

The 2009 Elections Mexico's New Political Situation

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Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard (left) and State of Mexico Governor Enrique Peña Nieto (right) are the two front-runners for the 2012 presidential race.

Last July's elections for the federal Congress and a few state and municipal governments marked a turning point in President Felipe Calderón's administration. It was widely accepted that this was going to be a difficult test for his government. In fact, large parts of the public thought it would be key for measuring the degree of support for the policies implemented over the last three years and for pinpointing the balance of forces among the parties in the road toward the 2012 presidential race.

The outcome confirms that in Mexico, what are called divided governments, where the first executive does not have a majority in Congress, which began in 1997 when for the first time the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) did not get a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, are here to stay.

That is, it is not likely that the president's party will again control the majority of the legislature.

In light of last July's results, the presidential party's lack of firm control over the Chamber of Deputies is sharpened by the fact that the opposition coalition will have an absolute majority. The PRI's own high vote count and its alliance with the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) have created an unprecedented political situation. For the first time, the president not only does not have a majority in the lower chamber, but he is also facing a coherent political force capable of blocking his bills and of passing laws and making decisions for itself. This is clear when we look at each party's vote and the number of seats obtained both through district and proportional representation (see table 1).

We can read this new relationship of forces in the Chamber of Deputies in different ways. The first and most obvious is that government performance over the last three years has

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not satisfied significant layers of the population. The National Action Party's low vote indicates that the public policies did not appropriately deal with fundamental problems like unemployment, the high cost of living and insecurity, leading it to be sharply rejected by the citizenry.¹ To be sure, the PAN conducted itself during the campaign as though it supposed —erroneously— that Calderón's personal popularity would automatically transfer to the party, when different previous studies indicated the opposite. PAN leaders also wrongly decided to center their strategy on critiquing the PRI's history of authoritarianism and corruption, believing that emphasizing the fight against drug trafficking would be decisive in turning the tide in its favor.

However, it became clear that the profound negative effects of the economic crisis and of a kind of daily, ordinary violence attributable not only to big organized crime but to deficiencies in public security and the administration of justice counted against a government project that had made job creation, increasing the average wage and family security its central banner. The “dirty war” campaign strategy against the PRI, which had worked so well when competing against Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was completely inappropriate in the kind of diversified election that took place in 300 electoral districts, where it was impossible to personalize and where local factors played a fundamental role.²

It is widely recognized that the PAN's electoral collapse was monumental. It not only lost 63 of its 206 federal deputy seats, but not even in the state elections were its results acceptable. Of the six governorships up for election, it only won Sonora,³ losing traditional bastions like Querétaro and San Luis Potosí. It also lost important municipal elections like Naucalpan and Tlalnepantla, both in the State of Mexico industrial corridor.

The other side of this coin was the overwhelming advance of the PRI. It shot up from 106 federal deputies in 2006 to 237 in 2009, a 106 percent increase in a relatively short period. This made it the largest caucus in the Chamber of Deputies and, to a great extent, the country's main political force. Thanks to its state-level wins, the PRI now controls 20 of the 32 state governorships since, besides winning in Que-

TABLE 1
2009 BALLOTING FOR CONGRESS

Party	Percent of Overall Vote	Deputyships Won by District Votes	Deputyships Won by Proportional Representation	Total Seats
PAN	28.01%	70	73	143
PRI	36.94%	184	53	237
PRD	12.19%	39	32	71
PVEM	6.70%	4	18	22
PT	3.65%	3	10	13
Nueva Alianza	3.42%	0	8	8
Convergencia	2.46%	0	6	6
PSD*	1.03%	0	0	0

Source: Federal Electoral Institute.

* Loss of registration as a political party.

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rétaro and San Luis Potosí, it retained Campeche, Nuevo León and Colima. If we add significant municipal wins,⁴ it is easy to understand why the PRI's regional and national strength gives it a very powerful platform for recovering the presidency in 2012.⁵

Nevertheless, the PRI's strategy for achieving this goal is not yet completely defined, and the outcome is neither predictable nor guaranteed. It should be remembered that in the 2003 mid-term elections, the PRI also chalked up major wins, making it look like the winning party for the 2006 presidential elections. Table 2 allows us to make an interesting comparison between the Chamber of Deputies in 2003 and 2009.

As it shows, the panorama in 2003 was not so different from now. Clearly, however, history belied the 2003 predictions, and Institutional Revolutionary Party was not a real contender in the 2006 race for the presidency. Its internal divisions, especially in the legislature, and its particularly objectionable presidential hopeful both played against its aspirations.

For this reason, the new relationship of forces in the Chamber of Deputies and, generally, nationwide, should be taken

TABLE 2
CONGRESSIONAL SEATS BY PARTY (2003 AND 2009)

Party	Seats (2003)	% (2003)	Seats (2009)	% (2009)
PAN	224	44.80%	143	28.60%
PRI	150	30%	237	47.40%
PRD	97	19.40%	71	14.20%

Source: Chamber of Deputies.

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with certain reservations as inputs for predictions about 2012. To a great extent, the probabilities of a PRI success will depend on how well its members manage to forge internal cohesion and establish a legislative agenda that politically benefits whatever candidate they field. Internal alliances will be crucial—for the time being, the negotiation about who would head up their congressional caucus and whether Beatriz Paredes would continue as party president seem to have stabilized them—as will their attitude and statements on a series of issues fundamental to the country’s future.

In effect, in a context framed by economic difficulties, job losses, depleted natural resources, a worn-out political system, the strengthening of organized crime and *de facto* powers (businessmen, the Church, unions, the media), the political forces should be obliged to present and pass a series of long-postponed structural reforms.

These include the fiscal reform to broaden out the tax base and increase government revenues; the energy reform to make it possible to explore and better tap the country’s energy sources, including water; labor legislation reform to establish new models for worker-management relations that, without injuring workers’ rights, would facilitate companies’ greater productivity; a political-electoral reform to resolve the crisis of Mexican presidentialism and open up for discussion topics until now taboo like the re-election of legislators and mayors; and a reform of the judicial system to reduce its impressive rates of impunity and corruption. None of these

reforms can be postponed any longer without risking the intensification of social discontent and the country becoming unviable.

Naturally, achieving national accords on these and other important issues implies a willingness to deliberate and negotiate that would put on the back burner the pragmatic calculation of what kind of political hay could be made from them. This is where the PRI’s strategy and priorities will be crucial. It can

risk a series of profound reforms, allowing some of its traditional clienteles and interests to pay the costs, or it can opt for cosmetic tweaking that will allow inertia to maintain the *status quo* without great political turbulence, in a kind of low-profile co-government with President Calderón and his party.

Some analysts think that, even if just for calculated reasons, the PRI would be interested in laying new structural foundations for the country’s development in order to win its bid for the presidency in 2010 in less disadvantageous conditions than those that exist today and with greater room for maneuver on different fronts. Others, however, argue that it will use its strength only as a block to legislation in order to further discredit the PAN administration’s failed public policies. Only time will tell which route it will take.

The position of the Mexican left also must be taken into account in this overall scenario. As mentioned above, the PRD suffered a very important drop in its vote count if we compare it with 2006. Both the post-2006 behavior of its presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and the increasingly severe internal clashes among its different currents contributed to this. Even in Mexico City’s Federal District, its most important bastion, the PRD’s electoral base has shrunk significantly. It still heads up most of the boroughs (12 out of 16), but with lower and lower vote counts and with less and less hegemony in the Legislative Assembly.⁶

Mexico’s left does not seem to have a very promising future. In 2012, dissension among its currents will certainly sharpen and they will have a very hard time agreeing on a presidential candidate. Up until now, it does not seem likely that Andrés Manuel López Obrador or Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard will withdraw, having already declared their presidential aspirations, and that a socially attractive, cohesive candidacy can be arrived at like in 2006.

With this post-electoral panorama, both public opinion and different sectors of society not organized in political parties will have to play a very important role. Making sure the political forces do not concentrate exclusively on pragmatic strategies and negotiations—the PRI and the PAN recently made a pact for the critical appointment of attorney general, for example— and ensuring that they pay attention to the really important issues for the citizenry and for strengthening institutional structures and public policies the country needs in coming years are crucial tasks that must be taken on collectively.

Regardless of which party wins in 2012, the country's situation requires an enormous effort of analysis, negotiation and forging proposals on different levels and areas of government. The bad reputation of the elites, the degradation of public life and collective existence, the country's loss of competitiveness, the drop in many indicators of government effectiveness, and, above all, the loss of the confidence of broad sectors of the population in the future all require that the new political relationship of forces lead to substantive agreements capable of improving the quality of Mexican democracy and its fruits for society. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Some analysts have correctly commented that the public expressed its dissatisfaction not only by punishing the PAN by not voting for it, but also in high abstentionism and by invalidating their ballots, something numerous civic associations widely promoted. In effect, dissatisfaction with the entire political class and the different parties translated into more than 55 percent abstention and 5.4 percent of invalid ballots nationwide. This last figure is particularly significant because it is more than the total vote for the New Alliance Party (3.41 percent), Convergence (2.36 percent), the Labor Party (3.56 percent) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which lost its legal registration when it only got 1.03 percent of the vote.

² If Mexico's electoral system did not combine the winner-takes-all and proportional forms of representation, the PRI's victory in 184 of the 300 districts would have given it a very easy absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies.

³ Even this cannot be attributed to its own merits, but to the population's outrage at the tragic deaths of dozens of children in a public child-care-center fire, which the previous PRI governor handled inappropriately.

⁴ Of the 550 municipal governments up for election, the PRI won 284 (51.9 percent); the PAN, 204 (37.2 percent) and the PRD, 27 (4.93 percent). The rest were won by the other parties.

⁵ The popularity and positioning of the governor of the State of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto, should also be mentioned here. This is basically attributable to his enormous spending to promote his image on the most important television networks, once again putting on the agenda the need to regulate the role of the media in political-electoral competition.

⁶ The PRD won 42 percent of the seats in Mexico City's Federal District Legislative Assembly; the PAN, 21 percent; the PRI, 12 percent; and the Labor Party (PT), backed by the López Obrador faction, 9 percent.