

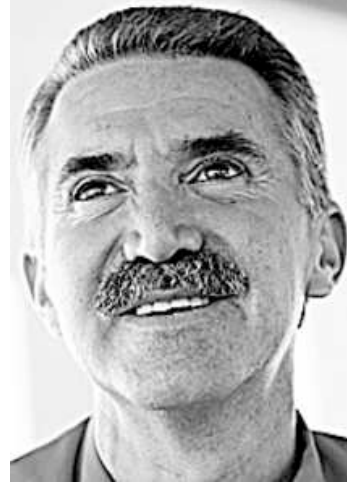
Mexican voters decide today whether to turn left

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A farmer works on a cactus field near a wall painted with the name of presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD, in Milpa Alta. Mexico is holding its presidential elections today.



CUAUTITLAN, Mexico — A deeply divided Mexico goes to the polls today to decide whether to stick with the U.S.-friendly policies of President Vicente Fox or to clean house. At the end of the most competitive, negative campaign in Mexican history, the results of the two-man, left-vs.-right race could be even more important to the prosperity of the United States' southern neighbor than Fox's landmark victory six years ago.

Perlita Hernandez Monteyo, 33, plans to vote for Fox ally Felipe Calderon. Why? As a result of the conservative Fox's "government of change," her family qualified for a housing credit that allowed them to own their first home and feel part of a small but growing middle class.

Hilda Cruz Martinez, 30, will vote for former Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Her family lives in a two-room shack with no running water and only hijacked electricity. She said she believes only a fresh start with the leftist ex-mayor will help poor people like her have a decent life.

"Our hope is with him," Cruz said. "From Fox, I saw nothing."

The two families' dreams and passions explain why the race

between Lopez Obrador and Calderon is so close and divisive, and why Mexico faces such a crossroads so soon after Fox ended 71 years of one-party rule by the corrupt Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, whose candidate is trailing badly this time.

The results matter greatly to the United States. A Lopez Obrador victory would put Mexico among a growing number of Latin American nations ruled by leftists suspicious of U.S.-backed policies. And the candidates have far different ideas about how to create jobs and end the nightmare of millions of people fleeing illegally over the border.

The two countries' billions of dollars in trade also could be affected. Calderon talks about making Mexico a private investor's heaven. Lopez Obrador speaks of reining in the excesses of globalization and renegotiating "unfair" parts of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement.

While Mexicans breathed a sigh of relief when the attack ads ended by law last Wednesday, a record 40 million are expected to vote. On one side is a prospering, optimistic Mexico, mainly residing in the more urban north and best positioned to

benefit from the pro-business path pushed by Fox. It is of this Mexico that Fox boasts when he notes that 19 percent of Mexican households have computers and 62 percent have washing machines while 1.1 million new cars hit the road last year.

On the other side is a disappointed Mexico, still waiting for the change that Fox promised in 2000. It resides mostly in the rural south, where few if any benefits arrived from NAFTA, farmers have watched their markets disappear and more and more people are a decision away from illegally migrating.

"It is indeed two Mexicos, and that helps us understand why people are so passionate for and against these candidates," said Gabriel Guerra, a political analyst. "The problem is that each camp exaggerated what the other side stands for."

Campaigning ended Wednesday with the ex-mayor slightly ahead in most polls, having struggled to recover from scathing attacks by Calderon and business leaders who called him "a danger to Mexico."

U.S. officials have remained officially neutral, saying they can work with whomever wins. Denise Dresser, a prominent Mexican political commentator, said she believes the fear of

Lopez Obrador hides a reluctance in Mexico to acknowledge itself as "a country profoundly and painfully unequal."

"His candidacy is a symptom," she said in a speech to the American Chamber Mexico organization. "A symptom of what? That there are too many Mexicans for whom the country doesn't work. That there are too many Mexicans for whom 'more of the same' means 'worse of the same.' "

She noted that 17 million Mexicans live in extreme poverty, 94 percent of crimes are unsolved and 40 percent of women suffer from domestic violence. Meanwhile, impunity is common for corruption and a tiny business elite enjoys government-sanctioned monopolies. "That is what should scare Mexicans," she said.

With the race so close, the margin of victory likely will come from the at least 8 percent of voters who were undecided. They include women, youths and middle-class voters frustrated with the stark choice between candidates and the mudslinging. Or the margin could come from PRI voters splitting off to vote for Lopez Obrador or Calderon because their candidate, Roberto Madrazo, continued to lag in

third place.

Democratic gains have not eliminated shenanigans. United Nation observers and others have uncovered some vote-buying and vote-twisting schemes.

But election officials have downplayed any irregularities. They say they don't expect trouble either during the vote or after, despite concerns that Lopez Obrador supporters will take to the streets if he loses.