

# Mexican election officials review vote

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**MEXICO CITY** - A review of Mexico's closest presidential race in history Wednesday is a key test for an electoral system that helped reverse decades of ballot-rigging and has been championed as an example for emerging democracies.

A preliminary count of Sunday's election showed Felipe Calderon, of the conservative ruling National Action Party, leading by just 1 percentage point over leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Democratic Revolutionary Party.

Because of the closeness of the race, however, the Federal Electoral Institute won't declare a winner until completing a review required by law that begins Wednesday and could take days.

The count will be crucial to proving the election was clean in a nation that emerged only six years ago from 71 years of one-party rule sustained by widespread vote-rigging.

"Such a close race is a nightmare scenario," said Ted Lewis, an election observer for the San Francisco-based Global Exchange. "If the ruling party wins by a hair, a lot of people will jump to the conclusion that something is amiss."

Lopez Obrador, a former Mexico City mayor with fervent support among the poor, has claimed the preliminary count was manipulated and his party has demanded a ballot-by-ballot recount. His claims have stoked fears of violent protests and raised the specter of a showdown reminiscent of the Florida recount in the 2000 U.S. presidential race.

It was unclear if electoral officials would meet the party's demands. Mexican law allows for a manual recount only if the sealed packages of ballots have been tampered with, or if the tallies are obviously miscalculated, wrongly filled out or illegible.

At the close of voting Sunday, volunteers at tens of thousands of polling places counted the ballots in each box and attached a report. Under election law, the electoral institute will review those ballot-box totals to compile the official results.

Luis Carlos Ugalde, president of the electoral institute, suggested there would not be a major recount. "In exceptional cases, you can open the electoral package but ... the votes were already counted Sunday in the presence of the parties," he said.

Lopez Obrador's party has claimed some votes were recorded twice and that 3 million of the 41 million ballots cast Sunday were "missing." But electoral officials said Tuesday that such ballots were set aside because they were marked incorrectly or appeared invalid. They said the votes would be examined during Wednesday's review - and counted if valid.

"The entire handling of the preliminary count was irregular," Lopez Obrador told Mexico's TV Azteca in a late-night interview Tuesday. "We are convinced that we won and we're going to prove it."

Ugaldo said about 2.6 million "inconsistent" votes were not included in the preliminary count. If all were validated, Calderon would still lead by 0.64 percent, he added.

For decades, Mexico's elections were rigged to ensure victory for the Institutional Revolutionary party, or PRI - fraud that allegedly included the 1988 presidential count in which a computer crash was blamed for a stunning turnaround that ensured another six years in power for the party.

Fears of such fraud eased after the Federal Electoral Institute was founded in the 1990s. The autonomous institute oversaw President Vicente Fox's defeat of the PRI in 2000 and has been praised as a world-class electoral body, advising emerging democracies including Iraq and Haiti.

PRI presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo finished a distant third in Sunday's elections. Party leader Mariano Palacios announced Tuesday he would step down, saying the PRI "will change its path to continue forward."

Despite the electoral reforms, conspiracy theories are easily awakened in Mexico.

"It's very suspicious," said Miguel Angel Bobadilla, 33, an orange juice seller in Mexico City who voted for Lopez Obrador. "It has been three days since the election, and they still haven't declared a winner."

The former mayor has inspired a passionate following among the poor with promises to distribute Mexico's wealth more equitably and has a proven ability to rally huge political marches. He has not called for any demonstrations since the election, although his supporters staged scattered, peaceful protests Tuesday.

"I voted because I believed in democracy in this country. But it's a fraud," said Angelica Lopez, 41, shouting pro-Lopez Obrador slogans while blocking a road in Mexico City's historic center.

Interior Secretary Carlos Abascal said the Fox government "does not endorse the victory of anyone" and was waiting for electoral officials to name a winner.

But political analyst Jose Antonio Crespo said the electoral institute must be scrupulous in its review to dispel concerns that some of its officials are aligned with the ruling party.

"I am worried," Crespo said. "All the players must tread very carefully or this situation could escalate out of control."