of the polling places counted, Mr. Calderón led the race with 38 percent the vote, compared to 35 percent for Mr. López Obrador. Mr. Madrazo had 19 percent.

Earlier in the evening, tension gripped the capital as it became clear the margin in the race was razor-thin. Mr. López Obrador did not arrive at the downtown hotel where he was expected to receive the returns, but closeted himself in his campaign headquarters instead. Mr. Calderón also remained out of sight at his party headquarters.

Luis Ugalde, the head of the Federal Electoral Institute, appeared twice on national television and urged candidates and their supporters to wait for official results. President Vicente Fox also addressed the nation, pleading with voters to heed the election commission's decision. "It's the responsibility of all political actors to respect the law," he said.

But Mr. López Obrador, who critics say has an authoritarian streak, acted as if he was already the president elect. He went immediately to the historic central square, where thousands of his supporters had gathered to celebrate.

"We are going to demonstrate that we won and they have to respect our victory," he told the crowd.

At stake in the contest is whether the country remains on a conservative track and stays a firm [United States](#) ally or joins a trend that has brought several leftists to power in Latin America in recent years, weakening Washington's influence.

"This is about the struggle between social classes," said Miguel Abel Sanchez, a 55-year-old shopkeeper, after he said he cast his vote for the leftist candidate in the rural town of San Rafael, 25 miles outside Mexico City. "We cannot live in a rich country with an enormous number of people in extreme poverty."

The election was another milestone in the country's march toward full democracy after more than seven decades of single-party, autocratic rule, which ended with the election six years ago of President Fox, who was not permitted to run for another term.

The campaign was marked by wide differences on how to handle the economy and a storm of negative advertising, as Mr. López Obrador's opponents tried to generate a high level of anxiety that his leftist populism would undo the country's democratic progress and stability.

Though [Mexico](#) has myriad problems, from rampant organized crime to environmental degradation, the election revolved around the issues of poverty and jobs, and how to close a yawning chasm between rich and poor that has sent some 10 million Mexicans north of the border in search of work since a free trade pact with the United States took hold over a decade ago.

Mr. Calderón, 43, said he would create jobs through securing more private investment and by cutting taxes. Mr. López Obrador, 52, said he would spend \$20 billion on social programs and public works to jump-start the economy.

Underlying the debate was the larger issue of whether Mexico's attempt to fit into the global economy through free trade agreements had done enough to alleviate poverty. Mr. López Obrador argued that it had not and that a new economic policy to funnel more tax dollars to the poor was needed. Mr. Calderón wanted to stay the course.

Mr. López Obrador also promised to slash spending on government salaries, root out corruption and cut other waste. He attacked what he called the privileged elite in Mexico, a network of businessmen and politicians that he said for too long had evaded taxes and become rich from government contracts and the sale of state monopolies.

"There cannot be a rich government and a poor people," Mr. López Obrador said repeatedly in his campaign speeches.

Mr. Calderón warned direly that Mr. López Obrador's plan would lead to more debt and an economic collapse. He said that Mexico had to compete in the global economy and that it could triumph with his leadership. He said he would encourage more foreign investment, allow private partnerships in the state-run oil business and slash corporate taxes. "I want a winning Mexico," he said.

Mr. Madrazo, 53, carrying the banner of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or P.R.I., tried to position himself in the center, promising to crack down on crime, cut taxes and provide more direct aid to the poor.

Throughout the country, from small towns to the sprawling capital, people stood patiently in line at open-air polling places, most of them little more than fold-up tables holding voter lists, ballots and cardboard ballot boxes with cellophane sides.

The line of voters in San Rafael was a panorama of Mexico: youths in shades and leather jackets, weathered farmers in white cowboy hats, sun-hardened old ladies in straw hats, small business owners in jeans, knit shirts and loafers. About two-thirds of Mexico's 71 million voters were expected to turn out.

Some said they were voting for Mr. Calderón, of President Fox's National Action Party, to give the free-trade and pro-business policies of the government more time to work. Mr. Fox made history in 2000 when he defeated the P.R.I., but most of the reforms he promised ran aground in Congress.

"In 6 years, you cannot undo what other people have done over 70 years," said Arturo Garcia, a 49-year-old tortilla maker. "Fox was tied up by the Congress."

Some left-wing fringe groups boycotted the election. On Sunday morning, Subcommander Marcos, the masked leader of the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, marched down Reforma Avenue, the spine of Mexico City, with a few thousand supporters, heaping scorn on all the political parties. Some danced in the street and waved Communist flags.

This race was the first modern election in Mexico in which all three major candidates received equal coverage from the media and waged an American-style battle of advertisements on radio and television, from inspirational spots promising more jobs to clever mudslinging attacks.

Mexicans learned the pitfalls and advantages of negative advertising, as all sides delivered broadsides. Mr. Calderón's camp tried to paint Mr. López Obrador as a dangerous leftist and a closet dictator who would bankrupt the country with welfare programs.

Mr. López Obrador portrayed Mr. Calderón as a member of the ruling elite that has enjoyed what he called "privileges" in Mexico for centuries — government sinecures, sweetheart contracts and low taxes.

All three major candidates refrained from bashing the United States or making naked appeals to nationalism, which used to be a mainstay in political campaigns here. Though Mr. Calderón and Mr. Madrazo said they would be tough on crime, none of the candidates said how they would address the gangland war among drug dealers that has claimed hundreds of lives over the last year.

Neither did any of the candidates offer new solutions to illegal [immigration](#), beyond saying the key was to create more jobs in Mexico, rather than to step up security along the border.

Until January, Mr. López Obrador had been leading all other candidates in most polls. An attempt to knock him off the ballot because his administration had ignored a court order backfired, as he mounted huge marches and rallies in his support. The more his political opponents tried to disqualify him from running, the more his popularity rose. Eventually Mr. Fox's prosecutors dropped the charges, as polls showed Mr. López Obrador with 40 percent of the vote.

But Mr. López Obrador stumbled in February when he attacked President Fox for using the bully pulpit of his office to campaign for Mr. Calderón. The leftist accused Mr. Fox of meddling in the election, compared him to a twittering tropical bird called a "chachalaca" and rudely told him to "shut up."

The comment did not sit well with many Mexicans, who revere the presidency, if not the president. Mr. Calderón's campaign pounced on the comment, running ads showing [Hugo Chávez](#), the leader of [Venezuela](#), insulting Mr. Fox side by side with Mr. López Obrador's rant. The Calderón campaign also began calling Mr. López Obrador "intolerant" and "a danger to Mexico."

Mr. López Obrador made a second mistake when he decided to skip the first presidential debate in early April. Mr. Calderon, a [Harvard](#)-trained economist, looked the part of a president, sounded well-informed and shot ahead in preference polls.

During the last three weeks of the campaign, Mr. López Obrador was hit with a blizzard of attack ads. Business leaders paid for spots that again used the image of President Chávez of Venezuela to scare voters, saying "Mexico doesn't need a dictator to come out ahead."

Other spots said voting for Mr. López Obrador was equivalent to voting for another economic crisis, like those of 1995 and 1982, in which Mexicans lost most of their savings as the value of the peso plummeted.

Mr. López Obrador struck back, calling his detractors in the business world "white-collar criminals" who used their links to politicians to make money. He also kept up the invective against the "privileges" of the rich, arguing they do not pay taxes and charging the current government was "a committee at the service of a minority."

In his final rally, however, Mr. López Obrador, apparently worried about the attacks, softened his rhetoric and took pains to say he would a careful steward of the economy. "We are not going to act irresponsibly," he said. "We're not going to provoke a crisis."