

Winning is just the half of it in Mexico

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The July 2 presidential election in Mexico isn't over yet, but one thing matters more than who won: Just how Felipe Calderón, the declared winner, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who's challenging the official results, finish out the election process.

The rest of Latin America, as well as the United States, have a strong stake in whether Mexico's fragile and still-emerging democracy can maintain the integrity of its voting system and in electoral disputes. The region's history of leaders both left and right trying to hijack elections to stay in power needs to become history. Mexico can help lead the way.

That means Mexicans must respect the authority of their two electoral bodies: the Federal Electoral Institute, which counts the votes and has a favorable reputation; and the Federal Electoral Tribunal, which declares the winner by Sept. 6 and hears legal challenges to the vote. The tribunal already has a solid track record of overturning local elections found fraudulent.

Both candidates have not been shining lights in this respect.

Given his apparent tortilla-thin victory, Mr. Calderón should not be so dismissive of Mr. López Obrador's right to a legal challenge. Nor should he triumph himself as president-elect until that title is granted. Winning by less than one percentage point should give anyone pause to wait for electoral certainty.

The greater disrespect and possible danger comes from López Obrador's postelection words and actions. He quickly accused the Federal Electoral Institute of "manipulating" the results, even though European Union observers saw no major irregularities. He suggests that he might take the final decision of the special elections court to the Supreme Court, even though that's legally dubious under the Constitution.

Most of all, he hopes large protests will persuade these two nonpolitical institutions to act on his behalf. At a giant rally in the capital on Saturday, he declared: "We have enough strength to validate our democracy using only peaceful demonstrations."

But can he ensure his followers will be peaceful? (A nationwide rally is planned July 16.) He also warned: "If there is no democracy, there can be no stability." In 1994, his followers seized oil wells in his state after he lost a race for governor.

López Obrador walks a fine line with such statements. As leader of the leftist coalition, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), he must act strongly to keep alive the hope of Mexico's poor that they have a stake in a democracy and their candidates can win. Yet he risks alienating many Mexicans from the PRD and his own possible presidential victory in 2012 if he destabilizes the country now by ultimately ignoring a possible victory for Calderón.

Calderón has wisely offered to include some opposition figures in his cabinet. He could go further by adopting some PRD policies. López Obrador must make clear that protests are not an implied threat of violence and that he will accept the official declaration.

Mexico faces weeks of political uncertainty. Its few democratic institutions are at risk. Let this time be a chance for both men to act as statesmen.