

Mexican vote in limbo

Both presidential candidates claim victory in Sunday's vote. A recount begins Wednesday.

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MEXICO CITY – Three days after the polls closed, Mexico is in political limbo - with the presidential vote still too close to call, and the two top candidates claiming victory.

The standoff, reminiscent of the Bush-Gore election aftermath in 2000, raises the prospect of protests and court challenges that could take weeks to resolve. It could also further polarize a divided electorate after months of negative campaigning.

With returns from more than 98 percent of polling stations in at press time, conservative candidate Felipe Calderón had a 1-percentage-point lead over left-leaning Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has called for a recount to find what he believes are millions of missing votes.

Preliminary official results are expected Wednesday - at which point a recount is set to begin. By law, this process will go on day and night until a final result is reached.

Mr. Obrador would have to see a dramatic swing in the remaining polling stations, or a vast discrepancy in the recount to catch up - but still, Luis Carlos Ugalde, President of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), has refused to call the election, warning that the race is still too close.

This has not, however, stopped the candidates themselves from calling it.

"According to our statistics, we have won the presidency," Obrador roared Sunday night. "The triumph is irreversible."

Just over half an hour later, Mr. Calderón of the ruling National Action Party (PAN) announced that "there is no doubt we have won."

On Monday, as Calderón's margin began to widen slightly, Obrador said some 3 million votes may have been lost and that his Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) would use every legal means to challenge irregularities, vote manipulation, and fraud.

Parties have until Thursday to allege irregularities at polling places and until early next week to dispute the counts. Such challenges go to the independent Federal Electoral Tribunal, which has until Sept. 6 to certify the presidential winner.

Asked about mobilizing his supporters to take to the streets, Obrador refused to answer. But such a reaction would not be a first for him. In 1994 after losing a hotly contested race for governor in his home state of Tabasco, Obrador and his supporters called for mass demonstrations, shutting down the state's oil wells, clashing with police, and paralyzing the elected government.

President Vicente Fox, who will end his single six-year term at the end of the year, urged calm. "It is the responsibility of all of the political actors to follow the law and respect the time [IFE] needs to announce the election results," he said.

The dead-heat is unprecedented in a country that suffered rigged elections for decades, and some saw the outcome in a positive light. "We don't have a clear winner, but that is a sign of clean elections. It's just like in any other democracy - Germany or Italy - where votes have to be

counted carefully and every vote counts," says Ana Paula Ordorica, a political columnist for the Excelsior newspaper.

Whoever wins, says Ms. Ordorica, will have to recognize that the election results show Mexico is "a divided country in every aspect." She says the winning party members will "have to realize that only a third of the population shares their vision, and so they need to look for more inclusive policies."

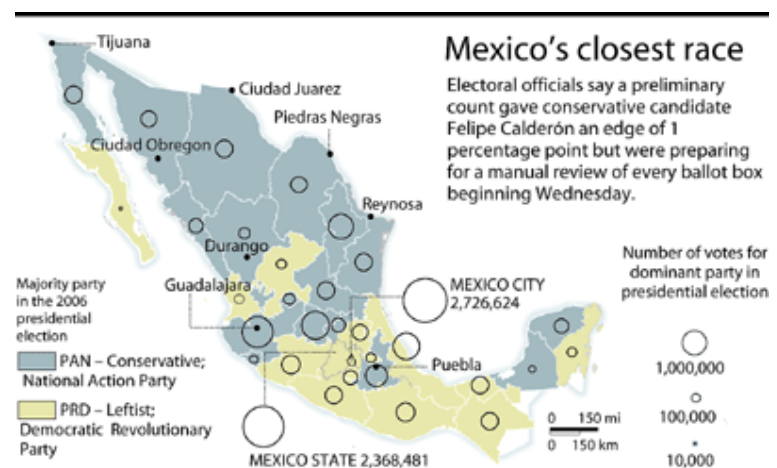
Other observers wonder how Mexico's institutions would handle a protracted legal battle. Such a close election, "...would be a difficult test for any democracy," says Robert Pastor, director of the Center for Democracy and Election Management at American University in Washington. "It's one thing in an advanced democracy like the US [Mexico] is still a very new democracy. I don't think they are used to institutional uncertainty."

A legal challenge to the outcome would be the first real test of Mexico's new electoral system, which has transformed itself from one of the region's most disreputable to an internationally admired model. By many accounts, IFE is among the world's most professional electoral commissions.

"If you had not had [IFE], there would have been 32 exit polls, and so-called quick counts by the parties, all over the map, with everyone picking and choosing [the count that suited them] and accusing everyone else of fraud," says Mr. Pastor.

Still, the public perception of the race's legitimacy could depend more on the candidates themselves than the way in which any sort of legal challenge unfolds, says Laura Freeman, a Mexico associate for the Washington Office on Latin America think tank. She says she was disappointed by the candidates' declarations of victory, only moments after the race was declared too tight to call. "They get people all hyped up, laying the groundwork for voters to become disillusioned," she says. They might think "that maybe in the election there were irregularities ... they might feel like they are getting lied to again."

"I want to believe IFE knows what it is doing," says Maria Hernandez, an ice cream vendor in downtown Mexico City and an avid Obrador supporter. "But I have a sneaking feeling there is massive cheating afoot."



SOURCES: AP RESEARCH; MEXICAN FEDERAL ELECTORAL INSTITUTE; AP