The PRI's 2006 Electoral Debacle

by
Joy Langston,
Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas

This short article outlines why the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed Mexico for the final 71 years of the twentieth century, not only lost the 2006 presidential election, but posted a miserable third place finish by taking only 22.7% of the national vote versus 36.7% for the winner, Felipe Calderón of the center-right National Action Party (PAN) and 36.1% for the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). It also explains why, despite its recent electoral results, the once-hegemonic party will continue to play an important, but reduced political role: as a coalition partner with the governing PAN to create majorities in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

The PRI was, from its inception in 1929 (as the Party of the National Revolution or PNR) until it first lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies in 1997, the hegemonic party in Mexico. The PRI did not lose a governorship to another party until 1989 and did not relinquish presidential power until 2000. The loss of the executive in 2000 to the PAN's Vicente Fox was a traumatic shock to the once-invincible party, and its leaders were determined to retake Los Pinos (Mexico's equivalent of the White House) in the 2006 presidential election.[1]

During 2004 and the first half of 2005, the PRI saw a quick return to power as a definite possibility as it had done very well in state elections during the last years of Fox's term.[2] The president's party had not been successful negotiating crucial bills in the legislature, most of which were directed at reforming backward areas of the economy, such as the tax, labor, and energy sectors. The macroeconomic growth indicators were not strong (except for foreign reserves), and although President Fox had promised 7% growth during his term, the economy had been sluggish, with GDP on average gaining under 2% a year in the first five years. Furthermore, the candidate most observers considered to be the PAN's most likely presidential nominee, the former Secretary of *Gobernación* (roughly, the Home Office or Interior Ministry) Santiago Creel, looked like a weak competitor, while the PRD's candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was weathering a series of legal challenges and corruption charges.

Given the PRI's optimism through the middle of 2005, what can explain such a terrible electoral showing in both the presidential elections and in the legislative arena (in which the PRI lost half of its House and Senate delegates)?

Many factors influenced the final electoral outcome, but two major problems help account for the PRI's debacle. First, the PRI's presidential candidate, Roberto Madrazo, proved unacceptable not only to the nation's roughly 70 million voters, but also to a good number of his own party's factions and leaders who refused to support his campaign effort. Second, the ideological polarization of the campaign between the PAN's more free-market Calderón and the PRD's more populist López Obrador rendered Madrazo irrelevant as Mexico's electorate was forced to decide between the Left and the Right, with the middle dropping out. Madrazo was unable to capitalize on the polarization because his macroeconomic promises were neither clear nor credible, and he failed in his attempt to make the salient issue of the campaign the PAN's perceived incompetence in governing. Thus, the third place finish was expected, though the low percentage of his vote share was surprising.[3]

The PRI's devastating electoral defeat does not begin with a stumble during the campaign tour, but with the presidential nomination process, and even before. We next examine why the public had such a negative perception of Madrazo and why it proved impossible for his campaign to overcome this image despite spending several million dollars on mass media appeals.

The Candidate

Madrazo's own political background hindered his efforts to convince voters of his sincerity and electoral platform. He had, in effect, "bought" his election to governorship of Tabasco in 1994 (Eisenstadt 2004), and six years later, when it was time to choose another PRI gubernatorial candidate for Tabasco, he destroyed the local party apparatus by forcing his personal candidate on the party.[4] Finally, he was accused of fraudulent spending in Tabasco's gubernatorial election in 2000, which eventually led to the disqualification of the electoral results by the Federal Electoral Tribunal and the imposition of a special election (which his specially placed candidate eventually won). Madrazo's party adversaries even charged him with fraudulent behavior against his own party brethren to win what was widely considered a tainted election for the presidency of the PRI's National Executive Committee (CEN) in 2002.

Once ensconced in the party presidency, his strategy to place the PRI in an advantageous position for the 2006 presidential elections became clear. First, Madrazo successfully led the PRI to a positive showing in the 2003 midterm congressional elections, in what was considered a referendum vote against the PAN administration's first three years in office. Then, by refusing to lend his 222-strong House

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delegation to form legislative majorities, Madrazo blocked President Fox from passing regular legislation or constitutional reforms for the second half of the *sexenio* (the Mexican president's one six-year term). In this way, Madrazo hoped that the PAN and the president would look incompetent and ineffective, thus paving the way for the PRI's triumphant return to Los Pinos.

At the same time Madrazo was implementing this strategy, however, he was making important enemies within his party. The PRI is a large organization, containing many factions and groups. Some of the most important groups revolve around the party's 17 state governors, while union leaders constitute the party's other major powerbrokers. Both of these actors control resources—both money and activist labor—crucial to campaigning. However, Madrazo, in his quest to win his party's presidential nomination, tried to destroy two rival powerbrokers within the PRI, Elba Esther Gordillo, the leader of the enormous and resource-rich National Teachers' Union (SNTE) and affectionately known to her followers as *la Maestra* (the teacher), and Arturo Montiel, governor of the Estado de México (Mexico's largest state, which surrounds the Federal District, and incorporates many of the suburbs of Mexico City), who competed with Madrazo for the party's presidential nomination.

Madrazo demonstrated a lack of a firm policy stand on structural reform when he knocked Gordillo from her powerful party leadership positions. Gordillo, as general secretary of the CEN and second in command, had been pressing the PRI to cooperate with the PAN on fiscal, labor, and energy reforms. When she was elected in mid-2003 to lead the PRI faction in the new Congress, she immediately began working with Fox and the PAN legislative leaders on a fiscal reform bill. Madrazo took part in the negotiations and publicly backed a bipartisan proposal which resulted. However, when the PRI deputies refused to line up behind their House leader, Madrazo took advantage of the incipient rebellion brewing against Gordillo's leadership to destroy her by attacking the fiscal reform as anti-PRI. Gordillo was voted out of her House leadership position and later abandoned her deputy seat. Though Madrazo had rid himself of a strong party leader, he was now seen by the business community, to which he had promised this reform, as a leader whose promises on structural reforms were not credible.

Governor Montiel's downfall, which most believe was orchestrated by Madrazo, ended up harming Madrazo as much as Montiel, largely because the corruption charges brought against Montiel tainted the entire PRI campaign. Montiel, with other current and recent PRI governors, had formed the Democratic Unity, a group within the PRI to present a single candidate to compete against Madrazo in the nomination primary so as not to split the anti-Madrazo vote. Montiel eventually won this pre-nomination contest, and polls showed him closing in on Madrazo in August 2005, a few months before the party primary. Weeks later, information linking his immense fortune to state resources was leaked to the press and he quickly withdrew from the nomination race, leaving the way clear for Madrazo. However, because of the PRI's long history of corruption in office, the unanswered accusations of using state resources for private gain hit the PRI and Madrazo as hard as they did Montiel. Private tracking polls showed that the PRI's support fell by almost 10 points in most of the states whose governors had formed part of the Democratic Unity group: Coahuila, Hidalgo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Nuevo León, and the Estado de México.[5] The party primary itself turned into a farce as a political lightweight was Madrazo's only competition.

Many governors refused to support Madrazo's campaign due to his hardball tactics, and the Teachers' Union proved to be the bane of his electioneering efforts, as Gordillo was a far stronger opponent than Madrazo had believed. Teachers dogged Madrazo at the PRI's earliest campaign events at the end of 2005, yelling accusations of his perfidy and inconstancy. The Maestra is credited with paying for a brilliant campaign slogan that began to appear on billboards and bumper stickers: "Do you believe Madrazo? Me neither."[6]

Figure 1 shows the negative evaluations of the three major party candidates across the entire campaign when respondents were asked this question: For which candidate would you never vote? As one can see from Figure 1, Madrazo's negatives are startlingly high—40% at the beginning of the campaign and 37% at its end—and compare badly to the other two major party candidates.

Thus, one finds both a negative image of Madrazo from the electorate and open dissention about his rule within the PRI. As early as January 2006, party leaders began to question publicly whether Madrazo should continue as candidate or be replaced.[7] The campaign looked doomed before it began, more so because Madrazo began 10 points behind the frontrunner López Obrador in some January polls.[8]

The Campaign

The presidential campaign began in mid-January 2006, and in the early stages Madrazo's team focused on cleaning up the candidate's damaged image. For example, ads did not use his last name, which in Spanish also means a slightly risqué usage of the word "smack." In January, the campaign ran TV ads in which Madrazo appeared with his incapacitated wife who stated that he was a good man who could be trusted, a direct rebuttal of the perception that Madrazo lacked credibility and integrity.

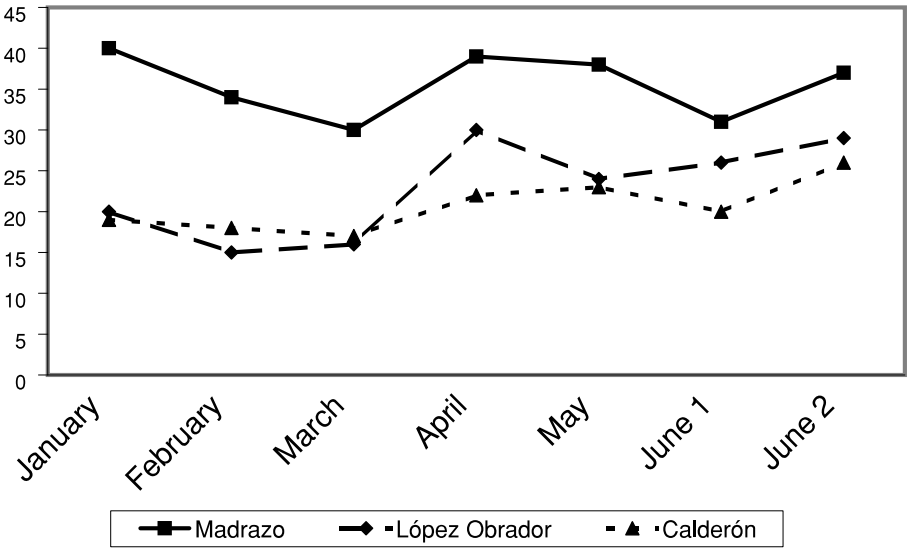
The candidate also emphasized what was seen as the great failing of the PAN administration: its lack of political experience and results, both in terms of job creation and crime. Madrazo opened with the theme "*Qué las cosas se hagan*" (So things get done). The problem with this appeal was that given Madrazo's blackguard behavior, it was not clear exactly *what* things would get done, as many questioned Madrazo's commitment to democracy and civil liberties. On a more humorous note, the candidate made, as did both of his rivals, somewhat outlandish promises, for example, "No more battered women with Madrazo." Not a single one!

As the media campaign wore on, it became clear that the contest had become a two-way race between the PAN's Calderón and the PRD's López Obrador, with Madrazo a distant third. In response, during the second half of the campaign, Madrazo reacted to the general tone of the ideologically polarized race (that was taking place over his head) between Calderón and López Obrador and changed his campaign message.[9] In the last two months before the July elections, one began to see radio, TV, and newspaper advertising arguing that because the PAN and PRD candidates were radicalizing the race, the voters should opt for the candidate who was reasonable, cool-headed, and economically moderate. Madrazo continued to focus on two issues at the national level: crime and economic growth wrapped in a government-effectiveness bundle (with differentiated promises at the local level). One of the more successful ads at this time showed a delinquent urinating in his pants when confronted with the very idea that Madrazo would be president. The candidate also continued to criticize the Fox administration's failings, as well as aim personal attacks at Calderón.[10] Given the heated situation toward the end of the campaign, this was not a bad plan; however, it was far too little too late.

The territorial side of the campaign equation was equally problematic. The party's 17 governors were considered a fundamental piece of the candidate's overall strategy. The PRI's state executives together governed 39% of the nation's population; if they used their political resources and party machines to

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Figure 1
Negative Perceptions of Presidential Candidates



Source: Consulta Mitofsky 2006.

mobilize voters for Madrazo, the PRI would have a solid advantage in the three-way race.[11] The governors (and PRI mayors in their states) could have helped organize rallies, marches, and tours for the candidate, as well as help pay for certain electioneering needs in their respective entities.

To shore up his campaign, Madrazo hired a personal pollster, María de las Heras, to publish surveys through a major national newspaper (*Milenio*). Her job was to maintain the fiction that the PRI candidate was not 10 points behind in the polls. This was crucial to keeping the PRI governors under control, to maintaining the local, municipality-based party structure working for the candidate, and to assuring that the PRI voters did not desert a hopeless candidate and choose a second best alternative to avoid their worst option (strategic voting). De la Heras's argument was that the polls showed Madrazo behind only because people were ashamed to admit that they would vote for the PRI's candidate, but victory would be achieved on Election Day.

Yet, despite De la Heras's strategy, Madrazo was still unable to control his party's strongmen (especially in the north). Because most governors win their elections with their personal popularity and the party's good image in the state, not its national image, they constitute an element of power independent of the national party. Constant rumors and newspaper articles reported that the northern governors were unwilling to rally around the candidate.[12] Some were even unwilling to appear on the same stage as Madrazo (in particular, Sonora Governor Eduardo Bours). Many PRI governors did not trust Madrazo because he had destroyed so many members of the PRI in his quest for power and because he had flip-flopped on the fiscal reform bill. Furthermore, the governors doubted the ability of a PRI president to radically improve their states' financial wellbeing more than Fox had; their states had done very well fiscally through the weak PAN president's large increases in non-earmarked spending. Finally, as long as they controlled their local assemblies and had some deputies lodged in Congress, a PRI president was not necessary for the governors' political wellbeing.

Madrazo also suffered from a series of publicized betrayals and exits by PRI politicians during the campaign. The leader of the National Social Security Workers Union stated that his members would not vote for the PRI's presidential candidate. Eighteen federal deputies affiliated with Gordillo's SNTE quit the party in March; one month earlier the party spokesman left the party in a fit of pique over a nomination issue; and, according to the press, former state party leaders in Guerrero left the PRI to support the PAN, while in Puebla, Querétaro, and Nuevo León, large numbers of party activists left the party with their respective leaders (Balboa and Carvizales 2006; Torres 2006a). Perhaps the low point came in May when senior PRI leader Manuel Bartlett, then a senator (who had also been a former governor and cabinet secretary under two different PRI presidents), called on PRI sympathizers to vote for the PRD to avoid another PAN presidency because Madrazo would certainly lose. While none of these desertions could individually have made much of a difference in a race with more than 40 million voters, the idea that even the party faithful, even senior leaders, did not believe that Madrazo could win and therefore were willing to try their luck in another party, was devastating to the campaign.

The Aftermath and Prospects for the PRI

As the electoral results became public on July 3, 2006, two results stood out: first, that the PRD's and PAN's candidates were almost tied at just over 35% of the vote, and second, that the PRI's candidate had been trounced by the former opposition parties. Madrazo had done badly in all regions of the nation; in fact, he did not win his own district in Tabasco or the other poor, southern states.[13] The congressional numbers looked almost as bad. With 28.2% of the national vote (five and half points higher than the presidential vote), and victories in a paltry 63 plurality districts (out of 300), the PRI would be awarded only 104 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, a fall of more than half (see Table 1). For the first time, the PRI was no longer the largest block in the Senate, dropping from 60 of the 128 seats to 33 (see Table 2).

Despite the PRI's downward tumble in the elections, it remains an important political broker within Congress. Mexico's strong three-party system makes it difficult to generate majorities in either the House or the Senate, and so the PAN is again required to negotiate with the PRI's legislative faction to pass important structural reform bills. Furthermore, with the political furor caused by the extremely small margin of difference between the first and second place finishers, and the doubt created by López Obrador about the independence of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), the PRI proved an important ally to the PAN in the aftermath of the elections, as the PRI accepted the official electoral results against the PRD's claims of rampant fraud. The PRI is expected to win at least two cabinet posts in exchange for its support in Congress for certain bills.

PRI's problem is that it is ideologically split between those party politicians who support more open and liberal economic policies, and those who are tied to the protectionist economic model that promotes poverty programs and economic subsidies for the poor as a means to ameliorate the nation's vast social inequalities. As early as September 2006, several members of the PRI could be heard complaining that it was not in the

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Table 1
Party Representation in the Chamber of Deputies, 2000–2006

Party	Total Seats 2000	District Seats 2006	List Seats 2006	Total Seats 2006	Percentage Difference
PAN	148	137	69	206	39.2%
PRD	97	88	36	124	27.8%
PRI	201	65	41	106	–47.3%
PVEM	17	0	17	17	11.8%
Convergencia	5	7	11	18	260%
PT	6	3	13	16	166.7%
Nueva Alianza	—	—	9	9	—
Alternativa	—	—	4	4	—
Independent	26	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	500	300	200	500	

Source: Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo, available at www.cidac.org.

Table 2
Party Representation in the Senate, 2000–2006

Party	Total 2000	Total 2006	Percentage Difference
PAN	47	52	9.7%
PRD	15	26	42.4%
PRI	58	33	–43.2%
PVEM	5	6	20%
Convergencia	—	5	—
PT	—	5	—
Nueva Alianza	—	1	—
Alternativa	—	—	—
Independent	3	—	—
TOTAL	128	128	

Source: Mexican Senate, available at www.senado.org.mx.

party's interests to support the PAN in all its neoliberal policies. It remains to be seen whether the PRI legislative delegation will be able to maintain unity when faced with this internal ideological division. Much of its strength and cohesion after the 2000 presidential defeat resulted because most party members accepted Madrazo as party leader and believed he stood a good chance of storming Los Pinos in 2006. Even if they did not personally agree with him or his policies, they believed that they individually would be better off if he (and the PRI) won in 2006. However, even Madrazo's questionable leadership is now gone (because of his devastating defeat), and no other political strongman has replaced him. With no strong national leadership to oblige the party's legislators to cooperate, the deputies and senators could find it difficult or unnecessary to vote together as a party delegation.

In more general terms, the fate of the PRI could depend on the decisions of the leaders of the PRD: if that center-left party radicalizes, then a large remnant of the PRI could capture the PRI's organization and move it to the center-left to occupy the ideological space vacated by the PRD, with the PRD—in its new guise of the Progressive Front—driving itself straight off the electoral cliff.[14] If, however, the PRD refuses to be taken over by López Obrador and remains closer to the ideological center, the PRI could be in grave trouble. Because the PRI has always held many ideologically diverse groups within its ranks, its politicians could find it more amenable to move to the party closest to their individual preferences than to remain lashed to a sinking ship that has been unable to stake out an ideological position or make credible policy commitments.

However, even if the PRD remains a part of the institutional game, both federalism and the nation's electoral rules could keep the PRI alive despite everything. The PRI enjoys strong voter allegiance in northern and southern states and currently holds more than half of the 32 state governorships. Governors are popular political figures who control enormous resources, and if they can win with the PRI label they will continue to use it. The same could be said for big-city mayors. Mexico's electoral rules also promote the survival of a weak third party (which used to be the PRD). The two-tiered system for legislative elections, with both plurality and list elements of representation, practically guarantees third party survival. Furthermore, public spending is quite generous for all registered parties, and the PRI is still able to tap into these monies.

Conclusions

Madrazo helped destroy the PRI's chances of retaking Los Pinos by using his leadership position in the CEN to force the party to give him the presidential nomination. His public image with both voters and his own party members of a corrupt and fraudulent politician with no substantive policy proposals proved impossible to change. The Mexican electorate did not appear to believe his promises, nor did they care that he was the most experienced politician in the race. Many of his party's governors refused to support him because they calculated they had more to fear from him than from an opposition president. Finally, the salient issue in the 2006 campaign was economic, and Madrazo was unable to make credible promises or even present a reasonable alternative to the two front runners. It remains to be seen whether the PRI, a party that was once all things to all political groups, can remake itself into a party that does not represent only corruption, fraud, and "overweening pragmatism."

Notes

1. Mexico's Constitution prohibits re-election for presidents; the term lasts six years.

2. Mexico is a federalist regime with 31 states and a Federal District that shares many of the attributes of a state. The states' directly elected governors are voted in on a staggered calendar so that state elections take place every year during the six-year presidential term except for one.

3. It is impossible to know how much strategic voting took place at the end of the campaign because throughout the campaign period, many public opinion polls estimated a higher proportion for the PRI than turned out to be the case. See Moreno (2006).

4. Several important state and national PRI politicians left the party in 2000 over the accusations of Madrazo's favoritism in the candidate selection

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process. For example, the PRD's candidate in the 2000 Tabasco race, César Raúl Ojeda, was once a close collaborator of Madrazo's in the state PRI.

5. TUCOM was the unofficial name of the group and stands for "All United against Madrazo" (Riva Palacios 2005).

6. She stopped these attacks only because she had formed a new party (PANAL) and was able to place a close political ally as presidential candidate (Roberto Campa) who would spend his entire campaign and debate time (and much money) criticizing the PRI's candidate.

7. Former governor of Sinaloa, Juan S. Millán, came out in a January 2006, issue of *Proceso*, a famous political weekly, stating that if Madrazo's campaign did not take off, he should be replaced with another candidate. See Araizaga and Jáquez (2006).

8. Even those polls that consistently rated Madrazo's popularity far higher than others, such as Consulta Mitofsky, still had López Obrador at 39% and Madrazo at 29%. See the June results at www.consulta.com.mx.

9. This roughly coincided with the arrival of Carlos Flores Rico as the spokesman and leading strategist of the media campaign. Calderón accused López Obrador of being authoritarian; while the PRD's candidate chided President Fox for supporting the PAN's candidate and talking like an annoying bird (*chachalaca*).

10. Alejandro Torres (2006b) reports that Madrazo attacked Fox for both crime rates and economic stagnation. The PRI candidate used both Calderón's tenure in a state bank (Banobras) and his brother-and-law's contracts with the Ministry of Energy to attack the PANista.

11. Riva Palacios (2006).

12. The PRI governors who appeared not to support Madrazo included those from Sonora, Estado de México, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Durango, and Nuevo León. Puebla, a large PRI stronghold governed by a Madrazo supporter, turned out to be a liability for Madrazo when its governor was shown (in an illegally recorded conversation) to have used his office to help a suspected leader of a child prostitution ring. Madrazo did not condemn the governor or his activities, but rather, the wire tapping. Again, this only fuelled the accusations that Madrazo was exceptionally immoral.

13. Madrazo did not win a single state.

14. Andrés Manuel López Obrador complained bitterly that his electoral victory was stolen from him by the IFE and Federal Electoral Court. He organized a mass demonstration that took over a main artery into Mexico City's downtown (Avenida Reforma) and several blocks of the historic center for more than a month. After he negotiated the removal of these camps, he proclaimed himself "legitimate president of Mexico" and called for the creation of a United Progressive Front, made up of the PRD, the Workers' Party (PT), and the Convergence Party, as well as several social groups that purport to be more radical than the PRD. As of now, it is not clear whether the PRD will in effect dissolve itself to become a part of this Front and transfer its considerable resources to it (which is to say, López Obrador) or remain an independent actor.

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