

Suspense Grows as Vote Count in Mexico Race Wraps Up

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MEXICO CITY, July 5 — [Mexico](#) endured a new cycle of suspense on Wednesday as the authorities tabulated their final official count of votes from Sunday's disputed presidential election, in which preliminary results separated the candidates by less than one percent.

With tallies taken from about 93 percent of the polling places, the electoral authorities reported that the count had tilted toward the leftist candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who had 36 percent of the vote, while the conservative candidate, Felipe Calderón, had 35 percent.

But with a race this close, elections officials said they would not announce a winner until all the tally sheets had been counted. As the night wore on, Mr. López Obrador's lead steadily narrowed as tallies arrived from the northwestern states that voted heavily in favor of Mr. Calderón. Even some of Mr. Lopez Obrador's advisers acknowledged privately that they were not confident their candidate's lead would hold.

The final tally, usually little more than a formality, turned into another cliffhanger of a moment in the most competitive presidential race in Mexican history. As the count ticked along on newspaper Web sites into the night, the president of the electoral institute said he would announce the final results as soon as he had them, no matter the hour.

Leaders of the Calderón campaign were huddled at their party headquarters. Officials from Mr. López Obrador's campaign remained at the electoral institute, making clear they would not recognize the results until there was a vote-by-vote recount.

The expectation among election observers was that any result would again be challenged, this time in an electoral court.

Security was increased around the presidential palace and the electoral institute, where authorities expected protests if the final results did not go in Mr. López Obrador's favor.

Still, for most of the day the official tallies indicated a shift from the preliminary count, which had shown Mr. Calderón in the lead from the beginning, and had ended giving him a feather-thin margin, 0.6 percent.

The official count began amid a volatile political storm kicked up Tuesday by the announcement by federal electoral authorities that some three million votes went untabulated in the preliminary count; by demands from Mr. López Obrador for a vote-by-vote recount; and by objections to those demands from the government.

Mr. Calderón, backed by big business and President Vicente Fox, appeared before the news media to repeat his claims of victory. Mr. López Obrador, the former mayor of Mexico City who has the support of the poor, held his own news conference to restate his case that the election had been rigged.

He said his campaign had uncovered irregularities at tens of thousands of polling places. Among them, he said, there were polls where the numbers of votes exceeded either the numbers of registered voters or the numbers of ballots. He said that in some cases votes from a single polling place had been tabulated several times.

"So what are we asking for?" Mr. López Obrador said. "That they conduct a full revision, poll by poll. We will act responsibly, as always. But we are asking the authorities to help clear up any doubts, to review inconsistencies and to not allow the will of the citizens to be violated."

His opponent, Mr. Calderón, a [Harvard](#)-educated former energy minister, said he felt confident that the final tally would confirm the preliminary count. Mr. Calderón said his campaign had reviewed all the tally sheets from the 130,800 polling places. According to their count, he said, he would win. "We demand respect for the law, and respect for the vote," Mr. Calderón said.

Luis Carlos Ugalde, the president of the Federal Electoral Institute, or I.F.E., defended his agency against a growing chorus of concerns. He pointed out that international observers had declared the vote the most transparent in Mexican history. The law, he said, did not allow the agency to recount every ballot.

Still, Mr. Ugalde acknowledged in a news conference that mistakes in the preliminary tabulation could have been made. If a candidate was still dissatisfied at the end of the official count, he said, his campaign would have four days to present a complaint to an electoral tribunal.

At 300 district election offices across the country, the final results were tallied in a process overseen by an election board made up mostly of ordinary citizens. It was far short of the vote-by-vote count demanded by Mr. López Obrador.

The board was to review the tally sheets from each box of ballots. Only in cases where the tally sheets are illegible, where there appear to be mistakes in the count or where there is evidence of tampering could the board recount the ballots.

Visits to a few district offices in the industrial city of Guadalajara, a stronghold of Mr. Calderón's National Action Party, offered a glimpse of the tensions in the process, and the potential for errors and irregularities in the initial tabulation.

Six ballot boxes were opened for a recount in District 8 because of errors on the tally sheets. In every case, the preliminary tallies turned out to be wrong.

In one case, polling workers had miscounted so badly that they gave 100 extra votes to a third candidate, Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and doubled the 235 votes for Mr. Calderón. Mr. López Obrador's count was not affected.

"They should open them all because in the six they opened, there were problems," said Francisco Mares, a 25-year-old lawyer who represented Mr. López Obrador's party at the district.

At District 11, another representative for Mr. López Obrador, Rocio Miranda Luévanos, demanded a recount every time results from a new tally sheet were read. But the chairman of the board refused.

Then, the board found a flaw on one of the tally sheets, and the board chairman ordered the box opened.

The secretary of the seven-member board tore open the envelope and extracted the brown-rimmed ballots. He separated them into piles on a small table as the board members and party representatives crowded around him.

The ballots bore the fingerprints of Mexico's burgeoning, if messy, democracy. The voters had made their marks with black crayons in any variety of ways — huge smeared crosses, neat checks, circles, smudges.

The secretary, Salvador de la Mora, counted the ballots one by one in each pile. Mr. López Obrador picked up six votes. Mr. Calderón lost one. Mr. Madrazo lost 14 votes.

Supporters of Mr. López Obrador, who had demanded all the votes be recounted, shook their heads.

"I am lamenting the lack of certainty that one would expect from an institution like the Federal Electoral Institute," said Rosa Guadalupe Espinosa Llamas, 42, who had been a congressional candidate for Mr. López Obrador's Party of the Democratic Revolution. "In one packet there we recuperated 10 votes. They should open them all."