

One Election, Two "Winners" For Now...

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I'm the new president.

No, *I'm* the new president.

That's essentially the message from the two grown men vying to run Mexico. It would be an amusing version of a sandbox squabble if there wasn't so much at stake.

In a disturbing replay of the 2000 presidential contest in the United States, Mexicans awakened Monday to discover they do not have a verdict from Sunday's national election on who will succeed **Vicente Fox** as the leader of this nation of more than 100 million people. Words like "recount" and "tribunal" were flying. And behind the scenes, the campaigns spoke ominously of lost ballots, no ballots or tampered ballots.

The New York Times and Chicago Tribune have declared an "electoral crisis," while Mexican commentators have latched onto the phrase "worst case scenario." The headline from one blogger on the Guardian's Web site was equally hyperbolic -- "Grand Theft Mexico."

Campaign Conexión is keeping calm, having lived through one of these just six years ago, when Al Gore and George W. Bush duked it out in Florida for 37 of the longest days of my life. The American Republic survived, in the end. Perhaps Mexico's political pros learned from our 2000 mess, as there has been a thrilling display of political chutzpah down here with conservative Felipe Calderón and leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador each declaring -- repeatedly and in several venues -- that he is the winner.



PAN presidential candidate Felipe Calderon on election night. (AFP/Getty Images)

In a television interview Monday morning, Calderón said that preliminary tallies posted by the electoral commission jibed with his internal counts, revealing him to be ahead by a comfortable margin. For those of you just tuning in, Calderón is a Mike Dukakis type -- a smart, staid technocrat. He has promised to continue the economic policies of

President Fox, who is praised here for at least maintaining economic stability over the past six years, if not generating fabulous wealth for ordinary Mexicans.

López Obrador, on the other hand, has been dubbed the "firebrand" in the race and compared to Venezuela's [Hugo Chavez](#). His campaign platform emphasized a "New Deal" style approach, pouring millions into housing, railroads and timber projects that would create jobs at home.

Not surprisingly, the pugilistic López Obrador took a slightly more aggressive stance Monday, at first saying he would accept the results of the electoral commission, [but then arguing that the commission must realize he leads by 500,000 votes](#). At one point, López Obrador claimed, falsely, that the IFE had promised to announce results Sunday night. And he claimed the reason there wasn't an announcement Sunday was that he had been ahead all along.

Known by his initials, AMLO has been raising the prospect of a stolen election for some time, [as the Chicago Tribune reminded readers today](#). "López Obrador's Democratic Revolutionary Party has warned all along that it could be victimized by electoral fraud. During the campaign, he insisted he would win by a large margin so that authorities would not 'mess' with his victory, just as the PRI allegedly stole the presidency from another left-wing candidate in 1988."



Andres Manuel López Obrador gestures to photographers as he makes his way from his home to his campaign headquarters in Mexico City on Monday. (Reuters))

The two candidates' Web sites, which by law had been pulled down last Thursday for the customary pre-election "quiet time," were humming Monday, oozing confidence through the computer screen regarding their man's certain victory.

The welcome message [on Calderón's home page](#) was easy to understand even if your Spanish isn't great: "Felipe Calderón Presidente de Mexico."

López Obrador, continuing the be-happy theme he rolled out a month ago, [posted a cartoon video](#) of himself climbing atop a victor's stand a la the Olympic medal podium. The narrator cheerfully announces: "Smile, Mexico won. López Obrador is now our president."

Calderón Leads in Early Counts

Thanks to modern technology, everybody on the planet with Internet access could play vote voyeur, watching [the preliminary tally](#) reported by the **Instituto Federal Electoral**, or IFE. All day Monday, the counter gave Calderón a slight edge.

In the past two presidential races, the IFE named a winner on election night, [according to the Dallas Morning News](#), which has prepared information on how a possible recount could unfold.

[The Los Angeles Times reported](#), "Electoral institute President **Luis Carlos Ugalde** announced that a 'quick count' based on a sample of the votes from about 7% of the precincts had produced a result within the margin of error. Only a full count of the more than 40 million estimated votes could determine the winner, he said."

The quick count, completed Sunday night, is a scientific estimate [based on 7,600 representative polling stations](#). After Sunday's quick count, the IFE moved on to a more thorough preliminary count. With 97.5 percent of the preliminary results in, Calderón had 36.36 percent and López Obrador 35.40 percent.

That was welcome news to the markets, which had displayed some jitters prior to Election Day when López Obrador was the man with the Big Mo.

"Investors seized on the news and sharply bid up the prices of Mexican stocks and the value of its currency in early trading today. The Bolsa index gained more than 3 percent and the Mexican peso rose 9 percent against the dollar," according to [a morning update by the New York Times](#).

[Marketwatch](#), the U.S. financial news site, reported that investors had already declared a winner: "The stock market ... felt it had been given sufficient information to assume a Calderón victory. The benchmark Índice de Precios y Cotizaciones jumped 722 points, or 3.8%, to 19,869 in Monday trades. The IPC has risen 11.6% since the start of 2006, placing Mexico among the two best-performing Latin American markets. The exchange-traded S&P Latin America 40 fund gained 3.6 percent Monday."

Markets aside, public and private comments by the campaigns and Mexican analysts suggested the election will not be resolved quickly or calmly. "But if history is any lesson, López Obrador is no Al Gore. He won't walk away from a stolen election without a protest," [writes Chuck Collins](#), a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies who lives in Oaxaca. "His political rise has been characterized by having to respond to dirty tricks. And if anyone is justified in being a 'firebrand' about stolen elections, it is Andres Manuel López Obrador. And the fact that there is a close election, the closest in this country's history, reflects progress in Mexico's transition to

democracy. If there are protests in the coming days, it's because Mexicans demand nothing less than a fair election."

Miami Herald [columnist Andres Oppenheimer](#), calling the uncertainty the "worst case scenario," said Sunday's non-outcome outcome was a "bad omen." Oppenheimer: "If Fox led a minority government that could not pass any major law through Congress, and was thus seen as a somewhat ineffective leader, whoever takes his place will have an even bigger challenge to pass laws and move the country forward."

Don't expect any finality to this election at least until Wednesday, when representatives from the political parties [will be at IFE](#) to observe a "vote-by-vote" count.

Sin Embargo Duda

A common phrase in Mexico, *sin duda* means "without a doubt," and indeed there was one political conclusion everyone seemed to agree on Monday. "The loser of the century," [as fellow blogger Ana Maria Salazar put it](#), was [Roberto Madrazo](#), the nominee of the once-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. "His political career is over," Salazar wrote, "and his loss may have been the final nail in the PRI coffin."

Remember, in 2000 Fox ended 71 years of PRI control. The party [had high hopes](#) Madrazo would put it back in the Los Pinos, the presidential compound.

Most commentators reported few glitches on Election Day, though [more accusations](#) of fraud and irregularities surfaced Monday.

In Estados Unidos

Only a fraction of the eligible Mexican voters living in the United States cast ballots. Some said [they feared reprisals](#). "Of the estimated 4.2 million eligible Mexican voters living abroad, only about 41,000, or 1 percent, requested absentee ballots. Of the 32,632 valid absentee ballots mailed to the Federal Electoral Institute, only 28,335 were from the United States," the Associated Press reported. "Why couldn't they have made it easier for us to vote here?" said Adriana Lopez, 27, a housewife and illegal immigrant in Orange County who wanted to but couldn't vote out of fear to cross the border. "The governments at home are always so corrupt."

For some of the immigrants that decided to cross the border to vote Sunday, it was a long haul, [according to the San Diego Union Tribune](#). "In Tijuana, hundreds waited hours to vote in an outdoor polling place just yards from the U.S. border fence at A.L. Rodríguez International Airport. The snaking line included a large number of legal U.S. residents: former farm workers, young professionals, business owners, students, grandmothers and young couples pushing baby strollers. They came from Los Angeles,

Riverside, San Diego and Chula Vista with ties to all corners of Mexico, from Culiacan to Puerto Vallarta, from Mexico City to Veracruz."