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Mexican voters choose between left, right

MEXICO CITY, Mexico (AP) -- After a campaign that split open Mexico's deep class divisions, voters went to the polls Sunday to choose between a free-spending leftist who pledges to put the poor first or a conservative career politician who says private investment and free markets are the road to prosperity.

The presidential election is the first since Vicente Fox's stunning victory in 2000 ended 71 years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

It will determine whether Mexico becomes the latest Latin American country to move to the left.

Conservative Felipe Calderon of Fox's party faces leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a former Mexico City mayor, the PRI's Roberto Madrazo, and two other candidates.

Also being elected were five governors and both houses of Congress.

Fox showed his ink-stained thumb to TV camera crews after voting across the street from the presidential residence in Mexico City with his wife, Marta Sagahun, and daughter, Ana Cristina Fox.

He posed with voters for photos and told reporters that "we can ensure that this election day is going to be to the liking of all Mexicans. So it is a happy day for Mexico."

Mexican law limits presidents to one term, and Fox plans to retire to his ranch in December after his replacement is sworn in.

Officials hoped to announce a winner within hours of the 8 p.m. (0100 GMT) closing of the last poll, based on a quick count. But they cautioned they would wait if the race was too close.

Luis Carlos Ugalde, the president of the Federal Electoral Institute, said shortly after the polls opened that he expected the elections to be "peaceful and orderly."

The estimated 10 million Mexicans living in the United States were allowed to vote from abroad for the first time, but the 41,000 ballots they requested weren't likely to make much of a difference.

The effort, thrown together late last year to beat electoral deadlines, wasn't well publicized in the United States.

Thousands of those who missed out were heading south Sunday to cast votes at ballot centers set up along the border.

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