



No AMLO

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This month, Mexican voters enjoyed their second truly democratic presidential election since the 2000 vote ended seven decades of single-party rule. For their good faith, they wound up with a minor squabble that's become a major controversy.

It isn't a real crisis like the 1988 election. Then, the ruling party won when results changed during a suspicious computer outage. Rather, it's the sort of crisis that occurs when the contest is close, candidates get anxious, and bad judgment goes on a roll.

Both leading contenders helped stoke the fires, but one clearly more than the other.

Months before the elections, former Mexico City mayor and candidate for the leftist Democratic Revolutionary party (PRD) Andrés Manuel López Obrador (he's known as AM-

LO for his initials) snubbed the first televised debate. Closer to the election, he questioned the professionalism of Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and predicted fraud on election day, strategically planting doubts in the process.

For his part, conservative Felipe Calderón of the National Action party (PAN) claimed in TV ads that AMLO would rule like Venezuela's authoritarian president Hugo Chávez. López Obrador responded that Calderón stood for the rich while he served the poor, thus framing the debate as a class struggle — a dangerous thing in Mexico where 40 percent of the population lives under the poverty line and only 60 percent of youths enroll in secondary school.

As tallies came in on election night, IFE president Luis Carlos Ugalde told TV viewers that with less than a

percentage point separating the two candidates, it wasn't possible to predict the outcome until tally sheets from all 300 electoral districts were tabulated – a process that could take days.

Within minutes, AMLO told a national TV audience that he had won by more than 500,000 votes. "I ask that electoral authorities respect our results," he warned. Calderón then felt compelled to pronounce, "We have not the slightest doubt that we've won the presidential election."

Later, AMLO claimed there were 3 million missing votes, which all parties knew were on tally sheets that were hard to read or filled out wrong. Calderón was still ahead when those votes were added in. By the end of IFE's full tabulation on July 6, the PAN candidate had won by a slim margin of 244,000 out of some 41 million votes.

In the bad old days, when the ruling Institutional Revolutionary party dominated government through bribes and vote rigging, just about every election was a crisis. Since 2000, Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute has conducted efficient, transparent contests with easy-to-read paper ballots. Just big X's next to names and party symbols. Invited to observe, the European Council reported "a grade of transparency and confidence on the part of the population in the political process without precedent and rarely observed in the rest of the world."

Although, PRD poll workers noted a

smooth vote on election day, López Obrador alleged fraud in ever more hyperbolic terms. The following Saturday, he called crowds of PRD faithful into Mexico City's Zócalo or central square to press for a full hand recount and even a supreme court decision to declare the election illegal. Specific ballot packages may only be unsealed if there is evidence of mistakes or tampering and the high court doesn't hear electoral disputes.

Few outside the PRD are following AMLO's lead. Intellectuals like Carlos Fuentes and politicians otherwise in sync with his liberal agenda don't think the election was rigged. The more AMLO invents charges and whips crowds into hysterics, the more he looks like a dangerous demagogue. Asked by reporters if he would accept a loss confirmed by a full recount, he said he won the election and would not give it up.

Though quick to anger, AMLO's not dumb. And while he may not obtain a complete recount, he monopolize center stage as he claims the rich "stole victory from the poor." That makes it crucial for Felipe Calderón to make the poor his priority. Fortunately his predecessor, President Fox, has laid a broad foundation for that through free market reforms that have ensured economic growth and balanced accounts.

While AMLO would use impose higher corporate taxes to pay for social programs, making Mexico less competitive in global markets, Calderón must make the marketplace, rule of law, and better educa-

tion accessible to Mexico's less prosperous multitudes. Employment will only rise when Mexico is more competitive and job seekers have more choices.

Despite the anxiety, a close election can be a blessing. It educates voters about the process, and shows that choices truly depend on who casts a ballot. When all the dust settles, it'll

be up to Felipe Calderón to combine AMLO's concern for the poor with the PAN's reasoned free-market policies to steer Mexico in the right direction. But first, López Obrador needs to state his complaint. And if he loses, learn to accept defeat honorably unless he wants to confirm fears that he is, indeed, another Hugo Chávez..

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