

The New Coordinates of the Vote

The 2003 Federal Elections

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Next July, we Mexicans will hold elections to renew our federal Chamber of Deputies as part of the dynamics of democracy. Two years after alternation in power,¹ with incipient expectations about democracy and an administration that is still suffering the effects of political

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inexperience, the 2003 elections will be a kind of referendum about change, a test of the new political regimen's maturity.

Marked by scandal, the electoral campaigns will be distinguished by ne-

gative aspects: on the one hand the accusation against the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of funneling public funds into the campaign chest of its defeated candidate in 2000, Francisco Labastida; and on the other hand,

allegations of supposed illegal foreign funding for President Vicente Fox's campaign.

A media war and a mud-slinging campaign have set the tone of the contest and this has meant that the electoral struggle has shifted into other areas, mainly the legislative arena and that of state governments, where the president's opposition has tried to reestablish some equilibria.

Figures from different poll takers show the widespread volatility of electoral preferences. After the PRI's 2000 defeat, two singular and contradictory trends have shown up among the political parties. Locally, there has been a surprising recovery of PRI followers and a pronounced drop in projected votes for the president's National Action Party (PAN). At the same time, federally, the PAN has maintained its high expectations of victory, and the PRI has moved up and down, subject to rhythms set by the media.

Pollsters' data would be a simple snapshot of Mexican reality, just like all opinion polls, if it were not for the fact that by studying results over the last two years, we can trace how public opinion has shifted. While it is true that several months remain before the elections and the dynamic of the campaign will change projected voting for all the parties, some trends are already visible, trends that have been taking shape since Vicente Fox took office.

The parallels between federal government approval ratings and voters' intention to cast their ballots for the PAN is one significant point. The PAN shifts in the same direction as the president, but more slowly. From this, we can infer that Vicente Fox brought PAN followers aboard his popularity train.

The PRI follows the opposite trend, increasing its intended ballots as public opinion takes a more negative turn toward the federal government. It is a zero-sum game, where whatever the

president and his party gain, the PRI loses, and vice versa. This undoubtedly demolishes any incentive for cooperation among the main political actors and explains why both sides have preferred confrontation to agreement.

It does not seem by chance that a deterioration of presidential performance approval ratings would improve electoral preferences for the PRI. Over the years, a large portion of Mexicans have gotten a more or less clear idea of the significance of the PRI. This is, of course, an image built from political inertia, fed by an authoritarian political culture that sees pragmatism as its clearest reference point for political effectiveness, certainty and commitment.

The PRI was an enormous employment agency through which government posts were obtained; it was also the national clearinghouse for all kinds of needs and requisitions. The party spilled out into public life in a permanent exchange, in which it worked to

VOTE FOR THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES (2000 AND 2003)

PARTY	% OF VOTES 2000	NUMBER OF SEATS 2000	% OF SEATS 2000	PROJECTED % OF VOTES 2003	PROJECTED NUMBER OF SEATS 2003	PROJECTED % OF SEATS 2003	CHANGE IN NUMBER OF SEATS
PRI	36.8	211	42	35	170	34	-41
PAN	38.2*	207	41	39	235	47	+28
PRD	18.6**	50	10	19	80	16	+30
Others	3.8	32	7	7	15	3	-17

* This is the vote for the Alliance for Change, made up of the PAN and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico.

** This is the vote for the Alliance for Mexico, made up of the PRD, the Labor Party (PT), the Party of the Social Alliance (PAS), the Party of the Nationalist Alliance (PSN) and Convergence for Democracy (CD).

Sources: *Seventh National Citizens' Opinion Poll: Scenarios of Governability in Mexico*, GEA-ISA, August 2002, and *National Telephone Survey, Consulta-Mitofsky*, October 2002.

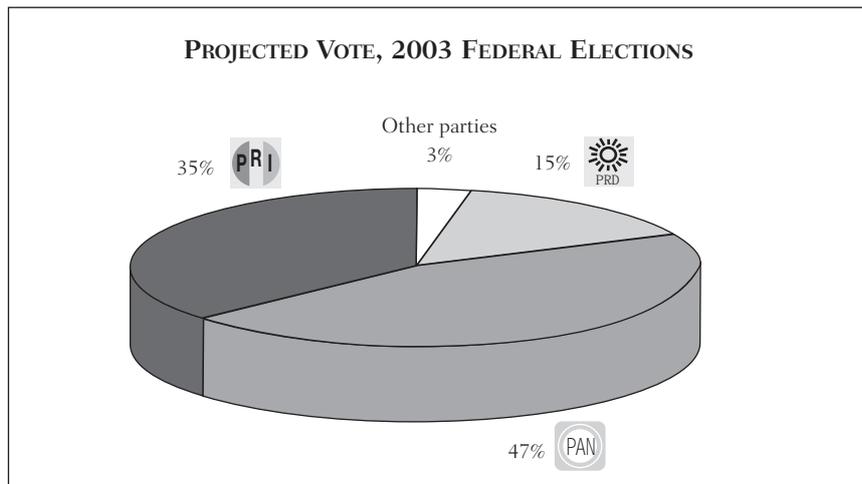
negotiate votes for goods and services. That is why the current administration's lack of results and inability to make visible what results do exist are the mainstay of the political survival of what used to be the official party.

Nevertheless, it will not be the corporatist vote that will decide the next election, but the vote of segments of the middle class who have seen increased insecurity and the economic recession as the best parameters for evaluating President Fox's performance. It is some of these voters, the group that decided the presidential election two years ago, the so-called "useful vote," who might punish the administration by voting against it.

One aspect that should be carefully evaluated is the way in which preference for the PRI displayed in local elections held since July 2000 is not succumbing to scandal. Never before had the PRI been subject to so many accusations of misconduct,² but despite the stories and the administrative and criminal investigations underway, it seems to be building an armor similar to the one President Fox had during his 2000 campaign.³

The polls show that, if current preferences continue, even in the best scenario, the PAN will have a difficult time getting the 251 seats it needs to have 50 percent plus one of the legislature. If we translate the number of intended votes into legislative seats, the president and his party can become the largest political force in the Chamber of Deputies, but not the majority.

The recent U.S. elections illustrate what a successful strategy for the PAN could be: a president who heads up his party's campaign, who designs and takes the message to the voters around an issue (the war against Irak in the



U.S. case, and the consolidation of change in our case), and who acts in the face of a confused opposition without clear definitions.

On the other hand, the dynamic of recent months indicates that the PRI will have very few opportunities for taking its message before the voters and getting them to concentrate on its proposals. Overshadowed by the negative onslaught, its campaign offerings will be blurry images in the midst of scandal.

Even so, the PRI may have a chance to recover from the government beating it is taking if it manages to move the mid-term elections out of the national arena and into the state dynamic. This is possible because the PRI occupies the governor's mansion in 17 of Mexico's 32 states, but also because there are places like the State of Mexico where the PAN has practically been erased from the political map due to a permanent, equally negative campaign.

In any case, we should remember that, like in other democracies, mid-term elections are an exercise of multiple political readjustments, whether it be the electorate warning the executive that it should moderate or eliminate certain policies, the introduction of local or regional issues onto the national agen-

da or candidates in each district taking advantage of the influence they exercise over their communities.

In addition, an electoral snapshot of our country shows us that vote counts in state elections tend to differ from those at a federal level. The PRI's only chance of overcoming its 2000 defeat will lie in its ability to make the federal elections a referendum on governors' performance and not that of the president.

Another factor is that the Senate, where the PRI has a plurality of seats, will remain unchanged until 2006; this means that even if the PAN wins a majority in the lower chamber, the government will continue to be divided. ■■■

NOTES

¹ On July 2, 2000, Vicente Fox became the first opposition candidate in 71 years to win the presidential elections. [Editor's Note.]

² The most important accusation, known as "Pemexgate," is that in 2000, the director of Mexico's para-state oil company, Pemex, in complicity with other of its high officials and union leaders, transferred U.S.\$60 million to the campaign chest of the PRI presidential candidate, Francisco Labastida. [Editor's Note.]

³ This refers to Fox's media coverage and political prestige when he was candidate, which turned into a kind of shield against any and all criticisms or denunciations. [Editor's Note.]