

# The Mexican Standoff

## TAUGHT TO PROTEST, LEARNING TO LOSE

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Even before it culminated in an intense political drama that made headlines around the world, the Mexican presidential election of 2 July 2006 was arousing keen interest. The prospect of a left-wing government taking office as a result of the vote was a real one. Such a turn of events would have meant both a first in the country's twelve-year-old democratic history, and a major addition to an alleged leftward trend in the politics of Latin America. Instead, the election result turned out to be a razor-thin plurality victory for center-right candidate Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN), which had ousted the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the previous presidential election six years earlier. Calderón's main rival, Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) objected strenuously to the result, which was unanimously declared official on 5 September 2006 by the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary (TEPJF), the country's highest institutional arbiter regarding all electoral matters. AMLO had finished with a tally of 35.33 percent of the vote as compared to Calderon's 35.89 percent—a margin of 233,000 votes out of more than 41 million ballots cast in a nation of more than 100 million people. (The PRI's Roberto Madrazo had come in a weak third with 22.2 percent.)

The TEPJF's verdict, though unsatisfying to those who wanted a full recount of the vote, closely followed precedent set through ten years of jurisprudence, and further strengthened the basis for the settlement of electoral disputes peacefully through the rule of law, an achievement that is now a hallmark of Mexico's democracy.

Despite the massive challenge that the slim margin of victory implied, the 2006 presidential election was the best organized and cleanest in modern Mexican history. The minor mistakes made in the vote count and other irregularities were duly rectified through the established judicial process.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, approval of the process has been common among international election observers, the media, and most political actors, with the nontrivial exception of the presidential runner-up and his coalition, who claim that the vote was the most fraud-ridden since 1988. While winners have been sending the message of respect for the rule of law, losers have been refusing to acknowledge the results and denouncing Calderón as a spurious, illegitimate president. It is not unlikely that AMLO will attempt a run for the presidency in the future, and that his campaign will draw on charges of an election allegedly stolen by “the forces of the right.” What is less obvious is whether he will attempt to continue prompting mass mobilization and protest in a way that challenges the institutional setting more broadly. In order to offer some clues to deal with this question, we present an analysis of the campaign and its outcome, and then turn to examine the bases of the protest that ensued.

AMLO’s strong electoral showing helped the PRD and his two minor coalition partners, Convergencia and the Labor Party (PT), do well in the congressional races held concurrently to renew the totality of the 500-seat Chamber of Deputies and 128-member Senate. The PRI (in a coalition with the Green Party, PVEM), did better in Congress than Madrazo did in his run for the presidency, but was nonetheless reduced to its lowest showing in history. The PAN emerged as the single strongest force in both houses, with a total of 41.2 percent of the seats in the Chamber and 40.6 percent in the Senate, as compared to the PRD’s 25.4 and 20.3 percent respectively, and the PRI’s corresponding 20.2 and 25.8 percent. The PT and Convergencia each have 3.9 percent of the Senate (5 seats), while the former has 3.2 percent of the Chamber seats and the latter 3.4 percent. It should be noted that since the election took place, the PRD, Convergencia, and PT coalition has renamed itself the Broad Progressive Front, which indicates the willingness of these three parties to coordinate with one another on a more lasting basis.

The Green Party will hold 4 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 4.7 percent in the Senate, and two new parties gained congressional representation: New Alliance—a teachers’ union—led PRI splinter—obtained 1.8 percent of the Chamber and a single Senate seat, while the Social-Democratic and Peasant Alternative won 0.8 percent of the Chamber but no seats in the Senate. In the new Congress, the PAN holds a strong legislative position, and should be able to pass ordinary (that is, nonconstitutional) legislation without great trouble, most likely with the support of New Alliance, the Green Party, and most of the PRI legislators. But it is now impossible for any two-party combination to pass constitutional reforms, which will strengthen the bargaining power

of the smaller parties—and implicitly of their senior coalition partners. An additional challenge for Calderón is the extent to which PAN legislators will respond to his own priorities.

The close-run contest and its bitter aftermath revived Mexico's supposedly long-gone travails with contested elections and fraud charges, and prompted some of the largest and most intense protests in the country's history, with crowds in the capital at one point topping a third of a million people. Scholars concerned with the phenomenon of "losers' consent" and political protest suddenly have an unexpected case to study, one that highlights how, even in the presence of massive institutional investments and a fairly successful electoral experience stretching over more than a decade, leadership incentives and partisanship can still prompt massive (albeit nearly wholly peaceful) unrest and political protest.

### **Key Novelties in the Race for President**

Open candidate-selection procedures have been a rarity in Mexican politics. Before 1999, when the PRI used a nationwide primary, that party would "unanimously" announce its nominee, who had always become the next president. The PAN, for its part, favored using party conventions for most of its history until 1999, when Vicente Fox, then the governor of the central-highlands state of Guanajuato, won an uncontested primary. The PRD, which came into being as a breakaway from the PRI during the years from 1987 to 1989, nominated the same uncontested candidate in both 1994 and 2000. In 2006, however, with each of the three major parties seemingly in a strong enough position to win the presidential election, nomination processes would matter as never before in setting up the contest.<sup>2</sup>

The PAN opted for a sequential, semiclosed primary in which slightly more than a million voters cast ballots in a series of three regional votes, each of which covered a different third of Mexico's 32 states. When it was all over, Calderón, a PAN founder's son who had served as the party's president, and briefly been President Fox's energy secretary, had bested rivals Santiago Creel (Fox's interior minister from 2000 to 2005) and Alberto Cárdenas (a former environment secretary and governor close to the PAN's more conservative and religious wing). Although Creel—originally the best known of the three and the one with the most support among independent voters—had been the early favorite, Calderón won a slight majority that allowed him to avoid a runoff and position himself as a strong new PAN standard-bearer. Paradoxically, the contender with the oldest ties to the party had ended up representing political renewal and a credible "inside" alternative to the Fox administration and its shortcomings.

The PRD featured a nominally open process in which only AMLO participated. A onetime president of the local PRI branch in his south-

ern home state of Tabasco, AMLO was a founder of the PRD back in the late 1980s who had then run in Tabasco's 1994 gubernatorial election. When he lost—to Roberto Madrazo, as it happens—AMLO and his followers cried fraud, blockaded roads and oil wells, and marched to Mexico City in order to stage sit-ins. After information surfaced which allegedly proved that PRI spending on that race had been about sixty times over the legal limit, the PRI administration of President Ernesto Zedillo tried and failed to unseat Madrazo.<sup>3</sup> Later, AMLO became the national leader of the PRD, and captured his party's candidacy to succeed Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (the PRD's principal founder and first party president) as mayor of Mexico City in 2000. AMLO's masterful use of the national visibility of his office (Mexico City television is broadcast nationally) soon made him a presidential frontrunner, as he even weathered storms that included financial scandals involving some of his closest associates. His calls for social justice and higher spending, combined with his knack for "getting things done"—sometimes without much regard for the rule of law—and huge doses of media coverage made him very popular in Mexico City and beyond.

A turning point in AMLO's quest for Mexico's highest office came in April 2005, when the PRI and PAN in the Chamber of Deputies stripped him of the legal immunity (*fuero*) attached to his office, and thus exposed him to criminal charges for allegedly having disobeyed a court order in a land-use case. Massive, fiery public protests forced federal authorities to back down and drop the charges, which would have effectively barred him from running for president. From the *desafuero* dispute AMLO drew two lessons that would become major themes in his campaign: 1) The Fox administration had been ready to use a legalistic sleight of hand to sideline him; and 2) "the people" had mobilized to stop this ploy in its tracks and save his political career. AMLO's own pompous and oft-repeated public claims of "political invincibility" seemed to have been vindicated. Nothing could stop him now. Indeed, regardless of AMLO's political interpretation of the episode, the ambivalence of the Fox administration—which originally filed the *desafuero* claim—regarding the proper enforcement of the rule of law underscores shortcomings in the process of democratic consolidation.

As it had in 2000, the PRI held an open presidential primary in 2006. Madrazo, who had lost the nomination to Francisco Labastida in 2000, had become party president in a nationwide primary in 2002, and had used his office to control access to federal candidacies and to steer party funds (Mexico has a generous public-financing law) to friendly state chapters. According to most polls, Madrazo personified the corrupt legacy of the authoritarian PRI, but his rivals within the party managed only to field an opponent (Arturo Montiel, governor of the populous central State of Mexico) who had to withdraw almost immediately amid charges of illicit enrichment. Madrazo emerged from his easy primary triumph

without the expected “nomination bounce” and failed to improve his poor personal standing with voters. He began his campaign facing billboards and hecklers repeating, “Do you believe Madrazo? Me neither!”

Mostly due to Madrazo’s weakness, Mexico was set to experience its first presidential election since the founding of the PRI in 1929 in which that party’s candidate never really seemed to have a chance of winning. According to *Reforma* (Mexico City’s leading newspaper and most credible pollster), Madrazo peaked in February—almost five months before the vote—and even then only came within 9 percentage points of the lead. This made it easier for Calderón and AMLO to campaign almost exclusively against each other, and polarization predictably intensified.

A second unusual feature of the race was the scale and personal nature of negative campaigning. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE, the autonomous election-management body running the contest) and the TEPJF issued bans on 29 “denigratory” ads put out by one or another of the three main parties, but campaign strategists easily found ways around such obstacles by changing ads to avoid repeating the specifically prohibited material. In similar fashion, unions, NGOs, and particularly business groups found ways to pay for political ads despite a law that allows only parties the right to broadcast “messages oriented toward the attainment of the vote” during the campaign season. In this sense, the 2006 campaign inaugurated Mexico’s struggle with the question of limits to free speech and “issue advocacy.” To this was added the relatively novel regulatory challenge posed by the high media activism of President Fox and other elected officials from all parties, which contrasted with the personal discretion that then-President Zedillo had observed during the 2000 campaign.

Another major novelty of 2006 was the unabashedly left-wing nature of López Obrador’s campaign proposals regarding economic policy. Although AMLO sent emissaries abroad to reassure investors that he was a Mexican Lula, and fairly successfully portrayed his ideas as a fiscally responsible statesman’s necessary innovations on a failed economic model, the main topic of his campaign during its final month was his promise to bring about a 20 percent immediate increase in the income of all those with annual earnings of less than 9,000 Mexican pesos (the equivalent of about US\$850), a group comprising roughly 64 percent of the population. The “immediate increase” plan included reductions in gas, electricity and gasoline prices, as well as direct cash transfers, to be financed through government austerity in other spending areas. The PAN campaign pounded away at the credibility of the plan, implicitly admitting what they feared might be its vote-getting power.

By December 2005, Calderón had lost most of the impetus of his primary win, and began the campaign on a down note with a widely seen interview in which the most salient topic was his personal conservatism. By February, however, he had righted himself, fired most of his newer advisors, and mounted a surge based on two key moves. The first was a

relentless negative campaign against AMLO's authoritarian personality and fiscal irresponsibility; López Obrador unwisely played into this by persisting in coarse rhetorical attacks on Fox in which AMLO compared the president to a noisy species of native bird. Calderón's second tack was more positive and centered on his own portrayal as a modern, honest, and well-educated policy expert who would provide the continuity needed to ensure macroeconomic stability and who had a sensible proposal to deal with apparently every public problem. Mostly due to Calderón's early travails, AMLO peaked in March, when his lead stretched to 10 points despite a lackluster campaign.

The combination of Calderón's negative campaign and AMLO's decision to skip the first presidential debate on April 25 spelled doom for the former mayor. Calderón used this debate to put Madrazo out of contention for good; by mid-May, the PAN candidate had cut away at AMLO's lead and made the race extremely close. López Obrador eventually responded by talking less about his past accomplishments and more about the specific benefits that voters could expect from his presidency. He also used his appearance in the second debate on June 6 to begin a massive and effective negative campaign of his own against Calderón's "clean-hands" reputation. The central allegation was that Calderón's brother-in-law, Diego Zavala, had been involved in an illicit scheme to procure government contracts while Calderón had been energy secretary. No indictments came down and indeed no evidence of wrongdoing ever surfaced—Zavala did obtain government contracts, but not on his relative's watch. AMLO's attacks, however, resonated with an electorate still vividly conscious of PRI corruption and wary of anything that smacked of nepotism and crony capitalism in the circles around Fox. With all the negative appeals from both major contenders, it is hardly surprising that election day found citizens polarized, and that a razor-thin margin in the context of such a young democracy was seen as contestable by the losers.

Perhaps the most important question stemming from the election is whether the protest led by AMLO is based on a major loss of citizen trust in the country's democratic institutions, or whether it is more of a short-term, elite-driven strategy designed to rouse support for a restructuring of the Mexican left around AMLO's leadership. In order to answer this question, we will look more closely at the respective support bases of Calderón and AMLO as these emerged on election day, and then turn to an analysis of the reasons behind the postelectoral protest.

### **What Shaped the 2006 Presidential Vote?**

The literature on Mexican voting behavior has evolved considerably in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Based on these studies, and using the nationwide exit poll sponsored by *Reforma*, we used a statistical model to estimate

the effect on the probability of voting for each candidate of a number of different possible determinants. These included social and demographic correlates (such as gender, age, and income); retrospective evaluations of the Fox administration's performance; party identification; ideological orientation; whether the voter received aid from government social programs; and a summary measure of voter's opinions regarding the two frontrunners, Calderón and AMLO.<sup>5</sup>

The election indeed featured a substantial north-south divide, with northwestern states (where the PAN organization has long been stronger, and where globalization's effects have been most palpable) clearly favorable to Calderón and unfavorable to AMLO. The PRD contender's very strong showing in the Federal District (Mexico City) is properly explained by left-wing ideology, PRD partisanship, and the degree to which AMLO's mayoralty cemented his personal appeal—all of which were significant determinants of his vote nationwide, and major influences in Mexico City. After we controlled for Mexico City residency, we found that the elderly were less likely to vote for AMLO and more likely to support the PRI, a finding consistent with previous research,<sup>6</sup> but counterintuitive if we consider that AMLO campaigned heavily on the economic benefits that he promised to deliver to the elderly—he apparently was unable to make this case convincingly to those living outside his metropolitan bastion.

Being an independent increased the probability of voting for Calderón by 15 percent, and the probability of voting for AMLO by 23 percent, while decreasing the likelihood of voting for Madrazo by 38 percent. Calderón balanced this relative disadvantage against AMLO with significant support from PAN partisans and those on the ideological right, as well as those who approved of Fox's performance and who had positive retrospective evaluations of both their own personal economic situation and the country's economy as a whole—an effect unseen in Mexico's presidential elections since 1994. Interestingly, AMLO did not seem to capture the support of those dissatisfied with Fox. Instead, the lion's share of what one might call the “fed up with Fox” vote went to Madrazo of the PRI.

Madrazo drew from the core support base that had sustained his party during its seven decades of rule. Rural, older, and less-educated voters, as well as women, were all more likely to support the PRI. Moreover, most of the factors that helped Calderón hurt Madrazo: Voters who were independents, from Mexico City, approved of Fox's administration, and positively evaluated the economy turned against Madrazo. Interestingly, neither recipients of the Seguro Popular—a health-benefits program for uninsured Mexicans inaugurated by Fox—nor recipients of Oportunidades—the internationally recognized conditional-cash-transfer poverty-alleviation program that began more than ten years ago and which now reaches one in every five families in Mexico—seemed decisively to support Calderón over the alternatives.

The north-south divide, however, must not be overstated. Neither income, nor education, nor religion, nor rural status made a difference in the vote between AMLO and Calderón. This was not an election of rich against poor, Catholic against secular, or urban against rural—indeed the only significant variable among these has Madrazo benefiting from the rural vote. The “north-south” distinction is better understood as representing an increasingly prominent left-versus-right debate over economic policy *that cuts across all segments of the electorate*. There is indeed a higher level of support for the left in the southern part of the country, for reasons related both to the history of the various parties’ organizational development and to differing levels of economic development.

In addition to the effects of ideology, retrospective evaluations, and partisanship, the model captures a strong candidate-centered effect on the vote. Both AMLO and Calderón’s campaigns successfully exploited voters’ partisan predispositions, intensifying opinions about both the favored candidate and his opponent in each partisan base. Those who wanted to vote for AMLO (or against the PAN, or Calderón) were biased to pay attention to those messages that reinforced the issue or issues which distinguished their candidate from the competitor, and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> The negative nature of the campaign and the fact that it was a close race until the very end further strengthened this effect, and in a three-party election in which the PRI represented the centrist alternative to the incumbent, a more moderate campaign approach by either AMLO or Calderón probably would not have made sense.<sup>8</sup>

The respective campaigns were successful in reinforcing each side’s stance. The polarization of attitudes was evident not only with regard to voter preferences and the closely related opinions that people held of the various candidates, but also extended to views about how the campaign had unfolded, about what had happened on election day, and about the postelection conflict. The type of discourse that dominated the campaign raised the potential for protest to such a height that the credibility of various authorities and voters’ favorable opinions concerning Mexican democracy proved to have only weak dissuasive power once AMLO determined on a course of political mobilization.

### The Importance of “Losers’ Consent”

A recent addition to the growing literature on “losers’ consent” argues that in newer democracies, individuals tend to lack sufficient political experience to help them handle defeat.<sup>9</sup> The idea is that election losers are more likely to engage in political protest, and that this effect is heightened owing to lack of experience with democratic events (such as elections). As the authors of this analysis put it, “Being in the political minority heightens citizens’ political protest potential.”<sup>10</sup>

The Mexican case, we argue, illustrates that not all political losers

are created equal, and that the way in which election campaigns are conducted makes a difference as regards ensuing political protests, especially in the context of newer democracies. Some citizens may be more convinced than others of the country's democratic virtues, and therefore less easily swayed by calls for protest. Some may have certain social and demographic characteristics that make them more or less likely to be mobilized for protest. Especially in cases such as that of Mexico—where massive investments in boosting the credibility of elections have been a centerpiece of recent, landmark democratization efforts—one would expect electoral credibility to have some calming or appeasing effect, perhaps in conjunction with the large-scale and intense voter-education efforts that the IFE is legally mandated to implement. More believable elections, in other words, should be helping to reshape Mexican political culture in the direction of greater trust. Hence there should be less readiness to mobilize for protest in the event of an adverse election result.

In order to test such expectations, we proceed in two steps. First, we try to determine the extent to which Mexican voters were convinced that they lived in a democracy and would remain so convinced *independent of the election's outcome*. We show how partisanship determines even these stable opinions: There were more citizens convinced that they were participating in a democracy in Calderón's camp than in AMLO's. Then we look at how these opinions of democracy might influence the potential for protest—in addition to the independent effect of having lost the election—and conclude that the protest itself has a strongly partisan character, and that misgivings about whether one is living in a democracy have little effect. These conclusions lead us to argue that the postelection protest is likely to be shorter-lived, and indeed less telling of deeper social dissatisfaction, than perhaps apparent.

We use the *Mexico 2006 Panel Study*<sup>11</sup> to identify four groups of individuals according to their respective perceptions of Mexico's democracy. First, we identify voters who, *convinced that Mexico is democratic*, were willing in each wave of the questionnaire (before the campaign season, during it, and after the vote) to affirm their belief that Mexico is a democracy. Second were the *convinced skeptics*, who said in response to all three waves of questioning that Mexico was not a democracy. The final two groups contained respondents who reported having changed their opinion. The third, or *disappointed*, group was home to those who had gone from thinking that Mexico was a democracy to thinking that it was not. The fourth and final group—we call them the *optimists*—was filled with those who, despite prior misgivings, eventually became convinced that Mexico was in fact a democratic country.

The Table shows how the members of these four groups are distributed across the range of their self-reported voting behavior. The data

**TABLE—PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY BY REPORTED VOTE**

	CALDERÓN	MADRAZO	LÓPEZ OBRADOR	OTHER	TOTAL
Mexico is a democracy (all waves)	54.2% n=154	20.8% n=59	21.8% n=62	3.2% n=9	100% n=284
Mexico is NOT a democracy (all waves)	19.4% n=14	18.1% n=13	54.2% n=39	8.3% n=6	100% n=72
Disappointed (switched 'yes' to 'no')	27.3% n=24	13.6% n=12	54.6% n=48	4.6% n=4	100% n=88
Optimistic (switched 'no' to 'yes')	40.3% n=29	29.2% n=21	30.6% n=22	0.0% n=0	100% n=72
Total	42.8% n=221	20.4% n=105	33.1% n=171	3.7% n=19	100% n=516

Pearson  $\chi^2(9)=67.94$ ; Pr=0.00

The *Mexico 2006 Panel Study* consisted of three waves: the first one carried out October 7–10 and 15–18 (n=2,400); the second one carried out May 3–16 (n=1,770); and the third one carried out July 15–30 (n=1,594). Federal elections were held on 2 July 2006. A total of 1,378 respondents were interviewed in all three waves, which included an oversample for the Federal District and rural areas. The Table shows data from the national sample only. Further information on the *Mexico 2006 Panel Study* is available at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/mexico06/index.htm>.

are somewhat encouraging, since more than half the voters interviewed systematically indicated their belief that Mexico was a democracy, while only 14 percent consistently rejected this assessment. The remaining 31 percent wavered in their opinion during the course of the campaign, with roughly half this group ending up disillusioned and the other half optimistic. Those convinced of Mexico’s democratic character were more than twice as likely to support Calderón rather than AMLO, while convinced skeptics were nearly three times more likely to support AMLO over Calderón.

As expected, “disappointed” voters reported much higher levels of support for one of the losing candidates than did “optimistic” voters. According to the data, one’s perception of Mexico as either democratic or nondemocratic was strongly associated with the victory or defeat of one’s favored candidate, exactly as the authors of the “losers’ consent” study would expect.<sup>12</sup> It would, however, be helpful to learn what lies behind the stable attitudes toward Mexican democracy, especially those independent of the specific election outcome. The structure of the study lends itself to such an inquiry, by allowing us first to identify groups with opinions that remained constant from before to after the election, and then to attempt to explain why these opinions have been held so steadily.<sup>13</sup>

The most important determinants of “democratic certainty” (whether it is the “positive” certainty that democracy is present or the “negative” certainty that it is absent) are contextual and political variables. Highly educated individuals’ opinion of Mexico’s democracy was slightly more volatile, but was not statistically distinguishable from opinion among less-educated groups. In particular, some of the same variables that were

important in determining a voter's choice between AMLO and Calderón also seemed to be at work in distinguishing between convinced democrats and convinced skeptics. These variables were: 1) retrospective evaluations of Fox and the economy, and 2) favorable evaluations of AMLO and negative evaluations of Calderón, which in turn made it increasingly likely for an AMLO defeat to bring about electoral protest.

### Protest and Democratic Certainty

The above findings raise the possibility that not all electoral defeats have the same implications regarding the likelihood and nature of follow-on protests. What factors maximize the potential for protest? Can institutional arrangements be strong enough to induce attitudinal changes that will restrain outbreaks of protest after an election? After asking respondents during the course of the campaign whether they would take part in a postelection protest should their favored candidate denounce the outcome and urge them into the streets, we assessed a set of possible determinants, in particular including citizens' certainty regarding the democratic quality of Mexico.<sup>14</sup>

The results of our model are compelling: Those who felt sure that Mexico is a democracy, along with those whose opinions changed (for better or worse), and those who felt convinced that Mexico is *not* a democracy, were *all equally likely* to report themselves ready to protest the outcome of the election should their standard-bearer choose to contest it. Neither the credibility of the IFE as Mexico's electoral authority nor voters' confidence in the cleanliness of the election made any difference in the likelihood of a voter to protest.

The evidence shows that those with the highest likelihood to protest a disliked outcome were individuals with low education, and Mexico City residents with specific sociodemographic characteristics such as old age and low income—both groups being the target of social programs that AMLO instituted early in his mayoralty. The same is true for voters who hewed to more extreme ideological views (whether of the right or the left),<sup>15</sup> partisans of all stripes,<sup>16</sup> and AMLO sympathizers who felt completely certain that their candidate would win. In other words, we found that those who felt strong emotional or ideological ties to a political party were more likely to protest in the event of their candidate losing, no matter how clean they thought the election had been, whether or not they perceived Mexico as a democracy, or how much they trusted the election's official arbiter.

Similarly, while opinions about Mexico's democracy and its institutions made little difference in explaining the potential for protest, mobilized partisan bases, and in particular those of the PRD, were found to align closely with segments of the electorate that had a higher latent potential for protest—in particular in Mexico City, which was the scene

of the largest demonstrations. Although strong partisans of all stripes were (not surprisingly) more likely to protest than were voters who failed to identify with any party, PRD partisans exhibited a much greater propensity to protest than did backers of the PAN or the PRI (the effect was about 50 percent stronger).

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***AMLO's complaint about a "stolen election" should be understood as part of a long-term gamble to strengthen his movement's position in Mexico's ideological spectrum.***

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Moreover, potential for protest was strongly influenced by campaign dynamics: Those who said that they would definitely vote for AMLO, and who were completely certain that he would win, were substantially more likely to say that they would engage in protest, implying that expectation of victory is one obvious reason behind the finding that close elections lead to protests. The survey results show that AMLO's supporters were more likely to protest than were Calderón's. Frustration with electoral defeat, especially among partisans, prompts individuals to engage in protests. Yet some partisans might have greater reasons to be frustrated—perhaps because they have been out of power for a longer time, or because the history of their movement and the context of the campaign make it harder to accept defeat. In the case of the Mexican election, two reasons made this defeat tougher to swallow: For one, the PRD has never held the presidency and was actually born from a failed attempt to capture this post in 1988, in an election that produced substantial evidence of fraud.<sup>17</sup> Second, the *desafuero* affair strengthened misgivings among AMLO and his followers as to the overall fairness of the country's political institutions.

Interestingly, the social bases of protest in Mexico show a pattern more consistent with "mobilized" rather than "spontaneous" participation: It was not those with higher resources, education, or status who professed the most willingness to take the streets, but rather such readily mobilizable groups as the elderly, the less educated, and the poor. Union membership played little role in the propensity to be mobilized for protest. A larger factor was perhaps membership in clientelistic networks, hence the greater likelihood of protest among those belonging to groups targeted for benefits by Mexico City social programs.<sup>18</sup>

In light of these findings, AMLO's decision to contest the election and mobilize massive protests appears completely rational. His partisan base and campaign strategy allowed him to rouse the support of those individuals with the lowest income and levels of education, in particular those in Mexico City, who were easily cooptable through selective incentives. Moreover, his repeated claims that obstacles were relentlessly raised to his pursuit of the presidency by "the system"—which in his telling was represented by the Fox administration and the Calderón

candidacy, and comprised powerful private interests alongside the leadership of the IFE and the TEPJF—take on a new meaning. As much support as AMLO enjoyed among those convinced that Mexico was not a democracy, neither the IFE's credibility, nor perceptions of democracy, nor expectations of a clean election made a difference at the mass level. Nevertheless, AMLO's ability to add a "stolen election" to the stock of injustices committed against him and his followers by those in favor of "neoliberal" economic policies should be understood as a long-term gamble to strengthen his movement's position in Mexico's ideological spectrum, which before democratization had included a prominent prodemocracy-versus-antidemocracy dimension that had seemed mostly resolved by the year 2000.<sup>19</sup>

But the 2006 election proved that a well-regarded candidate with a credible left-wing economic platform might not be enough for the PRD to win the presidency. By renewing Mexico's apparently dormant *political* (that is, democratic-versus-antidemocratic) dimension of conflict, and placing everyone except his own backers on the "authoritarian" end of the spectrum, AMLO is attempting to generate a broader political base for his movement as well as greater long-run differentiation from both the PAN and the PRI. Interestingly, the future credibility of electoral processes might become a minor ingredient in this gamble—after all, most people do believe Mexico is a democracy, contested election and all. In a sense, AMLO's bet is a wager that Mexico's *other* political institutions—especially those in charge of governance and enforcing the law—will show themselves unable to improve in fairness, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Looking beyond the Mexican case, it is apparent that our study builds upon previous analyses of protest in the aftermath of close elections in young democracies. We show that such elections are not *necessarily* preludes to political protest, since losers are not always equally likely to be mobilized. But even relatively strong and credible electoral institutions might not be enough to quell political protest in the presence of a polarizing campaign, especially if leaders and parties can effectively mobilize losers' underlying attitudes and electoral frustration.

Although our survey evidence does not suggest that flawed institutions were the principal cause of the protest, institution-building remains an imperative for Mexico. Better, more realistic regulation that effectively tackles problems such as the abuse of governmental resources before and during election campaigns is essential to achieving cleaner elections. The same is true in terms of enhancing the damaged credibility, autonomy, and regulatory effectiveness of electoral authorities. But our research clearly shows that these measures cannot, by themselves, be expected greatly to reduce the potential for protest. Rather, these institutional improvements are geared to altering politicians' incentives to engage in antisystem strategies. In this respect, the decision by

AMLO's electoral coalition, now called the Broad Progressive Front, to take its seats in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate could be seen as a basic indicator of the electoral framework's success and a favorable sign for the future. But it may also announce a more complex strategy, in which this leftist Front straddles both sides of the institutional game, deferring when politically expedient, defying when not.

However that may be, our results also underscore that the patterns of protest seen after Mexico's stunningly close 2006 election may be less democratic and less productive than many believe. Clientelistic, partisan-led protests that mobilize society's most susceptible elements are far from the kind of autonomous, grassroots participation that forcefully expresses substantive popular demands.<sup>20</sup>

For the time being, Mexico's political leaders face an enormous challenge. They must break the incentives for gridlock that have pervaded the system over the last decade, and engage in the kind of policy making that will promote greater levels of welfare and social justice. Should such an effort succeed, it might make Mexico's citizens less vulnerable to political manipulation and clientelistic mobilization—by any political party, winner or loser, sore or not.

#### NOTES

The authors wish to thank Alejandro Moreno and the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma* for access to its 2006 exit poll; and Marco Fernández for his comments on an earlier version. Alejandro Poiré acknowledges financial support from the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University.

1. We examined AMLO's charges and found no evidence of systematic wrongdoing that could have benefited Calderón's vote total. See Alejandro Poiré and Luis M. Estrada, "Allegations of Fraud in Mexico's 2006 Presidential Election," paper delivered at the 102<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, September 2006.

2. See Alejandro Poiré, "El Bueno, el Malo y la Incógnita: Ensayo Sobre las Primarias Partidarias del 2005," *Bien Común* 11 (December 2005): 7–10.

3. Ultimately, "[t]he Supreme Court . . . upheld Madrazo's contention that campaign spending was an internal state matter" and the case was filed. Susana Berruecos, "Electoral Justice in Mexico: The Role of the Electoral Tribunal under New Federalism," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35 (November 2003): 810.

4. For a review, see Jorge I. Domínguez, "The Scholarly Study of Mexican Politics," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 20 (Summer 2004): 377–410, esp. 405–10.

5. We assess the independent casual effect of each of the explanatory variables on the probability of voting for each of the three major candidates, using a multinomial logit model. For model coefficients and other detailed statistical information, see [www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/PoireGraphics-18-1.pdf](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/PoireGraphics-18-1.pdf).

6. See Beatriz Magaloni, "Is the PRI Fading? Economic Performance, Electoral Accountability, and Voting Behavior," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Alejandro Poiré, eds., *Toward Mexico's Democratization: Parties, Campaigns, Elections, and Pub-*

*lic Opinion* (London: Routledge, 1999), 203–36.

7. The more intense the partisan allegiance, the more biased the analyses and interpretation of the political environment. See Donald Stokes, “Party Loyalty and the Likelihood of Deviating Elections,” in Angus Campbell et al., eds., *Elections and the Political Order* (New York: Wiley, 1966).

8. Left-right ideology does not influence the Madrazo vote, underscoring his explicit appeals on the campaign trail to centrist voters.

9. See Christopher J. Anderson and Silvia M. Mendes, “Learning to Lose: Election Outcomes, Democratic Experience, and Political Protest Potential,” *British Journal of Political Science* 36 (January 2006): 91–111.

10. Anderson and Mendes, “Learning to Lose,” 91.

11. Participants in the *Mexico 2006 Panel Study* include Andy Baker, Kathleen Bruhn, Roderic Camp, Wayne Cornelius, Jorge Domínguez, Kenneth Greene, Joseph Klesner, Chappell Lawson (principal investigator), Beatriz Magaloni, James McCann, Alejandro Moreno, Alejandro Poiré, and David Shirk. Funding was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-0517971) and *Reforma*; fieldwork was conducted by *Reforma* under the direction of Alejandro Moreno.

12. Anderson and Mendes, “Learning to Lose,” 94.

13. The discussion in the next paragraph stems from a multinomial logit model of “democratic certainty,” where the dependent variable had three categories: convinced Mexico is a democracy, convinced Mexico is not a democracy, and opinion switchers.

14. The discussion in this paragraph and the ones below uses results of a logit model where potential for protest, as measured in the second wave of the panel, was the dependent variable.

15. This result is consistent with Anderson and Mendes, “Learning to Lose,” 103–104.

16. With the exception of PRI partisans in Mexico City, where this party has very weak support.

17. The evidence suggests that the fraud was not meant to stop a PRI defeat, but to guarantee a PRI majority in the Chamber of Deputies. See Arturo Sánchez Gutiérrez, ed., *Elecciones a Debate, 1988: Las Actas Electorales Perdida* (Mexico City: Diana, 1994).

18. For a critique of López Obrador’s performance, including his clientelistic policy making, see Roger Bartra, “Fango Sobre la Democracia,” *Letras Libres*, September 2006, 16–22.

19. See Juan Molinar Horcasitas, *El Tiempo de la Legitimidad: Elecciones, Autoritarismo y Democracia en México* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1991), 171–200 for the original description of the two dimensions of the party system, and Beatriz Magaloni and Alejandro Poiré, “The Issues, the Vote, and the Mandate for Change,” in Jorge I. Domínguez and Chappell Lawson, eds., *Mexico’s Pivotal Democratic Election: Candidates, Voters, and the Presidential Campaign of 2000* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press and Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 2004), 293–319, for an assessment of issue voting in the 2000 elections.

20. Anderson and Mendes discuss the latter type of protest in “Learning to Lose,” 98.