

MEXICO 2012: TRACKING DEMOCRACY IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

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The Rise of Enrique Peña Nieto and Return of the PRI

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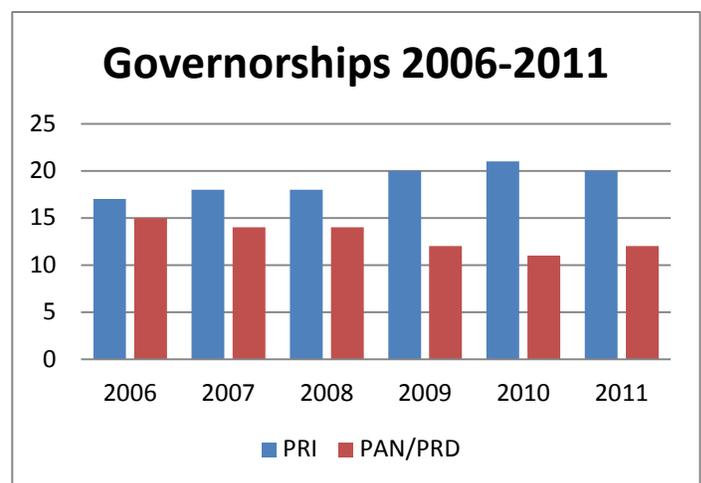
The prospect of the return of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) is no longer a novelty; in fact, most observers of Mexican politics now assume that the party is a shoe-in for electoral victory in July 2012. Whether this is accurate remains to be seen, but it is truly remarkable how the party has recovered from the shock of losing the presidency in 2000 and then the disastrous performance in the presidential election of 2006, in which the PRI was relegated to third place in the polls. Much of this recovery is due to the fact that it has adopted a strategic approach to regaining power since 2006, seeking unity among its members and elite factions and incorporating the opinions of the most astute of its senior figures, among them former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

However, in addition to the reawakening of the PRI's political machine, a large part of the organization's recent success is due to the discovery and promotion of Governor Enrique Peña Nieto, who has proven incredibly popular with Mexican voters and with the nation's media outlets. The rise of Peña Nieto and the return of the PRI as Mexico's dominant political party cannot be studied in isolation from each other. Both are important factors in defining the shape of the 2012 election campaign.

The Return of the PRI

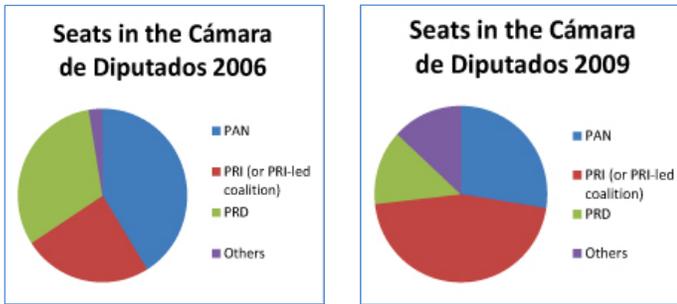
As discussed in the Mexican Elections blog in May, the return of the PRI is owed in large part to the many disappointments of the Felipe Calderón administration, the joint challenges of the Mexican economy and public insecurity due to the drug conflict, and an emerging nostalgia for the way Mexico was under successive PRI presidents. Its rehabilitation as a political force also owes much to the fact that it never left the political scene. The PRI may have lost its iron grip at the federal level with two unsuccessful presidential election campaigns, but it retained control of state governorships and gained congressional seats, thus boosting a nationwide presence in both political posts and public opinion. The governorships are particularly important given the rising amount of federal funds transferred to the states, funds that could, of course, be used for electioneering.

The key moment for the PRI occurred in the summer of 2009 when the party won a majority in the congressional elections. The victory meant that the PRI regained control of key committees in the Cámara de Diputados and the Senado and, thereby, gained a measure of control over federal

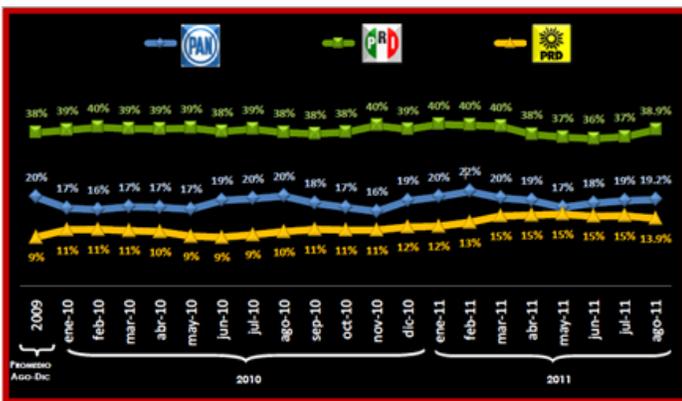


appropriations. Since then, the PRI has had the ability not only to block Felipe Calderón's spending plans but, more importantly, to push federal funds toward programs and areas of the country that could be used to generate support for the party and its candidate. The control of the Budget Committee stands out, but we can also point to the Communications, Radio and Television, National Defense, Agriculture and Water committees as key weapons in the PRI arsenal. With massive budgets and with enormous influence over social institutions, the PRI has used these commissions to prepare a path toward electoral victory.

In addition, the PRI has consistently maintained high public opinion ratings since the middle of the Calderón *sexenio*. At close to 40 percent, regardless of the candidate, the PRI has managed to garner more popular support than the other two parties combined throughout the past three years. This dedicated vote is unlikely to drop significantly over the next 10 months. Changes in preference in either of the other two main parties' support seem to come at the expense of the remaining party.



As for Peña Nieto’s rise, the PRI’s return is only part of the story. His association with Mexico state is a significant factor. Peña Nieto comes to the 2012 presidential campaign on the back of six years in power as governor, with powerful politicians behind him. He can claim a distinguished lineage in Mexican politics: although his father was an electrical engineer with the CFE, his uncle, Alfredo del Mazo González, was governor, as was his uncle’s father, Alfredo del Mazo Vélez.



Note: Mitofsky chart showing voter preference (without specifying candidate) since 2009 (reproduced with permission from Mitofsky).

Peña Nieto is also related, albeit distantly, to former governor Arturo Montiel, whom he succeeded in 2005. Montiel’s governorship was hugely popular, but his presidential bid failed following accusations of corruption, some of which came from his rival for the PRI candidacy in 2006, Roberto Madrazo. Under Montiel, Peña Nieto served in a succession of posts and formed part of the “Golden Boys” group in government—young, well-dressed men who were very much seen as the future of the party. From this group, he established himself as Montiel’s successor in late 2004, building support within the PRI and from a wide array of social institutions.

His alleged association with one of the most powerful, but mysterious political groups in Mexico may have been crucial

to his meteoric rise. The *Grupo Atacomulco*, reportedly dominated politics in Mexico state for years and exerted a considerable influence over national political outcomes. Arturo Montiel is believed to be the most senior member of the group today, and he is said to have used his influence to get *Atacomulco* behind Peña Nieto.

The creation of a political action group within the PRI dedicated to Peña Nieto’s presidential bid has also been key. *Expresión Política Nacional* (EPN) not only shares the same initials as the candidate, but has proven itself adept at raising funds, at developing a communications campaign, and at keeping Peña Nieto in the public eye. The origins of EPN are to be found in the *Fuerza Mexiquense* group, created for Montiel’s presidential bid six years ago.

The question of communication and public relations was identified by Peña Nieto’s team as far back as 2005, when it signed a long-term, multimillion dollar deal with Televisa, the country’s dominant TV network, to buy air time for the governor to promote his programs, provide coverage of his activities, and boost his presence in national news. The deal has been lucrative to Televisa and effective for Peña Nieto, as his camera-friendly image has been broadcast to the Mexican public giving him a visibility and recognition that is only matched by Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Along the way, Peña Nieto married a star of Televisa’s soap operas, Angelica Rivera, which provided extra coverage from the Mexican popular press and television media, with magazines such as *Cara*, *Quien*, and *Hola!* carrying multipage photo spreads of the wedding. Their marriage even received the personal blessing of Pope Benedict XVI as the couple visited Rome accompanied by senior ranking bishops from the Mexican church.

The media’s obsession with Peña Nieto and his private life has led commentator Carmen Aristegui to suggest that the 2012 election will be the first Mexican election to be decided by television. The involvement of both Televisa and TV Azteca (Mexico’s second TV network) with the former governor raises serious questions about impartiality. These are media monopolies that have felt threatened during the Calderón administration as the federal government tried to limit their power, and it therefore makes sense for them to build a relationship with, and drive the campaign of, a candidate who will likely be more sympathetic to them.

In addition to his connections to the church, powerful established groups within the PRI, and media monopolies (not to mention the growing link to the head of the teachers’ union, Elba Esther Gordillo), other question marks hang over Peña Nieto’s candidacy. One concerns his first wife, Monica Pretelini, who died under circumstances that

have never been adequately explained. Another involves his relationship to former president Carlos Salinas—a hugely controversial figure in Mexico and whose influence would be damaging to any candidate. There is evidence that Salinas has ties to the Peña Nieto camp, and that several members of Peña Nieto’s closest political collaborators in Mexico state are linked to Salinas, but it remains to be seen if Salinas himself is a force in the campaign.

At the time of writing, Peña Nieto continues to garner considerable support across Mexico. Whereas the PRI as a party receives around 40 percent support from the public, with Peña Nieto as its candidate for 2012, around 48 percent of the Mexican public says it would vote for the party, no matter who the opposition candidates are. This predominance in the polls has yet to be threatened, and for the other parties, time is running out.

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