

# Mexico Recount Begins, and Protests Go On

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ZAPOPAN, [Mexico](#), Aug. 9 — An election official was quickly dealing out ballots like giant cards on a felt-covered table on Wednesday when Humberto Mejía's hand shot into the stack like a striking snake. "Wait!" the lawyer for the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution cried.

He had spotted a ballot for the leftist candidate, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), that had mistakenly been put with the ballots for his conservative rival, [Felipe Calderón](#). "We've only counted two polling places this morning," Mr. Mejía said, "and I have found two more votes for Andrés Manuel."

It may not seem like much, but since Mr. Calderón won an official tally last month by just 243,000 of 41 million votes cast — a margin of less than one percentage point — every last vote counts.

Across Mexico, judges, election officials and party representatives began the slow process of recounting hundreds of thousands of ballots from about 12,000 polling places. More than 180 magistrates oversaw the opening of packets containing ballots from the July 2 election that are to be counted again in 149 of 300 voting districts and 25 of the 32 states.

It is an exercise that could well determine the course of the country. Mr. López Obrador and his supporters have stepped up their campaign of civil disobedience to demand a recount in all 130,000 polling places and are threatening to make it difficult for Mr. Calderón to govern if they do not get their way.

On Wednesday, hundreds of leftists blocked entrances to banks in Mexico City, a day after taking over toll booths on highways leading out of the capital.

With the political crisis deepening, Mexicans of all political stripes are hoping the partial recount will either put to rest Mr. López Obrador's claims of widespread fraud or lend them credence, which might force the court to order a wider recount.

On Saturday, a seven-member electoral tribunal charged with ratifying the results and declaring a president-elect rejected Mr. López Obrador's claim that there were enough irregularities in the election to warrant recounting all the ballots. The narrow ruling left the judges little leeway to order more ballot boxes opened, though it is still possible, election law experts said.

Instead, the judges ordered the ballot boxes opened in about 9 percent of the polling places after they concluded that Mr. López Obrador had presented evidence of arithmetical errors and, in some cases, fraud.

Mr. López Obrador reacted angrily, saying the judges should "rectify their decision." He announced Monday he was no longer staging marches solely to demand a recount but "to change this reality of injustice and oppression that has done so much damage to the country."

A former Mexico City mayor, he has complained that the playing field was tilted against him, with President Vicente Fox campaigning against him and business tycoons paying for illegal attack advertisements.

He has also said that poll workers, who are chosen at random like jurors, purposefully padded Mr. Calderón's totals in northern states, where the conservative National Action Party and the moderate Institutional Revolutionary Party joined forces to try to stop Mr. López Obrador from gaining power.

Mr. Calderón says that his victory is legitimate and that any recount is unnecessary and likely to do more harm than good.

Experts on election law said that while the partial recount was far less than Mr. López Obrador had wanted, it indicated a major concession to his party. What is more, counting ballots a second time in nearly 12,000 polling places could unearth a raft of errors that would give more leverage to proponents of a completely new tally.

"It will tell us if it is true or not that there was a manipulation of the figures," said Lorenzo Córdova, a law professor who specializes in Mexican electoral statutes.

John Ackerman, another election law professor in Mexico City, said, "Any significant move of the votes and there would be a major social push to expand the recount."

But election-law experts said the electoral tribunal would have a hard time justifying widening the recount to include other polling places because of the way its members wrote their ruling.

In essence, the ruling says ballots should not be recounted simply because a political party has suspicions that the tally was manipulated; there must be empirical evidence. The judges would have to alter that precedent to order a wider recount.

"It's not likely, but it's possible," Mr. Córdova said.

Most experts agree that the partial recount is unlikely to change the results, unless Mr. López Obrador's theory of widespread fraud is correct. Though the margin between the two candidates is only 240,000 votes, there would have to be major shifts in all 12,000 polling places in favor of Mr. López Obrador to close that gap.

At the Sixth Election District in Jalisco, the magnitude of even a partial re-tallying of votes was evident. After five hours of work, Magistrate José Manuel Mojica, a soft-spoken avuncular man with gray hair and mustache, had managed to get through only 3 of the 247 packets to be opened.

The judge sat at a green covered table with two lawyers, one representing Mr. López Obrador and one Mr. Calderón, while the head of the election district and one of the local board members counted ballots by hand. A secretary took notes.

Several problems arose, causing the judge to rub his forehead. In one polling place, 100 fewer ballots were accounted for than were delivered to the poll workers. "I'm missing a lot of ballots," the judge told the lawyers.

At another polling place, two null ballots, on which more than one candidate had been marked, were included in the stack for Mr. Calderón, a point the lawyer for Mr. López Obrador quickly pointed out.

What was more, the envelope that was supposed to hold null ballots was missing from the packet. It was found in the envelope containing ballots from an adjoining polling place.

The judge also had to deal with bickering between the lawyers about whether some ballots were valid. Marked with inky crayons and folded, the ink sometimes rubs off on another candidate's check box. The lawyers sparred over the validity of several of those ballots, until Magistrate Mojica said he would leave it to the tribunal to decide.

All told, after five hours of work, Mr. Mejía had discovered two votes for Mr. López Obrador and one null ballot that had been mistakenly counted for Mr. Calderón, a potential shift of three votes.

As the afternoon wore on, the only thing certain was sore fingers for the election officials charged with counting. The tribunal ordered the count finished by Sunday, and that was beginning to look like too little time to some involved.

"It's very hard," said Yolanda Hernández, the chairwoman of the board of District 6. "And we've just begun."