

Calderon accustomed to beating the odds

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MEXICO CITY - Felipe Calderon's apparent come-from-behind victory in Mexico's presidential election is no surprise to his supporters. After all, they note, few expected him to win his party's nomination over opposition from President Vicente Fox, who had another candidate in mind.

But Calderon won the National Action Party's primary, a victory that earned him the nickname "The Disobedient Son." He then proceeded to distance himself from the president, fought openly with the head of his party, and struggled to find a message that could chink away at his main rival, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who had a seemingly insurmountable 10-point lead in opinion polls.

"I was not the favorite," Calderon said in a huge understatement during a television interview on Monday.

But Calderon proved an able campaigner and a good strategist, and with more than 95 percent of the vote counted, appeared likely to eke out a victory by just under 1 percentage point.

If his election is confirmed after a recount on Wednesday, Calderon would become Mexico's youngest president. Now 43, he would be 44 when sworn into office on Dec. 1.

A lawyer by training, Calderon hails from Morelia, the capital of the state of Michoacan, and comes with a conservative pedigree. He's the son of a PAN party founder, was party president from 1996 to 1999, and served two three-year terms as a PAN congressman. He holds a masters degree in economics from the prestigious Autonomous Technical Institute of Mexico and a masters of public administration from Harvard University.

Married to a former PAN congresswoman, Margarita Zavala, Calderon is the father of three young children who frequently appeared on stage with him as he campaigned.

Officially, Washington had no dog in Mexico's race. But Calderon's campaign message was clearly music to the ears of official Washington. He called for deepening integration with the U.S. economy, pushing for job growth that could slow emigration from Mexico and opening up some of Mexico's energy sector to foreign investment.

In a March interview, however, Calderon said that, like Lopez Obrador, he wants to delay the opening of Mexico's farm sector to U.S. competitors under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Calderon is unabashedly conservative on moral issues. He's opposed to contraception and the morning-after pill, and believes the only acceptable reasons for abortion are cases of rape and incest and when the mother's health is at risk.

Calderon cuts a squeaky-clean image - his other campaign moniker was Mr. Clean Hands - but he's no stranger to the rough and tumble of Mexican politics. In the campaign's final weeks, he fended off allegations of nepotism that seemed likely to derail his bid.

Behind the scenes, Calderon can be gruff. Acquaintances report that he seldom says please. His single-mindedness put off some in his party.

Both Fox and the party's leaders were irritated when he left his post as energy minister in 2004 to run for president. Fox wanted the powerful interior minister, Santiago Creel, to be PAN's candidate, but Calderon beat him handily in the primary.

Calderon was trailing Lopez Obrador badly in the polls until March, when he fired his election staff and undertook a series of attack ads that equated Lopez Obrador to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Calderon may have an easier time than Fox did in pushing his initiatives through Congress. Preliminary counts show that the PAN will have the largest bloc in the legislature - that was not the case for Fox - though far less than a majority.

"Felipe has more political skills than Fox," said Carlos Hernandez, a human resources consultant who voted for Calderon on Sunday precisely because he expected him to show more political moxie than his predecessor.

Still, many expressed surprise that Calderon appeared to have won.

"It's a surprising victory because Calderon will have won over the PRI, the PRD and the PAN," said Jorge Chabat, a political analyst in Mexico City.