

## **“2006 Mexican Elections: A Challenge for Democracy”**

Karla Lopez de Nava

This coming July, Mexicans will not only have the chance to democratically elect a president, but more importantly, they will have the opportunity to endorse democracy. On July of 2000, Mexico had its first democratic elections after being ruled by a single party – PRI – for seventy one years. The question is not whether Mexico has transited to democracy, but rather, whether Mexicans—the government, the politicians, the media, civil society, and the citizens in general can sustain and consolidate the new democratic system.

With the intent of shedding some light on this question, Mexicanos at Stanford University, the John S. Knight Fellowships for Professional Journalists, and Yost House organized the conference **“2006 Mexican Elections: A Challenge for Democracy”**. The event took place on Saturday March 11, 2006 in Stanford’s Kresge auditorium.

The Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, The Charles F. Riddell Fund - Yost House, the Center for Latin American Studies, VPUE/DOSA - New Student Initiatives, Bechtel International Center, El Guiding Concilio - El Centro Chicano, Camacho Fund, ASSU Speakers Bureau, and United Airlines were co-sponsors of the conference.

The 2006 Mexican Elections conference proved to be wonderfully enriching for anyone with an interest in Mexican politics and/or in democratic consolidation. The conference consisted of three sections: a) a roundtable that discussed the role of the media in the 2006 electoral process; b) a keynote address given by one of the most

respected figures in Mexican academia, the historian and essayist Enrique Krauze, on the progress that Mexico has achieved in the political arena in the last decade, and on the challenges that Mexicans will face in the coming 2006 presidential election; and, c) a political debate between representatives of the three main political parties in Mexico – PRI, PAN and PRD.

The following pages provide a brief summary of the main arguments addressed by each speaker, the most important themes and points of discussion that arose in each panel, a brief analysis of each section, and a conclusion.

### **First Panel “The Media in the 2006 Electoral Process”**

Participants:

**Roy Campos**, President of Consulta Mitofsky, leading firm in market research and public opinion polls.

**Javier Corral**, senator for the National Action Party (PAN) and coordinator of the Senate’s Special Committee for the Reform of the Electronic Media.

**Martin Espinosa**, Radio Broadcaster for Grupo Imagen.

**Marco Antonio Gómez**, member of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)

**Leo Zuckerman**, professor at the Center for Economic and Education Research in Mexico (CIDE) and moderator of the panel.

Roy Campos, President of Consulta Mitofsky, was the first speaker on the panel. Based on extensive electoral survey data, he argued that in Mexico, electoral outcomes have been determined by one or a combination of three factors:

1. Incumbent Performance
2. Party Structure, i.e., the number of hardcore supporters that each party has across the country.
3. Candidate's attributes.

He explained that the outcome of the 1994 Presidential election was mainly determined by party structure. Ernesto Zedillo, the PRI candidate, won the election not because voters were happy with the performance of the incumbent PRI government, or because they found Zedillo likeable, but mainly because at that time, the PRI still had a much bigger advantage in terms of party structure compared to the PAN or PRD. Neither Zedillo's personal attributes nor the PRI's performance in government (which was not highly rated) played a role.

By contrast, Campos argued that the 2000 presidential election was determined by a combination of the candidate's attributes and government performance. People liked and identified with Vicente Fox, the PAN's candidate, and additionally, this time around, voters punished the PRI government for its performance. In this election, party structure apparently did not play a role in determining the outcome; because the size of the PAN's hardcore voters is very small, this in itself cannot account for Fox's victory.

What will determine the outcome of the 2006 election? Preliminary analyses of the polls suggest that this coming election will mainly be determined by the candidate's attributes, rather than by government performance or party structure. The leading candidate in the polls (up until February of 2006) is the PRD's candidate—Andrés Manuel López Obrador. 39.4% of respondents said they would vote for Obrador,

compared to 29.8% who answered that they would vote for Felipe Calderon (PAN), and 27.5% who support Roberto Madrazo (PRI).

On the one hand, if vote intention was explained by government performance, then Felipe Calderon (PAN's candidate) should be the one leading in the polls, given the high levels of approval that Fox has among the people. Approximately 70% of the population approve of Fox's performance. On the other hand, if party structure were to weigh more on the outcome, then it would be the PRI's candidate who should be leading in the polls, given that the PRI still holds the largest average number of hardcore supporters across the country. The PRI holds 42% of the mean votes across the country, compared to 35% for the PAN, and only 19% for the PRD.

Thus, according to Campos, the results in the polls indicate that this time the public is giving more weight to the candidate's personal attributes. Obrador's image, charisma, and personal qualities have given him the lead over the other candidates. However, Campos warns that these numbers only represent vote intention, and not actual votes. He concluded by saying that, ultimately, what will define the outcome of the coming elections is which one of the three factors, or which combination of them — government performance, party structure and candidate attributes weighs more on actual voters when they cast their vote.

Even though Campos talk did not focus on the effects that the media has on elections, his discussion was fascinating, because it provided a clear picture of what serious and unbiased public opinion surveys, which were practically non-existent in Mexico before the 1990's, can say about the political preferences of the public. The fact that it is now possible to conduct this type of study and present results on TV and

newspapers speaks of the opening of the media and the progress that Mexico has seen with regard to freedom of speech and political liberties.

The next speaker on the panel was Javier Corral, a PAN senator and leading coordinator of the electronic media reform committee of the Senate. His main argument was that given that the media plays an important role in the democratizing process, laws are needed to make the media more transparent and competitive. He contended that the opening of the media has contributed to the democratic process; however, not all of the media has contributed in equal form, and some has even had negative effects on public opinion. Too much freedom of the media, without any limits, he said, has given free rein to the pursuit of personal interests, rather than the public interest.

He explained that the radio is the most plural and democratic of all forms of media, whereas TV, given its duopolistic character (there are only two TV owners in Mexico: Televisa and Television Azteca), is distinctly less democratic. TV is not playing the role of intermediary anymore. Instead, it has become a political power itself, capable of imposing its own agenda, and in constant fight with the state. According to Corral, the only way of stopping the politicization of the TV and making it more transparent and objective is to regulate it. This is crucial, given that the number of Mexicans who watch TV is still much larger than the number of people who listen to the radio or read the press.

Following Corral, radio broadcaster, Martin Espinosa explained that for the first time in Mexican radio history, the radio broadcasters have complete uncertainty regarding who will win the 2006 presidential elections. This uncertainty speaks of the truly democratic nature of current Mexican politics and also of the plural and open

character of the media. Not many years ago, radio broadcasters could not transmit any political information without previous consent of the government. Additionally, not anyone could own radio frequencies, because they were given by concession of the government. Today, Espinosa argues, radio is the most plural of the media means. Anyone can buy a radio frequency, and it is no longer dependent on or controlled by the government. All factions and tendencies have a voice in radio, and facts and news reports are presented in an objective and impartial matter. The only problem that this opening has created is that in some cases, as happens with TV, each radio owner looks for her own economic and political interests. However, most radio frequencies are open and diverse, and this is why, at the moment, Mexican radio is one of the most impartial and pluralistic means of the media.

The last speaker of the panel was Marco Antonio Gómez, member of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). He explained that the IFE has been regulating, but still needs to improve, three areas that mark the relationship between politics and the media:

1. The commercial rates and fares that candidates have to pay to appear on radio, TV, etc.
2. The quantity and quality of coverage that each candidate receives in the news.
3. The format and diffusion of political debates between the candidates.

With respect to the first point, Gómez explained that the contract between media and parties is of a particular nature, and that IFE has no say in this. Tariffs are not regulated, so if a party has no money, then the party can end up with too little coverage and this can be a problem for equality and democracy. However, the IFE has guaranteed each

competing party access to the media and provided part of its budget to each party, in order for them to have some means to access the media.

With respect to quantity and quality of coverage, Gómez said that this still has to be regulated. Partial criticism of a candidate generates inequality. At the moment, the only thing that IFE has guaranteed is access to the media, but not quality.

Finally, Leo Zuckerman, the moderator, asked each of the participants, whether they thought TV could determine who wins the elections. All of the participants agreed that TV has important effects on elections because it defines the arena of debate, and is the means by which citizens get to know the candidates. However, all agreed that, although TV is important, it does not determine who wins the elections. There are other factors, like territorial party structure, that are much more important in determining who wins. Additionally, more exposure of a candidate in the media does not necessarily translate into more votes for the candidate. In fact, sometimes the opposite happens. Roberto Madrazo, the PRI's candidate, for example, has had the biggest media campaign and lags behind in the polls.

### Analysis and Conclusion

The discussion of the media was enriching and informative. Each participant gave his own point of view on the media and its political impact, but there was general agreement on where the media is now (distinguishing between the more plural nature of the press and radio compared to TV), how much of an impact it is having on the elections, and what needs to be done to make it equally accessible to all political factions

and democratic. Thus, rather than seeing a clash of views, the panel provided the exposition of similar views, but coming from different perspectives.

**Keynote address “Civic Initiatives in the 2006 Presidential Election” by Enrique Krauze.**

Enrique Krauze’s remarks were divided into two parts: The first part consisted of a review of the progress Mexico has made in the political arena and the challenges it faces as a democracy; and, the second part, described several scenarios of what would happen if PRI, PAN or PRD wins the presidential election. He began his address stressing the importance of the coming election. He argued that “these are historical elections”, because since 1876 until today, Mexico has never had the opportunity to confirm or endorse democracy, i.e., it has never had a second democratic presidential election since the nineteenth century. In 1911, Madero was democratically elected; however, he was killed in 1913, so this took away the chance Mexicans had to endorse democracy. Mexico’s main priority, said Krauze, needs to be the maintenance of the democratic system, precisely because it would be a waste if democracy fails, given the huge political progress that Mexico has made since 1995, when the IFE was created. And later in 1997, the PRI lost majority in Congress, an event that finally marked a real division of powers. Mexico stopped making headlines as an expert in electoral corruption. The media is now open and the freedom of expression is impressive compared to what was seen in the 1960’s, 1970’s and 1980’s.



In the second part of his talk, Krauze presented several scenarios of what would happen depending on which party won the election. He argued that the PRI is now reformed, but that it failed in its choice of candidate: “The PRI primaries should have been much more open and democratic.” However, he said that if Madrazo were to win the presidency he would not be alarmed, given that the political system now has checks and balances, and there are stronger democratic institutions. He also anticipated that if the PRI won the presidency it would form a coalition with the PAN.

He then said that the PAN has no real government experience, which is a downside. However, he felt that no matter if PAN or PRI won, democracy would continue.

Finally, he argued that he would be quite happy if a left party came to power, and that in a country where the majority of people are poor, this seems natural. Nonetheless, he said that although he had no problem with the social or economic program of the PRD, he did have a lot of misgivings with respect to the political agenda of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the PRD’s candidate. He argued that given some of Obrador’s antagonistic attitudes towards the law, such as his disdain for the law of transparency, he feared that if Obrador wins the presidency, Mexico would run the risk of returning to a hegemonic era. He claimed that the personal charisma and messianic attitudes of Obrador pose a danger for democracy, although, he also remarked that he hoped fervently that he was mistaken in his appreciation.

Krauze concluded his talk by saying that Mexico needs much more than transparent elections. Mexico, he said, needs much more public debate. The current format and timing of debate in the media is not adequate and needs to be improved.

However, he finished his speech in a more optimistic tone, by saying that he trusts that the coming election will be conducted in an orderly and peaceful manner, and that the democratic spirit will prevail.

## Analysis and Conclusion

Krauze did a wonderful job of recounting the history of victories that Mexico has achieved in terms of democratic development, while highlighting some of the challenges that lie ahead for Mexican democracy. However, some were surprised to hear Krauze, a highly respected intellectual figure, voice such apprehension towards one particular candidate, Obrador (PRD), and his fears of what could happen if he wins the presidency. In a way, it is a fair and important warning, but coming from one of the most respected historians and essayists in Mexico, it was unexpected. Especially, this was so because his speech showed a marked political preference and, in a way, implied a lack of full confidence in the current democratic institutions that, as he himself praised, Mexicans including all political parties, civil society, and the media, have painstakingly built. Many believe that Mexico is a growing democracy, and that like other democratic systems, its maintenance does not depend on the personal qualities of the president, so much as on the effective functioning of the political institutions, a strong civil society, a growing economy, an independent media, etc.

On the other hand, Krauze concluded his talk on a more optimistic note, and as anyone who has read his work or has heard him speak knows, he is gifted with words.

## **Second Panel “The Electoral Agenda of the Political Parties”**

Participants:

**Federico Döring (PAN)**, Congressman and senatorial candidate for the National Action Party (PAN)

**Saúl Escobar (PRD)**, International Affairs Secretary, Democratic Revolution Party (PRD)

**Roberta Lajous (PRI)**, International Affairs Coordinator, Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, the third section of the conference consisted of a political debate between representatives of the three main political parties in Mexico— PRI, PAN and PRD. In the first part of the debate, each representative had the opportunity to give a brief statement of the main goals and objectives of his or her party if it wins.

Federico Döring, PAN’s representative, said that for his party, this coming election meant an opportunity for consolidation, rather than party competition. He said Mexicans need to consolidate democracy, and that the challenge for his party in this election was to go beyond party politics and solve fundamental issues, such as: the high crime rates and the need for structural reforms in the fiscal, energy and telecommunications sectors.

The PRI representative, Roberta Lajous, opened her statement by saying that Krauze had made a mistake in saying that the PRI had chosen the wrong candidate. On the contrary, she argued, Madrazo is the best candidate because it was his idea in 1989 to structurally reform the PRI, and it was Madrazo who reestablished the PRI in the 2003 mid-term elections. The PRI is what it is now, thanks to Madrazo, Lajous contended. She also said that Madrazo’s objectives if he wins the elections are: economic growth,

increasing Mexico's international competitiveness by making structural reforms in the fiscal, energy, and labor sectors, and an integral reform to the judicial system in order to establish a rule of law.

Finally, Saul Escobar said that the PRD has a big challenge: not only to govern the country, but to reform it. It is not only an issue of winning the elections, he said, but making real changes. This, he argued, is a complex task, given the past inertia and institutional structure. He also said that it is important to have economic growth, but even more important is to improve the quality and standard of living. He said that the PRD's objectives are: to win the election, and then have a realistic project to change the country. State, social and institutional reforms will also be made. He also spoke about the wish his party has to change the presidential system into a parliamentary system. Basically, he said, the PRD wants to propose a whole new constitution.

After the representatives stated their parties main goals for the presidency, they explained where their parties stand with respect to several issues posed by Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, the moderator.

With respect to the question of reelection (currently, there is no possibility of reelection at any level of government), both the representatives of PAN and PRD agreed that reelection is necessary to make the representatives' work more efficient; however, while both parties want reelection at the municipal and legislative level, the PRD also wants reelection at the gubernatorial level.

By contrast, Lajous said that the PRI is against any type of reelection, and she also took the opportunity to criticize the PRD with respect to the reforms this party plans to make if it wins the election.

On the issue of public safety, there was consensus from all parties. All representatives agreed on the need for a judicial reform. However, Lajous, again criticized the PRD for the still very high crime rates in Mexico City, which Obrador has failed to lower. Döring, PAN's representative, complained that Fox's government has been trying to pass a judicial reform since 2003, but that the opposition parties have not even discussed it in Congress. On issues of environmental protection and water savings, the three representatives agreed that indeed the problem of insufficient water is serious, and something has to be done. However, it was clear from their answers that not one of them had a clear plan on how to solve the problem, and that it is not part of their agenda, or at least, that it is not a priority.

On the issue of federalism and decentralization of power, all representatives agreed: more autonomy has to be given to the states, especially with respect to budget and fiscal responsibilities. With respect to NAFTA, both PRI and PAN agreed that it has been beneficial, but that things have to be modified in order to translate these results into per capita growth and improvement of living standards. Lajous (PRI) also said that aside from NAFTA, the problem of immigration needs to be taken care of. By contrast, Escobar (PRD) said that NAFTA had been a mistake, not because of the economic opening it implied, but because it was done in a rushed manner and there had been a lack of planning. He proposed a revision, especially with respect to the part which concerns the agricultural sector.

Finally, on the issue of poverty, all parties agreed that they would continue the current poverty alleviating program "Oportunidades", but that they need to devise new, more focused programs and ways to raise the economic growth.

## Analysis and conclusion

On some issues, the parties still tend to align themselves as before, and on others, the alignments have changed. In the economic arena, for example, both PRI and PAN, as has been the custom, tend to coincide more; whereas, the PRD, tends to distance itself from the economic program of these two parties. One thing that has changed, though, compared to the 2000 platforms, is the position of both PAN and PRD with respect to political reforms. Although PRD and PAN still tend to concur on political issues, as on the issue of reelection, it seems that PRD is now taking a more extreme position. Throughout the debate there was strong rhetoric from Escobar (PRD) about “breaking with the old regime”, the need to change the institutions, and even going as far as to propose a whole new constitution that would change the regime to a parliamentary system. On the other hand, PAN has now moderated its speech and espouses a continuation of Fox’s program. This makes sense given that PAN now plays the role of incumbent party, not the opposition.

Interestingly, the PRI and PRD seem to have exchanged strategies, and now the PRI is playing the “discredit” game that the PRD used to play when the PRI was in power. Throughout the debate, the PRI representative did not lose an opportunity to criticize and discredit the politics of the PRD, whereas the PAN and PRD representatives assumed a more neutral tone, and mainly focused on presenting their policy platforms. In a way, it almost seemed as if the PRI already expects the PRD to win the elections, and

rather than proposing a policy platform it is using a strategy of discrediting the party that (at least for now) is leading in the presidential polls. This strategy is not new, it has been used by the majority of parties at some point or another, and it is not particular to Mexican politics. The irony is that now, rather than being used on the incumbent party, it is used on an opposition party, which suggests the huge threat that the PRI feels from the PRD. One will have to see whether, as the elections draw near, the parties will use this type of strategy more, and ultimately whether this will help them.

Just a few years ago, having a conference like this would have been unimaginable. The fact that Mexicans now have an opportunity to debate openly about electoral and political issues, and that representatives of each party can speak up, present their policy platforms, and be subject to questions and even criticisms, speaks of the huge improvement that has been made in the political realm. As a Mexican, it was a privilege to be part of this conference, and witness such an exchange. As a student of political science, this conference reminded me that democratic consolidation may be a slow and arduous process, but it is certainly possible.