

Felipe Calderón: A Politician at Birth

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MEXICO CITY, Sept. 5 — It was more than 30 years ago that a seventh-grade history teacher in Morelia, a quaint colonial city in central [Mexico](#), went around the room surveying the career plans of his 12-year-old pupils.

There were future doctors, lawyers and teachers in the room; no surprise, as this was the city's leading school. But one boy — chubby, serious, with a wild mane of hair — announced that day that he wanted to be president of Mexico.

Alma Delia Álvarez Zamudio, a classmate who became a teacher, remembers the moment well. “We all said normal jobs but Felipe surprised us all,” she recalled. “He said it like he knew it was going to happen. He said, ‘presidente de la república.’ ”

As of Tuesday, Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa, 44, was on his way to becoming just that, one of Mexico's youngest presidents.

Mr. Calderón narrowly won victory in the July 2 presidential election and then withstood a challenge from his main opponent, the leftist [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#). On Tuesday morning, the country's highest electoral tribunal officially declared him the victor. On Dec. 1, he will take office.

To call the balding and bespectacled Mr. Calderón a career politician would be something of an understatement. His first campaign, his family likes to say, came in 1962 when he was still in the womb. It was a governor's race in Michoacán State that his father, Luis Calderón Vega, a prominent political activist who helped found the National Action Party, was managing. His pregnant mother was pitching in, as well.

There were other races, many others, all of them family affairs. Young Felipe handed out leaflets when other children were out playing ball. He rode around in a truck with loudspeakers when his contemporaries were hanging out in the park.

And again and again, his father's National Action Party, or PAN, with its pro-business and free market positions, lost.

Mr. Calderón, a studious, serious boy who grew up to be a man not all that different, was teased at school for trying to unseat the powerful ruling party, which in those days ruled Mexico with an iron fist. His father soothed him by explaining that democracy was a long-term affair.

It took decades, actually, until 2000, when Vicente Fox's presidential victory ended 71 years of single-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

Mr. Calderón was one of the many who made that defining moment possible. He used to round up neighborhood children to monitor polling stations to catch the ruling party as it stole elections. Eventually, his name began to appear on the ballot, always as a proud PAN-ista.

By the time Mr. Calderón was 26, he was a member of the municipal assembly in Mexico City. He was a member of Congress before he hit 30 and chairman of PAN at 34.

He even found his wife in the party, marrying Margarita Zavala, a PAN congresswoman. They have three children. Not surprising at all to those who know him, he proposed to her during a campaign swing.

After a stint as a graduate student at the Kennedy School of Government at [Harvard](#) in 1999, Mr. Calderón served briefly as Mr. Fox's energy minister. He then initiated his own bid for the presidency, outflanking Mr. Fox's handpicked candidate, Santiago Creel, the former interior minister, in a November primary.

"He was always preparing for this," said Juan Luis Calderón Hinojosa, one of Mr. Calderón's four siblings and an aspiring politician himself. "It's no surprise."

There are those who say Mr. Calderón rose up the political ladder too quickly, experiencing little of the real Mexico along the way. In

the campaign, Mr. López Obrador painted him as a candidate of the rich and powerful, disconnected from the everyday struggles of Mexicans.

But some of those who grew up with Mr. Calderón disagree with the portrayal of him as a rich kid.

They say that his childhood home, where his mother, Carmen Hinojosa, still lives, is a modest dwelling not far from Morelia's main square, and that when he was not out politicking, young Felipe was kicking a soccer ball or playing the guitar. He did not have particular luck with girls, friends recalled, and his athletic prowess was modest. He attended church regularly, walking with his family to a modest chapel.

"He was just one of the guys," said Ignacio Alvarado Laris, a childhood friend.

Although his experience in the private sector was limited, Felipe spent a year in a youth group that helped the area's poor people by painting their houses and even digging latrines, friends and family recalled. Local politics, though, was his main pastime.

"In the rallies he attended as a boy, people were wearing sombreros, not suits," said Luis Mejía Guzmán, a PAN activist and family friend.

Mr. Mejía notes that Mr. Calderón learned politics the hard way, by consistently seeing candidates he supported come up short.

"Felipe knows how to struggle," he said. "His political life hasn't been easy. In campaign after campaign, his side didn't stand a chance."

Even his presidential victory was by a hair, less than 1 percent of the vote.

Mr. López Obrador, a former mayor of Mexico City and spokesman for the country's lower classes, has protested Mr. Calderón's win — by 243,000 votes out of 41 million cast — and vowed to challenge his administration for the next six years. Tuesday's decision officially

affirmed the validity of the election, but the protests seem likely to continue.

In Michoacán State, Mr. Calderón's home turf, some of Mr. López Obrador's backers continue to camp out in protest in the main square of Morelia. "I'd be very proud to have a president from Michoacán, but there's something more important than that," said one protester, Francisco Garcidueñas. "We want a president who really won the election."

So Mr. Calderón's struggle continues, even now that his childhood dream has come true.