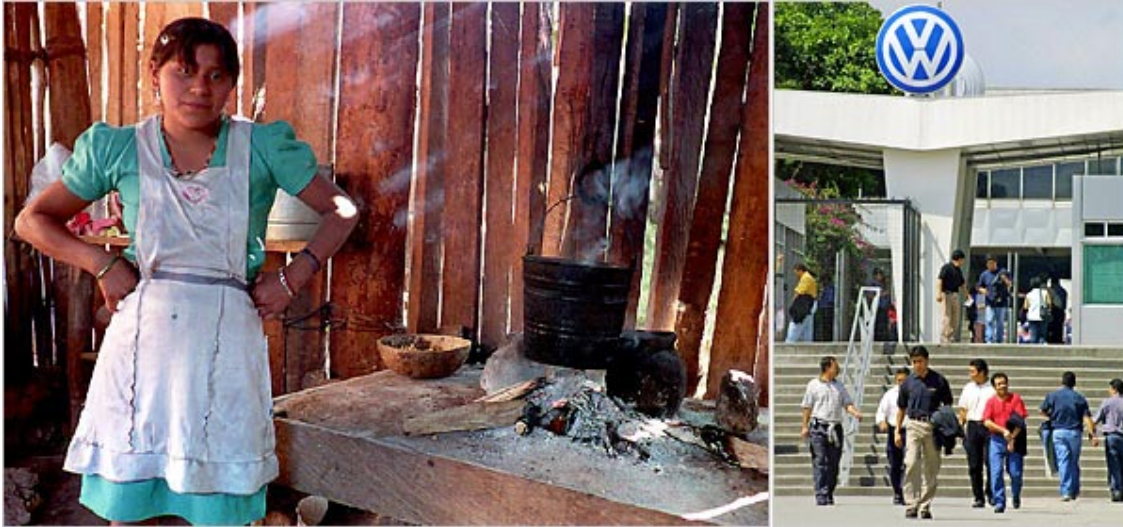


Mexico Faces Its Own Red-Blue Standoff



Omar Torres/Agence France-Presse -- Getty Images, left; Rafael Duran/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

SOUTH VS. NORTH In Chiapas in the south, where leftists did well in last weekend's election, rural poverty is common, and some villages lack electricity. Mexico's conservatives did well in areas near the United States, where free trade promotes industrial jobs.

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NO matter who wins the election in Mexico, where the leftist and conservative candidates are locked in a legal battle over the outcome, the voters have pulled the curtain back on a new political landscape for the country. In the end, who won may not be nearly as important as who lost. The candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled the country with an iron hand for 70 years, did not win a single state. Worse, the P.R.I., as the party is known, lost its hold on Congress, slipping from the largest faction to third largest.

In short, the declining former ruling party finally crashed and burned. And from the wreckage have risen two invigorated, growing — and quite evenly matched — parties, [Felipe Calderón's](#) National Action Party, or P.A.N., and [Andrés Manuel López Obrador's](#) Party of the Democratic Revolution, the P.R.D.

"What's happened, I think, is that in fact we have a new panorama," said Daniel Lund, a pollster and political analyst. "Two parties have emerged that are not the dual heirs of the P.R.I."

And they look a lot like the [Republicans](#) and [Democrats](#) or Britain's Tories and Labor.

The two parties are roughly divided along the left-right lines that appear throughout Latin America today. The right supports free trade and privatization; the left opposes globalization and favors more welfare programs. But they are not so much at odds on the country's broad needs and goals — national pride, a rate of development that matches that of countries like Brazil and Chile, and avenues by which the poor can move upward.

One striking feature is a split along regional lines. Mr. Calderón took most of the northern states, while Mr. López Obrador dominated the central and southern states. So Mexico's new map has its own version of America's red state-blue state phenomenon, and it is so evenly balanced that the presidential race produced a virtual tie.

Last week, when Mr. Calderón was declared the victor by a margin of less than 1 percent of the vote and Mr. López Obrador vowed to fight in the courts for a recount, the stalemate raised the prospect of more polarization — and, perhaps, a bitter stalemate.

The new map depicts an industrialized north, where business ties to the United States have played an enormous role in the rise of the right-leaning, conservative party, and a more agricultural south that is a hotbed of leftist discontent and anti-globalization sentiment. Political scientists say this has a little to do with history and a lot to do with economics.

For starters, the benefits of the 1994 free trade agreement with the United States and Canada have never trickled down to southern states like Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero. While the economy in the north has grown at 4.5 percent a year, the southern states have barely grown 1 percent each year. They remain largely agricultural and poor, with big indigenous populations.

It was in Chiapas in 1994 that the Zapatista rebels, mostly descendants of Mayan Indians, rose up and became heroes for opponents of globalization everywhere.

In the north, meanwhile, border cities have swollen as migrants continue their inexorable march northward, and maquiladoras, the factories that assemble products for American companies, spring up like wildflowers along the Rio Grande and the rest of the border.

Even in agriculture there is a clear difference. The south holds on to the old system of ejidos, or cooperative farms, that was established after the 1910 revolution. Most farmers produce only for their own consumption or a little for the local market.

The north, however, is dominated by large modern farms, much like those in California, producing everything from tomatoes to chiles for export. Many people from the south are moving north to work as pickers, because the pay is better.

The P.A.N. has its roots in the north. Founded in 1926, it served as a haven there for those fed up with the P.R.I. machine, which was little more than a dictatorship in democratic clothing. The P.A.N. won its first governorship in the north, in the late 1980's, and began the long march to power that led to the victory in 2000 by its candidate, Vicente Fox.

Now, that march is being followed by the emergence of a vigorous two-party system. Even if he ultimately loses, Mr. López Obrador has united his party's warring factions and doubled its presence in Congress. "Andrés Manuel is the P.R.D.," said Federico Arreola, a former columnist and newspaper owner who worked on the López Obrador campaign.

The P.R.D.'s ability to dislodge the old rulers of the P.R.I. in the south crystallized only in the late 1990's, when Mr. López Obrador, the national chairman of his party, tapped longstanding anger over the oppressive tactics of the old ruling party. He won a term as mayor of Mexico City in 2000, and last year the party won the governorship of Guerrero.

Now, with the P.R.I. unraveling, its members have been drifting into the other two parties. In the south, they have flocked to Mr. López Obrador, who has promised to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, subsidize farmers, fix prices for corn and beans, cut

prices for energy, spend more on welfare programs, and build refineries, trains and roads to provide jobs.

The biggest question now is whether the two main parties can learn to work together after a divisive election. During Mr. Fox's six-year term, the P.R.I. sabotaged most of his reforms in Congress.

In the new landscape, such tactics from whichever side loses the presidency could paralyze Mexico's development and spur an even greater flood of immigrants to the United States. Multiparty democracy is young here, the idea of bipartisan cooperation has yet to take root, and the prospect that a razor-thin election will yield only partisanship already scares some Mexicans.

"We cannot have another six years of a country in gridlock," said Rossana Fuentes Berain, the editor of the Spanish-language Foreign Affairs.