

MEXICO - The Candidacy and Post-Electoral Insurgency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador: a case study of electoral political strategy (by Dan Lund, MUND Americas)

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[MUND Américas](#) - The current moment in Mexican politics began in 2003 with the clear emergence of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as the leading candidate for President in Mexico and ended with the closure of the formal election process. It is likely to serve as a seminal period for the study of political culture, campaigns, elections and public opinion. Of course what is happening did not begin in 2003 nor will it end anytime soon. Nonetheless, there is coherence to the notion of this period as the “long campaign” with the emergence of the electoral left in a competitive position nationally, as well as a left movement challenging institutional privilege and competence.

Many things will become clearer with time and perspective, however it seems irresponsible not to attempt some preliminary hypotheses with the material at hand. The following is an attempt to take advantage of some of the opportunities I have had as a survey researcher and polling analyst to be “close up” to some of the processes. [1]

My focus is on the candidacy of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as a guiding thread to understand the emergence of a potent left electoral option in Mexico, and an orientation for the post-electoral insurgency. This is not a history of the Left, nor of left electoral politics. It is not a systematic review of political preferences over time, or in the campaign. It is not an analysis of the polemics over the role of the IFE, the President or any other actor in the process, nor to the dynamics of negative advertising, new to Mexico in this election. [2]

It is difficult to identify one problem area that could reveal the essence of what is at stake. For now, it has seemed best to focus on the dominant figure of López Obrador. He has been setting a significant part of the political agenda for this period, and is likely to do so for the coming period.

A reasonable contribution to this phase is a preliminary evaluation of what can be gleaned of his trajectory as a leader, with specific reference to political culture. Much of my perspective has been developed over the past decade in the course of following the relevant discussions in the press and academic circles, doing some modest public opinion projects that touch on the work of the various parties, and paying attention to what people say.

There is one reference I find myself returning to again and again, and it is a core part of this paper (itself part of a larger effort at analysis)—namely, the personal transcriptions from nearly eight years of interviews with José Barberán, distinguished member of the Punto Crítico collective in the 1980s, participant and critic of election processes in the period of 1988 through 2002, and close collaborator with Andrés Manuel López Obrador up until Barberán’s untimely death from cancer. José Barberán deserves more serious scholarly acknowledgement that I can give him, but my intellectual debt to him should be clear from a review of the footnotes to this study.

AMLO is a polemical figure, attracting extreme characterizations and evaluations, from intemperate criticisms to uncritical admiration. His balance of judgment even his sanity are regularly questioned. [3] Meanwhile prayers are said on his behalf in some churches, and people have begun to define their politics as “andresmanuelista.” [4] His ambitions are suspected, and portrayed as personal vanity. Others shrug

off hyperbole and note his emerging presence as what English history scholars refer to as a “man of history.”

The long electoral campaign and the extraordinary initial post-electoral protest period give us elements for an evaluation of some of the elements, based on both quantitative and qualitative research. Much of the argument here depends on an integration of insights from qualitative studies. As usually the case with such materials, their best use is in crafting hypotheses and establishing points of departure for later quantitative work.

Our point of departure is the commonly expressed elite opinion that AMLO is a skilled mass leader, who really does not understand modern electoral politics. Coincident with this notion is that of AMLO as a media primitive, someone unable to engage modern communication in a mass society. This view of elite criticism was crystallized in the New York Times editorial of August 29, 2006, mixing Olympic detachment with Delphic observation: “Mr. López has flaws that apparently kept him from the Presidency.” [5]

Just as reasonable people differ on the characterization of the campaign in Mexico, the evaluation of the vote process, so reasonable people differ on the characterization of the leading figure and his project. Our research, organized in summary and initial fashion, leads me to conclude that he is a man of his place and time who is a skilled electoral political operator and a shrewd strategist with regard to the media.

He is operating with some significant disadvantages political and financially, and so he has tended toward what might be described as insurgent styles in electoral politics and media usages. If Mexico were a well-developed formal democracy, much of what AMLO has attempted in electoral strategies and media tactics would be regarded as innovative. But, because Mexico is still very early in the process of a transition of its institutions from a long-standing, and persistent, authoritarian party-state, with degrees of limited tolerance, cooptation and cooperation, his innovative approaches take on the character of institutional challenges. [6]

To suggest some of the argument around his identify as a political operative focused, if not obsessed, with electoral strategy, we will look briefly at his emergence from Tabasco, his development of the center/southeastern strategy for the PRD, and the Chiapas gubernatorial election as a form of symbolic closure to the summer election period.

Tabasco, origins for the insurgent electoral focus

The image of López Obrador as the leader of masses provoking tensions came with his emergence on the national scene as a political protestor from Tabasco. [7] With regard to his home state of Tabasco, he has been part of a transitional political period there in which the party electoral balance has changed dramatically in a little over one decade. As an election- focused politician, his goals appear consistent: to win elections, and to win them by votes, to accept defeat where it is indicated, but to protest where defeat is by fraud.

In 1988, López Obrador was the candidate for Governor of the Frente Democrático, sharing the ballot with Cuahatemoc Cárdenas as the candidate for President of the Republic. He acknowledged that they lost the election, but that the process was corrupt in any event. [8]

In 1994, López Obrador was again the candidate for Governor, this time with the newly formed PRD. The election has been analyzed to some degree, and merits further research as a case study in the early transition period of electoral democracy. [9] It is clearly the crucible in which the style of electoral campaign and post-electoral protest was formulated.

López Obrador lost the election to Madrazo in 1994, gaining 39% of the votes to Madrazo's 57% in the official tallies. However, the post-electoral process was more important in terms of charges and then significant evidence of fraud and massive illegal campaign spending. [10], culminating in the context of la Caravana para la Democracia, mass march on Mexico City. [11]

The protest movement eventually segued into preparation for the coming election. The gubernatorial election in Tabasco in 2000 was controversial with the PRI eventually winning after the Federal Electoral Tribunal ordered a new election. The final result of the second election was a clear 4% victory for the PRI, and was certified. The protest following this election was symbolic and locally cathartic, but no more.

Thus, in the space of six years from 1994 to 2000 the electoral dynamics of Tabasco had shifted and would continue to do so in the following years. This October 15th, 2006, the PRD lost the governorship again to the PRI but kept a majority of municipalities and control of the State Legislature.

López Obrador would appear to be a product of his understanding of Mexican history and the texture of electoral processes. Reasonable people can disagree about his judgment and his approach in any given situation, however his general orientation looks more than anything else like a combination of the long view of history and the immediate timetable of elections.

The Southeastern Strategy, natural point of departure for the electoral left

López Obrador came to the national stage of electoral politics through the Presidency of the PRD in the later half of the 1990s. Early on in his term, López Obrador began to articulate a long-term electoral strategy for the party – the Southeastern Strategy, achieving deep electoral presence in the municipalities, districts and States of Southeastern Mexico. [12] It was clear after a decade of PAN electoral advances in the North (beginning with the dramatic challenges to election results in 1985) that a regional differentiation of party preferences was going to accompany the democratic transition. [13]

More than just a natural territorial base familiar to López Obrador, the Southeastern strategy provided the best opportunity to apply the two key features of the long-term electoral challenges: understanding the continued fragmentation of the PRI at every level; and, developing a broad movement for the reform of institutions. [14]

PRI fragmentation has been a fact of Mexican political life especially since before the 1985 surge of the PAN in the northern State elections, abetted by new and significant PRI desertions, and the 1988 formation of the Democratic Front headed by Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, also abetted by significant PRI refugees. This fragmentation process has been a part of both PAN and PRD strategic conceptions for some time.

The element of popular support for change and reform became clear in the political dynamics and opinion studies of the 1990s. Local, national and international research confirmed the consistent majorities in favor of change, even radical change. [15] The best vehicles for radical change were seen to come from outside the PRI.

The key element for understanding what most people have meant by “change” and “radical change” in the various studies has been identified in follow up studies by a number of centers and companies. MUND Américas has surveyed national populations in Mexico since the late 1990s, including up through July-August of 2006, with open-ended questions about defining change and radical change.

Given the Mexican context, it will come as no surprise that the focus of change relates to the institutions that are a legacy of the Mexican Revolution (public education, public health, separation of church and state, independent branches of government). The definition of change is that these institutions function as they should – nothing more complicated, nor more radical than that.

In a national post-electoral study conducted by MUND Américas this past summer, we found 62% in favor of “more change” or “radical change” with regard to the institutions. [16]

When we coded the open ended part of the question, “For you, what is “more change” or “radical change” in the government? it came out like this:

- that the institutions function as they should: 83% of the 62% who favored more or radical change; viz.

nearly 52% of the total survey

- that we change the institutions completely: 3% of the 62% who favored more or radical change; viz. less than 2% of the total survey
- that there is a strong executive who can force or impose change: 5% of the 62% of who favored more or radical change; viz. 3% of the total survey
- that the military take over the executive branch of government: 2% of those who favored more or radical change; viz. 1% of the total survey
- other, various responses adding up to 7% of those who favored more or radical change; viz. 4% of the total survey.

Long-term electoral strategy, demographics of migration and emigration

While the Southeastern strategy was important as a jump start, the identification of the long term view for the PRD (or its integrated successor organization) was rooted in the rural/urban demographics of the region – constantly changing by way of internal migration and international emigration.

For example, the PRD's increasing challenge to the PRI in the State of Guerrero was linked to the dramatic growth of Acapulco as an urban center, with a strong service worker community. While the same was true in other urban centers throughout the country, the Southeastern states showed a particularly dramatic tendency.

Tuxtla Gutierrez in Chiapas grew more than 300% from 1980 to 2000, and again another 16% from 2000 to 2004. [17] San Cristóbal de Las Casas increased more than 200% from 1980 to 2000, and increased another 25% from 2000 to 2005. [18]

The new cities of the Southeast have been particularly fertile terrain for the electoral growth of the PRD. [19] In fact, the working hypothesis quickly emerged that the PRD's natural base was in the urban mass and not the rural oppressed. [20] The more the old village links were strained to breakage in the Southeast, the less influence the PRI seemed to have in some of the critical areas of the region.

While internal migration within the states dominates the movement of peoples in the region, the second strongest tendency is emigration for work to the United States. The process of mass emigration is relatively new to the region, beginning in the 1970s and becoming strong in the past three decades.

This tends to put the region well behind the Bajío in historic terms; emigration patterns in the center and Bajío area had been established as early as the 1920s. Given the newness of the dynamic, the disruption of family and community life in many areas of the South has a raw edge. People are painfully conscious of the dynamic, and have not internalized the process as inevitable.

Good polling and election data

An electoral strategy based on targeted base building, in significant part building on the fragmentation of the PRI, required a skillful use of solid polling data, including the critical use of exit polls on election day. Two examples will suffice to suggest how important a close reading of polls became for the strategy.

An important fragmentation of the Oaxaca PRI took place in 1997 and coalesced in the gubernatorial campaign of Hector Chávez López in 1998. There was enormous confusion over the polls. The problem spilled over into the election day, when the Rosenbluth Foundation (contracted by the PRD locally) went public with an exit poll showing a 3% margin for the PRD coalition over the PRI of José Murat. José Barberán, working for the CEN of the PRD, showed a solid margin in favor of the PRI. The final formal result was 49% for the PRI and 37% for the PRD coalition. [21]

The two contradictory results put the leadership in a bind. López Obrador, on site for the closing period of

the campaign, approved of the protest over vote fraud. However, given his reading of the late pre-electoral polls and the internal exit poll, a very limited period of protest was undertaken, as much for catharsis as anything else. [22]

The PRI, at least in official terms, has held its 49% of the electorate in Oaxaca. This was the margin of Ulises Ruiz against the 46% for Gabindo Cue's coalition six years later in 2004. Given the dynamics of the multi-front challenge to Ulises Ruiz in 2006, it is clear that Oaxaca will be back on the front burner in the Southeastern electoral strategy.

Guerrero has been a different story, but with some parallel elements. In 1999 the PRD campaign of Felix Salgado Macedonio came very close to beating the PRI candidate, Rene Juárez Cisneros. Early on election eve, the exit poll of TV Azteca showed a slight margin for the PRD, and the independent Indemerc exit poll, while incomplete because of claimed "official interferences" suggested the same. However, once again the Barberán CEN sponsored exit poll showed a margin for the PRI, slight but nonetheless clear. [23]

There were a series of protests following the election, especially focused on the "official" elements of interference with the process. However, the protests were symbolic and cathartic, not strategic. The final result of 50% for the PRI and 48% for the PRD confirmed the Barberán exit poll. [24]

Six years later, in 2005, the Guerrero gubernatorial campaign was very different. With a huge majority in Acapulco, and a growing urban presence everywhere, the PRD with Zeferino Torreblanca won 56% to the PRI's 43%. As in all relatively successful State level political exercises, the good results were a blend of good local candidates and preparation, and strong support from the national party.

Electoral strategy's benchmark success

The long and confusing 2006 electoral campaign did provide several moments of startling clarity. One of these was the electoral map projected on television monitor screens throughout the country on election eve and the following week. The central Southeast with the exception of Puebla and the Yucatán went for the candidacy of López Obrador, with a strong congressional vote on behalf of the Coalition for the Good of All. The 32 federal entities (31 States and the Federal District) were divided evenly, 16 and 16, by the PAN and PRD Coalition candidates.



Map by Electoral Preferences (MUNDAmericas)

Chiapas, conclusion to the electoral summer of 2006

The State of Chiapas has not come later than many other States (south, center and north) to the process of transition to democracy. As with a number of other States, Chiapas has played an important role historically for the PRI as bastion of votes, extra votes when needs be. And, as with other States Chiapas has experienced the rich panoply of political development along with the continued fragmentation of the PRI.

The Governorship election of 1995 (postponed one year because of the Zapatista uprising) showed a PRI in fragmentation: PRI 51%, PRD 35%, others 14%. Five years later in 2000, the blue tide of Fox impacted Chiapas and helped a broad coalition of everybody but the PRI to a 53%-46% victory in the candidacy of Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía.

Chiapas, as with a number of other states, continued to develop enormous flexibility and fluidity in electoral alliances, and in 2006 the PRI (aided at the last minute by an informal coalition of the PAN and the Panal) confronted the PRD/PT/C Coalition for the Good of All. This time there was another national tide: PRD/PT/C Candidate Juan Sabines 553,270 over PRI (with shadow coalition) 546,988. There was a difference of less than 1% (0.53%), or 6,282 votes.

The attention paid to Chiapas on August 20, 2006 was appropriate to the importance of Chiapas in itself, but also a reflection of testing the electoral strength of AMLO and the Coalition for the Good of All, after more than a month of intense and well-publicized post-election protest.

One nearly overlooked element in the close election is that the vote for Sabines was nearly identical to the vote for López Obrador seven weeks earlier. López Obrador won the Presidency vote in Chiapas as a non-PRI candidate for the first time, with 551,749 votes. Sabines won with less than 2,000 more votes than López Obrador had established as what would appear to be a benchmark for the plurality level of the PRD in coalition.

The election in Chiapas on its own did not “prove” anything about the post-electoral struggle, except that the protest was not a fatal campaign element for the López Obrador project. López Obrador had not made the local campaign “his” campaign, but he had worked with the local forces on another of the key pieces of the Southeastern strategy.

My working hypotheses for further research, by way of conclusions:

1) In the current context of Mexico, mass protest is an aspect of electoral politics.

Nonetheless, the leadership of the movement headed by López Obrador is consistently clear in public statements and expressions of both strategy and tactics that the winning of state power is by way of electoral politics.

The violence that is present in the country is clearly from the drug cartel wars, or from social protest that López Obrador does not direct. [\[25\]](#)

2) The concomitant aspect of an electoral strategy is to focus on executive initiative and legislative consideration.

Even in the current context, López Obrador has already submitted a major legislative initiative by way of his economic team in the Alternative Project government and the Coalition Senators (PRD, PT and Convergence).

The “comparative pricing” initiative addresses the problems of disproportionately high consumer prices for goods and services produced by the monopoly or non-competitive market sectors of Mexico (telecom among them).

It takes as its point of departure the hard data that Mexican consumers (in the main earning 50% to 10% of their Canadian and US counterparts are paying much more for equivalent services in Mexico compared to the US and Canada. [\[26\]](#)

3) Historically, when results show that the campaign López Obrador was coordinating to have lost, he has often authorized cathartic protest. [\[27\]](#)

When the electoral process and vote counting has been so deeply tainted as to be fraudulent in the extreme, in his perspective Tabasco in 1994 and Mexico Presidential in 2006, he challenged the results

directly without regard to catharsis.

This process with its insurgent elements is currently at play in Mexico and will continue for some time. [28]

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Notas

[1] This discussion is not an apology for López Obrador; he doesn't need one. It is an effort to take advantage of both the distance and engagement I have enjoyed in my three decades of living and working in Mexico to contribute to a discussion that is seen in largely caricatured terms outside of the country.

[2] Each and all of these themes merit separate and extended exploration.

[3] Diego Fernández de Cevallos has called López Obrador a "psycopath," Vicente Fox added "out of touch with reality", and Felipe Calderón in full campaign labeled him a "schizophrenic." All of which raises that intriguing question of how to file psychological evaluations offered of each other by passionate political competitors.

[4] MUND Américas, Focus Group Studies, Mexico Campaign 2006, "Religion and politics at the popular level: a consideration of the vocabulary of politics with religious symbolism on the Right and the Left" Dan Lund, November 15, 2006.

[5] *New York Times* Editorial, August 29, 2006.

[6] "Insurgent" is used here as non-traditional challenging of some of the basic tenant of a process, especially with regard to privilege and authority.

[7] Characteristic of this image was the initial campaign number of the popular magazine CONTENIDO (February, 2006) in Mexico. All three candidates were profiled with photographs. Calderón was presented as the Consolidator of the transition with two photographs: one of him with his family, another kissing his wife. Madrazo was presented as the "tercero en discordia" with one photograph: of the candidate with his wife. Meanwhile, López Obrador was the "populista" with four photographs: one as young man addressing a crowd in La Chontalpa, another with blood on his shirt after a protest in 1994, a third with Subcomandante Marcos and a fourth with René Bejarano.

[8] The argument is set out in his book of 1989, TABASCO, VICTIMA DE UN FRAUDE. This book marked the interruption of his multi-volume history series on Tabasco, in favor of more political writings: LOS PRIMEROS PASOS, TABASCO, 1820-1867, Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, 1985 and DEL ESPLENDOR A LA SOMBRA, LA REPÚBLICA RESTAURADA, 1867-1876 Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, 1987.

[9] Andrés Manuel López Obrador ENTRE LA HISTORIA Y LA ESPERANZA, CORRUPCIÓN Y LUCHA DEMOCRÁTICA EN TABASCO, 1995 Grijalbo.

[10] News photographs of the 1995 protest period often show Santiago Creel or Juan Molinar Horcastas (both citizen advocates for democracy in that period, now high ranking PANistas) seated at the same table as López Obrador reviewing or presenting data.

[11] The protest reaching México City was massive, agile and definitive in terms of some aspects of López Obrador's image.

[12] Transcription of interview by the author with José Barberán, June 10, 1999.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Transcription of interview by the author with José Barberán, July 14, 1999. The notion of constructing a new political force based on the fragmentation of the PRI and the popular hunger for change is common property between the PAN of Luis H. Alvarez and Manuel Clouthier, and the political heirs of Cuaúhtemoc Cárdenas.

[15] See results on line of the Latinobarómetro in México for the period of 1995 to 2005. Also, for reference, compare the studies on political culture of Consulta Mitofsky, Parametria, IPSOS-Bimsa, GEA-ISA, ARCOP, among others.

[16] Estudio Nacional, Post-Electoral, Cultura Política, Julio 28 a Agosto 12, 2006. MUND Américas, Informe Inicial por Dan Lund.

[17] Data drawn from the INEGI, 2000 Census Report; INEGI 2005 Census Update.

[18] Ibid.

[19] It was in the North and the Bajío that the PAN found its new oppositional base in the cities and at the municipal level. For the PAN this also included the Yucatán, the great exception to the Southeastern tilt toward the PRD.

[20] Transcription of interview by the author with José Barberán, December 12, 2000.

[21] Transcription of interview by the author with José Barberán, November 30, 1999.

[22] Ibid., "When Andrés is sure that an election has been lost, the idea of a cathartic protest makes sense. There is a need to protest the context and the unfairness of the overall process. But, beyond political catharsis, no. When he is convinced that an election has been won, he takes a different view." (author's translation).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] In any period of mass protest, even when dominated by a clearly identified pacifist current (see MUND Américas Opinion Bulletin #14, October 18, 2006), there is inevitably a more visible profile for all aspects of the left, non-electoral and electoral, violent and pacific. The profile does not mean these left currents have weight or actual significance. The hostile editorial notes of AMLO as violent are simply off the mark and constitute contentious (but of course legitimate) rhetoric whether they come from Televisa in Mexico, the Wall Street Journal or El País in Spain. Every historical witness, and a clear-eyed reading of the current period, show him to be as deeply committed to pacifism as his

historical models, Ghandi and King. This is what makes his leadership and movement to be likely resistant to ordinary repression. See Lorenzo Meyer, "Agenda Ciudadana", *La Reforma*, November 23, 2006.

[26] Iniciativa de Ley de Precios Competitivos. November 22, 2006.

[27] Catharsis in the Mexican political context is not seen as a dust-up or a physical fight. It is, as can be observed in Mexico, a full throated protest which clears the air for the time being.

[28] Deeper discussions of what has already happened can be undertaken in this context: for example, what happened on July 2 (Election Day), on September 1 (the protest inhibiting President Fox from delivering his State of the Nation address), on September 15 (the protest inhibiting President Fox from delivering the traditional Cry of Independence in the Mexico City Plaza, on October 15 (the mixed results in the Tabasco State elections in which the PRD coalition lost the Governorship once again, but preserved their majority of municipal governments and in the State Legislature), on November 20 (when López Obrador took the symbolic oath of office as the "Legitimate President"), and on December 1 (when Calderón took the oath of office as the Constitutional President of Mexico).