

## Calderón claims win; foe says no

The air of crisis eased in Mexico as unofficial results gave conservative Felipe Calderón a slim presidential victory. But leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador promised to challenge the result.

THE MIAMI HERALD  
Jul. 04, 2006



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**CHALLENGED:** Felipe Calderón celebrates, but results remain unofficial.

Conservative Felipe Calderón claimed an insurmountable lead Monday in Mexico's closest presidential race in modern history, but his populist rival, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, began exploring plans for a potentially lengthy challenge.

Nevertheless, the air of crisis, which had reigned late Sunday when both candidates declared themselves victorious in fiery speeches, seemed to ease as nearly complete but unofficial returns showed Calderón clinging to a victory margin of almost 400,000 votes, or one percentage point.

Mexico's financial markets returned their best performance since May, with the Mexico City stock market rising 4.8 percent and the peso rising 2.2 percent against the dollar.

López Obrador, who had declared his victory "irreversible" on Sunday, issued more conciliatory statements, even as his top aides raised questions about voting irregularities and promised to show "hard evidence" of their victory.

"I'm always going to act in a responsible manner," López Obrador said in an interview with Televisa. "If we lose the election, I will accept it. If we win, even if it's by one or two votes, I am going to defend the triumph."

**SHADES OF FLORIDA**

The standoff recalled the U.S. presidential election in 2000, which was decided only after the U.S. Supreme Court stepped in to stop a recount in Florida. There are no hanging chads or butterfly ballots in Mexico, but as in Florida six years ago, Mexicans are fighting over discarded ballots and this country's version of absentee votes.

With more than 98 percent of the votes counted, Calderón was ahead 36.4 percent to López Obrador's 35.4 percent, giving him a margin of about 385,000 votes.

In a testy interview on the Televisa channel, Calderón said most of the remaining votes to be counted were from northern states where his National Action Party, or PAN, dominates. He said there were simply not enough votes remaining to reverse the results.

"We won 1-0, but we won," he said.

Calderón called his victory "irreversible" -- the same phrase López Obrador used late Sunday night when exit polls and incomplete returns suggested a technical tie. López Obrador belongs to the Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD.

## **RECOUNT PLANNED**

The final call rests with the Federal Electoral Institute. A recount begins Wednesday and could drag on for several days. Any challenges have to be turned in by Sunday, officials said. In the event that irregularities are found, the entire election results could be appealed to an election tribunal that doesn't have to rule before Sept. 2.

In an interview with McClatchy Newspapers, PRD spokesman Gerardo Fernández explained the rationale for an official contest.

He said the PRD carried populous Mexico City and 16 of 31 states -- among them Mexico, Veracruz and Tabasco. Combined, those areas encompass more than 30 percent of Mexico's population. The PRD carried three of the five most populous regions and 155 of 300 voting districts, Fernández said.

"If that isn't sufficient, we have facts that show our victory," he said. Asked to elaborate, Fernández cited internal polls showing the PRD winning by margins not reflected in the preliminary results reached Monday.

Fernández also pointed to various voting discrepancies, including discarded ballots, but he stopped short of saying there was outright fraud, referring instead to various "errors and inconsistencies."

## **PAINFUL HISTORY**

PRD supporters have lost a close presidential election once before, in 1988, when the election commission's computers -- controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI -- suffered an hours-long failure. During that failure, National Democratic Front candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas saw his lead disappear. The winner of that election was the PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari, officially with 50.7 percent of the vote. Cárdenas went on to found the PRD.

A PAN victory would also be a painful reminder for López Obrador of the 1994 governor's race in his home state of Tabasco, where he lost by a narrow margin to the PRI's current presidential candidate, Roberto Madrazo. López Obrador's supporters claimed fraud in that outcome.

## **POSITIVE NEWS**

Adding to the PAN's good news, election results show it won all three governors' races on Sunday's ballot and became the largest bloc in the Mexican Congress, even though Congress is still likely to remain a stumbling block to the next president.

Preliminary vote totals show that, as expected, Calderón cleaned house in the wealthy, industrialized north, winning nine of 11 states, and dominated the central west heartland by carrying five of those six states.

López Obrador dominated the center of the country, winning five of its six states and sprawling Mexico City, along with seven of the eight southern states. One southern state, Campeche, was still too close to call. The PRI did not win a single state in the presidential race, the preliminary results show.

## **REGIONALLY DIVIDED**

Roderic Camp, the author of 20 books on Mexico, said Sunday's vote showed as never before the fault line between the country's poor rural south and the wealthier, industrialized north.

"I believe this is the most regionally divided election that I can recall in recent memory," said Camp, a professor at California's Claremont McKenna College. "Historically, the PRD and PAN are regional parties that do well in certain areas and can't get a single member of Congress elected in other areas."

The United States, which has deep cultural and business ties to Mexico, has a major stake in the outcome of the election, but Bush administration officials stayed on the sidelines.

"The transparent process of reviewing ballots is also a fundamental tenet of democratic government," U.S. Ambassador Tony Garza said late Sunday. "I am convinced Mexicans will wait patiently and prudently as the Federal Electoral Institute reviews today's voting records."