

2006-2012 Who Can Govern?

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A few months before the election of Mexico's next president, voters' eyes are trained on the race to Los Pinos. However, the experience of recent years tells us that it is not who wins the presidency that will define the future of the next administration, but, in any case, the way in which the new head of the executive builds his relationship with Congress.

For the last nine years, the country has lived with having a president without a majority in Congress. First with Ernesto Zedillo and later with Vicente Fox, a divided government has earned its citizenship papers in Mexico. And, although in and of itself, it should not be a problem, the fact is that with the passage of time, the relationship between the executive

and the legislature has become the main obstacle to governability.

As if that were not enough, the most recent opinion polls reveal a very complex scenario for the future president given the prospect, once again, of a Congress in which no party will have a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, aggravated by each of the three main political forces having equal-sized caucuses (see table).

Under these conditions, the order of the basic questions that voters have to ask themselves about the presidential candidates from now until July has to be reversed. Instead of asking ourselves who will win the presidential election, we must ask who can govern with the most divided Congress in recent history.

Instead of asking the candidates about their programs, we should ask which party or parties the winner will have to negotiate with and what changes that would mean for their gov-

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ernment project. Instead of wondering whether they intend to fulfill their campaign promises, we have to begin to ask ourselves if they will be able to. And, lastly, we should ask ourselves where the necessary negotiating spirit is going to come from among the political forces, because the evidence indicates that up until now it has only rarely existed.

THE REFORMS THAT NEVER CAME

The stature of a government is not measured by its intentions, but by the effectiveness of its actions. This is a maxim as old as the craft of politics itself, and also the corollary of the term that is coming to an end: a government confused about its objectives and the instruments needed to achieve them, a handful of good intentions with no *de facto* possibilities.

The story of President Vicente Fox’s administration would be different if from the beginning he had been aware of the significance of governing with a congressional minority. We know that a large part of the plans and projects of the so-called “government of change” was tied to forging a stable majority coalition in Congress.

The options were on the table from the beginning: either you renounced puritanism, those foundational aspirations, and sought a major alliance with the reformist wing of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—that same group that Fox’s forces had defeated at the ballot box but that had worked for the previous two terms on economic reforms—or you threw everything into destroying what remained of the old regime, including the PRI itself.

What happened was neither one nor the other. At the end of the term, the president neither forged an alliance

POLLING RESULTS (PERCENTAGE)		
PARTY	FOR PRESIDENT	FOR THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES
PAN	30.6	32.5
PRI	28.8	37.0
PRD	37.5	29.0
Other	3.1	1.5

Source: Consulta Mitofsky National Poll, March 2006.

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nor has he been able to pass the legislative reforms in fiscal, energy and labor matters that he wanted. His party did not advance one centimeter in Congress or in the different states, and in the current race for Los Pinos, the National Action Party (PAN) is lagging behind.

NO NEGOTIATOR IN SIGHT

Up until now, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) is the most serious hopeful in the presidential race. All the polls consistently put him at least 10 points ahead of his closest adversary; but in legislative terms, López Obrador could be a weaker president than Vicente Fox.

The first reason is that his party would only get 26 percent of the seats in Congress, while the remainder of the ones won by the coalition supporting his candidacy would be distributed between the Labor Party (PT) and Convergence.

The second reason is that the experience of Mexico City’s Legislative Assembly does not speak highly of AMLO because during the second half of his term as mayor, he and his Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), making legitimate use of their majority, steamrolled the PAN, PRI and Green Party of Mexico (PVEM) caucuses on innumerable occasions. That was the only way they could get their most emblematic programs passed.

López Obrador, in contrast with Vicente Fox, probably knows how to negotiate with Congress and has better political operatives. But we should not forget that any negotiation is based on strength; that is, you can only negotiate as well as your weight allows. López Obrador would be dealing with a Congress where he had a minority, with only six governors out of 32 from his party, and only 13 percent of the country’s city halls in hands of the PRD.

In the case of the PAN and the PRI, things are even more complicated.

For Felipe Calderón and the PAN, the most obvious problem is their already proven inability to build alliances in Congress.

Clearly, if the PAN won the presidency, it would once again have to seek a negotiation with the PRI because the liberal agenda Felipe Calderón has under his arm has no place in the PRD. But the future of that project is subject to several conditions.

The first is that Calderón Hinojosa would not have the very high popular support Vicente Fox started out his administration with because his election would not be a novelty, or alternation in office or end the old regime. As the scenario is unfolding, Felipe Calderón would also not have an easy win like the current president did, much less

Fox's charisma that has helped him weather constant mistakes.

We should also not forget that Felipe Calderón was a central actor in Vicente Fox's first legislative defeats. As leader of the PAN congressional caucus, he did not wish to, or could not, make sure some of the president's bills got passed, bills that despite resistances, never faced a legislature as hostile as this one. It was in this first period of the term when conditions existed to further these reforms; in the second half, they just stagnated.

The PRI and its candidate have few options. Stuck in third place in the polls, they are facing a scenario in which the PRI would have the smallest congressional caucus in its entire history. PRI members are used to negotiating from

strength in their own interests, but without that, negotiation is impossible.

If they once again lose the presidency, as political animals used to power, it will be very difficult for PRI members to adapt to the new conditions. If they have survived Vicente Fox it has been more because of his mistakes than their successes.

Scattered, anxious about their future and facing an open door, they will seek refuge in the PRD. That is perhaps the reason why López Obrador is not worried about the fact that though the polls give him 39 percent of voter's support, their forecasts only give his party 26 percent of the seats. He is calculating that once in office, PRI congresspersons will be malleable, willing to be convinced and susceptible to pressure. **MM**