Opposition Wins Majority in Mexican Vote

Miguel Tovar/Associated Press

A voter cast his ballot on Sunday in Mexico City. The party of the Mexican president became the second largest in Congress.

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MEXICO CITY — President [Felipe Calderón](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/felipe_calderon/index.html?inline=nyt-per) suffered a setback in midterm elections Sunday when the opposition Institutional Revolutionary Party unseated his party as the dominant force in[Mexico](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/mexico/index.html?inline=nyt-geo)’s fractured Congress.

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The vote heralded a renaissance in the opposition party, known as the PRI, which dominated Mexican politics for much of the 20th century. Its comeback reflected both the effects of the global economic crisis and voter weariness with the violence caused by the government’s crackdown on drug traffickers.

With 77 percent of the tally sheets counted early Monday, the PRI had won 36 percent of the vote to 27.5 percent for the president’s National Action Party, known as the PAN.

In a televised speech, Mr. Calderón recognized what he called the new composition of Congress and promised to work with legislators. But he neither mentioned the PRI by name nor congratulated it.

The president is personally popular, and his party tried to keep the campaign focused on the government’s popular social programs and its attack on organized crime. But that approach was clearly not enough in a year when the economy is expected to shrink by as much as 8 percent.

Although a majority of Mexicans still support Mr. Calderón’s battle against drug cartels, it has shown little sign of curbing the problem. On the contrary, almost 800 people were killed in drug-related violence in June, a record.

With the Sunday election result, the PAN became the second largest party in the lower house of Congress. In the Senate, which did not face election, it remains the largest party.

As partial results were being reported, Germán Martínez, the PAN leader, acknowledged that the PRI had won a simple majority of seats in the lower house. The PRI governed Mexico for 71 years before losing the presidency in 2000. In the 2006 elections, it lost more ground when its presidential candidate ran a distant third.

A nominally centrist party, the PRI has not directly opposed Mr. Calderón’s drug policies but campaigned on its experience and vague promises to improve security. Although the PRI did not win an outright majority, it will be able to pass legislation in alliance with smaller parties.

The partial count indicated that some 43 percent of voters went to the polls, which was more than expected by election officials, who had predicted 60 to 70 percent of voters to sit out the vote, which replaces all 500 members of the lower house, known as the Chamber of Deputies.

The PAN also fared badly in gubernatorial races, losing five. A sixth was unresolved late Sunday. Voters were also elected hundreds of mayors and local legislators.

The campaign had generated little voter enthusiasm. The signs of apathy were clear around Mexico City by midmorning. In the working-class suburb of Ecatepec, polling places were empty.

Ramón Velásquez, a 43-year-old accountant, said he had cast a null vote, marking his ballot with a large cross. “The truth is, politics are in a bad way, the country is in a bad way and the politicians don’t do anything to move it ahead,” he said. “Let’s hope lots of people cancel their vote and that it’s a wake-up call that this has to change, that this thirst for power that is impoverishing us has to end.”

The outcome promises to make Mr. Calderón’s final three years in office trying ones. Lacking an outright majority in the first half of his term, he was forced to bargain with the PRI, which watered down his key proposals on energy and tax reform.

Meanwhile, Mexico’s left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution, or P.R.D., has been hurt by an internal split. In the partial results late Sunday it had about 12 percent of the vote.

The party’s 2006 presidential candidate, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/l/andres_manuel_lopez_obrador/index.html?inline=nyt-per), who lost to Mr. Calderón by a sliver, is feuding with the party leadership and threw his support behind two small parties.

*Antonio Betancourt contributed reporting from Ecatepec, Mexico.*