

Mexico's 2004 Local Elections What to Expect

Gustavo Ernesto Emmerich*



Nelly Salas/Cuartoscuro

Local electoral results are determined mostly by local factors, including the patronage system, although national issues can influence part of the electorate.

In 2004, 14 out of 31 Mexican states will hold local elections. All 14 will entirely renew their legislatures and municipal governments and 10 will elect new governors. The significance of these elections goes far beyond local politics, taking on a truly national character. They will test the relative

strength of the political parties at a time when all Mexico is beginning to look ahead to the 2006 presidential elections.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEM

Mexico shifted gradually but dramatically over the last 15 years from a hegemonic to a pluralist party system. Before 1988, Institutional Revolutionary Party

(PRI) electoral and political hegemony was overwhelming. From 1988 on, growing dissatisfaction with PRI dominance along with increasingly fair electoral institutions and laws for political competition helped opposition parties to win governorships, municipal governments and growing numbers of federal and state legislative seats, and finally, in 2000, the presidency.

Mexico's new party system has three layers. The first is made up of three main

* Professor of political science at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Iztapalapa campus.

political parties that win a substantial share of the vote and are the only ones holding state governorships and considerable numbers of federal and state legislative seats: the PRI, the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

The PRI, despite its 2000 presidential defeat, remains the country's biggest party. In the 2003 federal legislative elections, in coalition with the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM), it recovered its lead at the polls. In early 2004, it controlled 17 governorships and the greatest number of municipal governments (although not particularly those of the most populated municipalities), and had the biggest caucuses in both chambers of the federal Congress as well as majorities in a good number of state legislatures. The PRI conceives itself as the heir to the social, nationalistic and "redistributionist" values of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), although at the end of the 1980s it shifted toward a free-market, free-trade stance. While still in power, persistent economic stagnation and many political and corruption scandals led to a sharp decrease in its popular appeal. Even if the PRI is the only party effectively organized and able to get votes all across the country, its current constituency is composed mainly of older, poorly educated peasants and impoverished urban dwellers, which gives it an edge in the less industrialized and developed states, where part of its electoral appeal stems from patronage-based networks.

The PAN has occupied the presidency since 2000 (its term ends in 2006); nevertheless, today it is only the second most-voted party. It won the 2000 presidential election in a coalition

with the PVEM. In the 2003 federal legislative elections, the PAN came in second behind the newly formed coalition between the PRI and the PVEM. At the beginning of 2004, the PAN held nine governorships and a great number of municipal governments (including many of the most populated municipalities), and had the second most numerous caucuses in both federal chambers as well as majorities or at least numerous caucuses in several state legislatures. Founded in 1939, it is based on a mix of Catholic and liberal principles quite similar to that of Christian Democratic parties in other parts of the world. Its

constituency is chiefly younger, educated, middle class and urban, giving it an edge in the most industrialized and modernized states. Formerly concentrated in the North, the PAN has tried quite successfully to achieve a truly national presence.

The PRD was founded in 1989 and is the third vote-getter nationwide. At the beginning of 2004, it controlled 5 state houses as well as that of its stronghold, the Federal District (or Mexico City). Its quite varied constituency mainly includes highly educated, urban people of medium age along with peasants and some unionized workers. Lacking a truly national base—it is virtually non-existent in many states, particularly those of central and northern Mexico—the PRD is especially prone to alliances with minor parties. It maintains a social democratic, nationalistic stance, opposing what it calls "neolib-

eralism," in its view represented by both the PRI and the PAN.

Three parties with much smaller shares of the vote, which control a small number of municipal governments and have just a few federal and state legislative seats, form the party system's second layer. As their seats can be decisive when no major party has a legislative majority of its own, which is the case in both federal chambers and 15 state legislatures, their political clout is much greater than their share of the popular vote would seem to warrant. Additionally, they are sought out by the large parties to forge electoral

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coalitions when the latter think it will be difficult to win the elections alone. These parties are the PVEM, the Labor Party (PT) and Convergence for Democracy (CD).

The PVEM is the fourth most voted party, although way below the three main ones. It shifted from a coalition with the PAN (and against the PRI) in the 2000 presidential election, to a coalition with the PRI (and against the PAN) in the federal legislative races as well as in several state elections held in 2003. Its constituency is mainly young, educated and urban, particularly in Mexico City and surrounding areas. It upholds vague environmental principles.

The PT is the fifth vote-getter. Its small constituency is mainly urban, particularly in the state of Durango and to a lesser extent in and around Mexico City as well as in some other parts

of the northern states. Defined as a socialist party, for ideological reasons the PT tends to coalesce with the PRD but, circumstances demanding, it sees no problem in making a coalition with the PRI or even —occasionally and in multi-party groupings— the PAN.

Convergence for Democracy is the newest and sixth most-voted party, with presence mainly in the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca. It is basically a center-left spin-off from the PRI. In the 2000 presidential election, it ran in a coalition with the PRD.

Besides the six national registered parties, a few local parties run exclusively in their respective state elections getting only a few votes and in the best of cases winning a couple of municipalities and state legislative seats each; these groups form the party system's third layer.

THE 2004 LOCAL ELECTIONS SOME PERSPECTIVES

State elections are held on different dates (see table 1 for the 2004 electoral calendar), according to local legislation. Governors are elected by plurality for six-year terms. State legislatures are fully renewed every three years; about 60 percent of the representatives are elected by plurality by districts and the rest by proportional representation. Similarly, municipal governments, or *ayuntamientos*, are elected every three years; the party with the most votes occupies the mayor's seat and about 60 percent of the seats of the municipal council; the remaining seats are apportioned through proportional representation. In the state of Oaxaca, many municipal governments are chosen using the "customary mechanisms"²

of their majority indigenous population, rather than through regular elections. Governors cannot be re-elected under any circumstances; lawmakers and members of municipal governments cannot be re-elected for a consecutive term. In each state, an autonomous electoral institute or council organizes the elections and counts the votes; its decisions can be appealed before the state or federal electoral tribunals.

Local electoral results are determined mostly by local factors, including the patronage system, although national issues can influence part of the electorate. Usually, local elections are considered a sort of referendum on the current governor's performance. When a governorship is at stake, the gubernatorial race takes the lead vis-à-vis simultaneous campaigns for the legis-

TABLE 1
2004 LOCAL ELECTORAL CALENDAR

STATE	DEPUTIES SEATS		MUNICIPALITIES	GOVERNOR	DATE
	BY PLURALITY	BY PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION			
Yucatán	15	10	106	No	June 20
Chihuahua	22	11	67	Yes	July 4
Durango	15	10	39	Yes	July 4
Zacatecas	18	12	57	Yes	July 4
Baja California	16	9	5	No	July 4
Aguascalientes	18	9	11	Yes	August 1
Oaxaca	25	17	570*	Yes	August 1**
Veracruz	24	21	210	Yes	September 15
Tamaulipas	19	13	43	Yes	October 3
Chiapas	24	16	118	No	October 17
Michoacán	24	16	113	No	November 14
Puebla	26	13	217	Yes	November 14
Sinaloa	24	16	18	Yes	November 14
Tlaxcala	19	13	60	Yes	November 14

* 418 by customary mechanisms and 152 by regular elections. [Editor's Note.]

** The elections for Oaxaca municipalities will be held October 17.

lature and city governments. Although all governors have a great influence in state politics, PRI governors in particular are regarded as “political bosses,” power and sometimes business brokers deeply interested in keeping their party united for achieving electoral wins. Voter turnout in state elections tends to be extremely low, particularly when the governor’s seat is not at stake; a low turnout gives an edge to the party with the best organization, i.e. the PRI, which —although it is forbidden by law— is used to literally carrying “its” voters to the polls in a patronage-system exchange for favors.

In the forthcoming 2004 local elections seven PRI, two PRD and one PAN governors are to be replaced. Arithmetically, it is more probable that the PRI lose governorships than either the PRD or the PAN. Heavy swings in voting, split voting and the division of the vote among the main parties render it difficult for any of them to achieve overwhelming victories. At this writing, it is too early to predict scenarios: most nomination processes and talks for electoral coalitions have not yet begun or are just about to begin. The way the main parties nominate their candidates will probably have an impact on their electoral results: the more open to the public the process is, thus giving their nominee more visibility and legitimacy, the more votes the candidate will probably get. The PRI and the PRD have held primaries in the past and the PAN more recently. However, many times a party prefers to look for a “unity candidate” to avoid splits. Coalitions are of the utmost significance when the main parties seem to be evenly matched. Usually, they are basically coalitions “against” the party already sitting in the governor’s office

or that at least aim to win some extra city governments and legislative seats; the latter is particularly important in the states in which no party has a legislative majority of its own. Table 2 provides background on the current political situation in each state holding elections in 2004.

NATIONWIDE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

In Mexico’s perennial electoral calendar, 2004 is the year within the 2000-2006 term in which the most governors will be replaced. Thus, the 2004 local elections will deeply affect Mexico’s power balance *among* the political parties. In addition, the 2004 elections will also affect the balance of forces *within* each of the three main parties, which at some point during 2005 will choose their candidates for the 2006 presidential elections.

Although local elections have no formal and/or direct influence at the federal level, President Vicente Fox would undoubtedly be glad if one or two more PAN candidates won governors’ seats. In addition, if the PAN is able to make some wins, it could use them as proof of renewed popular support for Fox’s administration, a support badly needed after the PAN lost the 2003 federal legislative elections. Also, the PAN winning one or more extra governorships could be instrumental in predisposing local voters to weigh in for the PAN in the 2006 presidential elections. A good showing for the PAN could reinforce its more “institutional” hopes for the presidential nomination, like the minister of the interior, Santiago Creel, and the minister of energy, Felipe Calderón, among others. On the

contrary, a bad showing might force the PAN to rely on nominating President Fox’s popular wife, Martha Sahagún, who has been flirting with the idea of running for president.

For its part, the PRI wants to ratify its status as the country’s biggest political force. This concretely means holding on to its seven governorships up for election, and if possible, capturing one or two more. If this is indeed achieved by the PRI, it would improve its chances of recovering the presidency in 2006, but might paradoxically complicate its internal rivalries. Current PRI leader Roberto Madrazo, regarded by many a PRI member as the natural presidential candidate for 2006, is far from rallying unanimous internal support. Among Madrazo’s rivals for the nomination are some current PRI governors, like Tomás Yarrington of Tamaulipas and Miguel Angel Núñez from Hidalgo (the only two who have explicitly said they intend to run), Miguel Alemán of Veracruz and Arturo Montiel of the State of Mexico. Yarrington’s and Alemán’s terms end in 2004 and Montiel’s in 2005; if they are able to give the PRI a victory in their states, their aspirations for the PRI presidential nomination would be strengthened and Madrazo’s weakened.

The PRD boasts among its members the political leader who currently has the highest approval ratings in the whole country: Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the head of the Mexico City government, at present widely seen as a potential winner of the 2006 presidential race. In order to win in 2006, the PRD would need not only a popular candidate like López Obrador, but also to increase its share of the vote in local elections and extend its electoral constituency from the few states in

TABLE 2
BACKGROUND ON LOCAL CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATIONS

STATES IN WHICH PRI GOVERNORS ARE TO BE REPLACED; THE PRI HAS A LEGISLATIVE MAJORITY IN ALL THESE STATES

Chihuahua. The main challenger to the PRI would be the PAN, which was in office from 1992 to 1998. A PAN-PRD coalition, which Convergence might join, seems feasible. The PRI will most certainly enter a coalition with the PVEM.

Durango. Predominance of the PRI. The PRD and PT have formed a coalition whose nominee for the governorship was defeated in the PAN nomination process. Since the PAN has nominated its own candidate, a broader opposition-to-the-PRI coalition seems unlikely.

Oaxaca. The PRI's main challenger is Convergence. The latter, the PAN, PRD and PT have agreed to run a common candidate, who most probably would come from Convergence. Municipal and legislative elections will be held two months after the gubernatorial race.¹

Puebla. Predominance of the PRI; the PAN would be its main opponent.

Sinaloa. The main opponents to the PRI would be the PAN and the PRD.

Tamaulipas. Predominance of the PRI.

Veracruz. The main opponents to the PRI would be the PAN and Convergence. A Convergence-PRD coalition seems likely. The PRI is pretty divided.

¹ At the close of this edition, an assassination attempt was made on the life of Oaxaca Governor José Murat of the PRI. This will muddy the electoral process. [Editor's Note.]

STATES IN WHICH PRD GOVERNORS ARE TO BE REPLACED; IN THE TWO OF THEM, NO PARTY HAS A MAJORITY IN THE LEGISLATURE

Tlaxcala. The current PRD governor was supported in his bid for office by a multi-party, anti-PRI coalition. His wife is seeking the PRD nomination, thus creating tension inside the PRD. It is unclear whether the anti-PRI coalition will be renewed; in any case, the PRI would be its main opponent.

Zacatecas. Predominance of the PRD. Many PRI members joined the PRD when the current governor led the way a few weeks before being elected.

STATE IN WHICH A PAN GOVERNOR IS TO BE REPLACED; NO PARTY HAS A MAJORITY IN THE LEGISLATURE

Aguascalientes. Predominance of the PAN. PRI and PT have announced in principle an anti-PAN coalition.

STATES HOLDING ONLY MUNICIPAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

Baja California. The PAN sits in the governor's office; no party has a majority in the legislature. Predominance of the PAN; the PRI would be its main opponent.

Chiapas. The PRD governor was supported in his bid for office by a multiparty, anti-PRI coalition; the PRI has a majority in the legislature. It is unclear if the anti-PRI coalition will be renewed; in any case, the PRI would be the main opposition contender. Trouble should be expected in the state's area controlled by the rebel Zapatista movement.

Michoacán. The PRD occupies the governor's office; no party has a legislative majority. The PRI and, in some regions, the PAN would be the main opposition to the PRD.

Yucatán. The PAN sits in the governor's office; no party has a majority in the legislature. The main opponents to the PAN would be the PRI, which is seeking a coalition with the PVEM, and a local party, the Alliance for Yucatán.

which it is now concentrated to a truly national level.³ Meanwhile, the current PRD governor of Zacatecas, Ricardo Monreal, wants to give his party a victory in his state, and so strengthen his own already announced ambitions for the PRD presidential nomination. For his part, the founder and moral leader of the PRD, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, has not dismissed the idea of running for president in 2006 for the fourth time.

In the second layer of the party system, the PVEM and the PT would be quite satisfied by just obtaining a few extra municipal governments and legislative seats, and—provided they compete by themselves and not in coalitions—by marginally increasing their respective shares of the vote. This would be equally satisfactory for Con-

vergence for Democracy; this party, however, has serious aspirations to forming coalitions that could give it the governorships of Veracruz and Oaxaca. For the three of them, good 2004 results would strengthen their chances of forming part of a winning coalition in 2006, or choosing a presidential candidate of their own who could increase their share of the vote.

Today, Mexico's party system is quite fluid. Shifting coalitions, a volatile electorate and no party being able to get a majority of the vote on its own are integral features of it. Regrettably enough, electoral coalitions usually tend to be purely momentary and do not translate into shared government or concerted legislative action. Perhaps because of this, and still more regrettably, turnout is on

the decline: in the 2003 federal congressional elections, only 42 percent of the electorate came out to vote, an expression of the people's dissatisfaction with the entire political class. We do not really see anything that might reverse this trend in the 2004 state elections. ■■■

NOTES

¹ After receiving this article, a series of corruption scandals broke involving key PRD and PVEM members, as well as Mexico City officials, that will no doubt affect them very seriously in this year's 14 state elections. [Editor's Note.]

² By "customary mechanisms" the author refers to traditional forms of election used by indigenous communities, different from the universal, secret ballot. [Editor's Note.]


³ López Obrador's popularity and therefore presidential nomination possibilities were seriously affected also by PRD and Mexico City corruption scandals. But, although he lost several points in popularity, until now Mexico City's major is still the front-runner. [Editor's Note.]



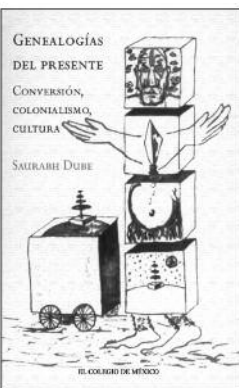
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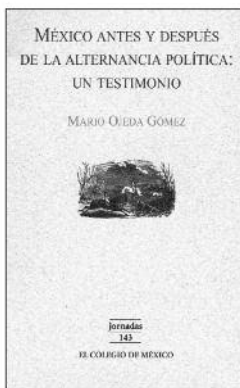
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Informes: El Colegio de México, A. C. Dirección de Publicaciones, Camino al Ajusco 20, Pedregal de Santa Teresa, 10740 México, D. F. Tel.: 54493000, exts. 3090, 3138 y 3295. Fax: 54493083. Correo electrónico: publi@colmex.mx y suscri@colmex.mx www.colmex.mx