

# Mexicans Vote to Return the PRI to Power: Updated

[This report updates the report written and posted on the *New Politics* blog on July 3.]

The PRI is back in power. Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has won the Mexican presidential elections with a plurality of 38 percent of the vote, returning to power the party which ruled Mexico as an authoritarian one-party-state for decades. Peña Nieto defeated the left-of-center Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) who got 32 percent of the vote and Josefina Vázquez Mota of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) who received about 26 percent. For the Mexican left, the election results are a stinging defeat not only at the presidential level, but also in the congressional elections.

López Obrador, who claims to have won the last election, has not accepted the election results either and is asking the electoral authorities to investigate. Thousands of his supporters marched through Mexico City the day after the election, claiming that their candidate had once again been defrauded of his victory. López Obrador claims that Peña Nieto and the PRI violated spending limits; he argues that through fraud they have stolen one million votes. The Mexican electoral authorities have agreed to recount more than half the ballot boxes because of irregularities found in vote tallies. Peña Nieto won the election by more than three million votes according to the authorities. The PRD, however, won again the mayoralty of Mexico City with 60 percent of the vote and won the governor's elections in the States of Morelos and Tabasco. The PRD thus remains a political power in the country though it did not win the presidency and has a minority in the congress.

While López Obrador attributes his loss to his opponents' violations of election law and fraud, his own decisions no doubt also had an impact. In 2006 the Mexican election authorities reported that he had lost by a quarter of a million votes and many believe he actually won; this time he lost by more than three million votes and no one but his most ardent followers are asserting that he was the winner. Why did López Obrador lose in 2012? Perhaps it's because he abandoned the more radical rhetoric of his 2006 campaign, which led the media to compare him to Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, and this time portrayed himself as a moderate reformer who would follow the example of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, the former president of Brazil. López Obrador sought this time around to win the confidence of the Mexican business establishment and of Mexico's middle classes, while still holding on to his traditional base among working people, peasants and the poor. Did some of his potential voters lose confidence in a candidate who changed his identity from left to center? Perhaps. In any case, the move to the right clearly failed to improve on his 2006 performance.

### **The Future: A PRI – PAN Alliance?**

The PRI in power under Peña Nieto will not for the foreseeable future be in a position to recreate the one-party state that it was in the past. While final statistics are not yet in, the PRI will likely have little more than 240 seats in the 500-seat lower house. The PRI will only be able to rule by making an alliance with the PAN with which it shares a common economic program, and the PRI and the PAN together will have just enough votes to make it impossible for the PRD to block their program. Mexico's former Foreign Minister, Jorge Castañeda, believes the outcome of the election will lead to cooperation between the PRI and the PAN on the basis of their common economic agenda. Under a Peña Nieto presidency and a PRI-PAN alliance, Mexico's neoliberal policies will continue and will expand, with the country likely to see continued

piecemeal privatization of the petroleum industry and the passage of a labor law reform bill that would weaken unions. There is also, however, the possibility of political deadlock, an alternative that led to a fall in Mexican stock prices as the election results were reported.

### **The Student Movement—Too Little Too Late**

Peña Nieto, who had the support of the powerful Televisa network and of the PRI's powerful political machine, faced a rising challenge in the month before the election from a new student movement that criticized his links to the mass media and his record of political repression in Mexico State where he had been governor. The student movement expanded from the elite Ibero-American University, to the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and then to state university campuses throughout the country, raising its cry against money's corrupting power in the media in ways similar to the American Occupy movement.

But the student movement, known as "I am #132," which grew rapidly and attracted attention from throughout the country, was still too little and too late to change the election victory for Peña Nieto and the PRI that had been predicted for months by the polls. The question now is, will the student movement that arose out of the 2012 presidential election be able to continue as a significant social movement once Peña Nieto takes power? Other student movements of the late 1960s and the mid-1980s had an important progressive impact on society at large, and this one may too if it can recover from the election hangover and tackle the society's economic and social problems.

### **The PRI's Past**

The Institutional Revolutionary Party has its origins in the Mexican Revolution. It was created in 1929 by President Plutarco Elías Calles as the party of government functionaries

and transformed by President Lázaro Cárdenas in the late-1930s into a mass party of workers and peasants. By the 1940s the PRI had become an authoritarian and corrupt party with a nationalist economic program; it oversaw the state banks and industries, encouraged private capital and used its control of the labor unions and peasant leagues to ensure labor peace. The "Mexican Miracle" of the 1950s and 60s was based on the PRI's policy of keeping wages down, though providing workers with subsidized health care, housing, food, and fuel. By the 1980s, however, the PRI abandoned its nationalist economic program and adopted neoliberal policies to encourage foreign investment, open markets to free trade, cut the social budget, and weaken labor unions. Since the 1970s, the PRI had loosened its hold on the political process and by the 1980s there were growing political parties left and right.

When the PRI turned right in the 1980s, the nationalist wing, led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas broke off forming the Democratic Current and then a National Democratic Front, which also included the former Mexican Communist Party and other left groups. Cárdenas ran as the Front's candidate in 1988 and is widely believed to have won the election, but the PRI President Miguel de la Madrid and the electoral authorities declared Carlos Salinas de Gortaria the winner. Salinas then oversaw a vast privatization of industry that transformed Mexico's political economy. In the election which just took place, Salinas supported Peña Nieto, and some argued that Salinas will be the power behind the throne.

### **The PAN's Failure**

In 2000 Vicente Fox, a Coca-Cola Company executive, businessman and rancher, ran as the National Action Party's candidate for president and won, ending over 70 years of rule by the PRI. Fox had received votes from both the right and left, from all of those who wished to end the long rule of the PRI. Fox oversaw the emergence of multi-party political democracy, but did little to change the economic direction of

the country. Many were surprised to see him maintain the alliance with the country's corrupt official unions. When Fox retired, he left to his successor Felipe Calderón the country's continuing economic difficulties and its fundamental social problems. In this election, Fox declined to support the candidate of his own party, Vázquez Mota, and instead endorsed the PRI's Peña Nieto as the best option for voters.

For the last six years, Felipe Calderón, also of the conservative PAN, has held office, pursuing a war against drug dealers that saw the deployment of 40,000 soldiers and thousands of police officers, widespread violations of human rights, almost 60,000 killed, 10,000 disappeared, and thousands forced to leave their homes for other states. He has also presided over an economic crisis that saw annual per capita growth of less than one percent throughout his term, with millions unemployed and a growing number of youth who could neither continue their education nor find jobs. Real GDP growth for the last dozen years has averaged 2.3 percent, low for a developing country. Some have argued that the terrible economic situation helped to drive tens of thousands of Mexicans to seek work in the illegal drug trafficking business. Calderón thus became tremendously unpopular with the Mexican people, making PAN candidate Vázquez Mota's campaign an uphill battle. The people punished Calderón and the PAN by denying her their votes.

### **The Left's Future**

Mexico's left, which invested so heavily in the rightward-moving López Obrador must ask itself whether it made a mistake and might not have done better pursuing some other alternative. Lacking confidence in the Party of the Democratic Revolution, López Obrador created his own campaign organization called MORENA (*Movimiento para la Renovación Nacional* or Movement for National Renovation). MORENA became an umbrella for a variety of social movements and small left political parties who stood under it or just outside of it,

anxious to find a candidate who could advance the left. Speaking to the left, López Obrador said he wanted “real change,” and the revolutionary left interpreted this to their followers as “regime change” that would restore democracy and create a popular political economy. The appearance of the student movement “I am 132” encouraged the left to believe that their time had come. The Mexican left thus embraced a rightward moving populist, a strategy that in the wake of López Obrador’s defeat leaves it disappointed and disoriented.

What is new and exciting coming out of the election is the new student movement. On July 4 in Guadalajara, one of Mexico’s largest cities but also generally a conservative one where the largest demonstrations by social movements, unions and the left seldom exceed 500 people, students using social media organized a 7,000 person protest against Enrique Peña Nieto and the PRI. Something is happening among Mexico’s young people and they deserve to have options on the left besides populism; their demand for democracy and social justice needs to find expression in a revolutionary rejection of capitalism and a vision of democratic socialism. If the left is to offer it, it must critically examine its own illusions regarding the existing political system, its parties and its candidates.

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