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**A Departing Governor Looks Ahead to a Bigger Prize in Mexico**

**By ELISABETH MALKIN**

TLALNEPANTLA, Mexico — The most important candidate in Sunday’s election for governor here is the one who is not on the ballot.

Opinion polls for the race in Mexico State, which surrounds Mexico City, show that the candidate from the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, will win resoundingly.

But the bigger winner may be the state’s departing governor, Enrique Peña Nieto, the youthful, photogenic early front-runner in the 2012 presidential election campaign.

Analysts say that in passing the job on to a candidate from his party, Mr. Peña Nieto is gathering momentum for his national ambitions. Politicians from [Mexico](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/mexico/index.html?inline=nyt-geo)’s two other main political parties, beginning with President Felipe Calderón, view that prospect with trepidation, warning that the PRI’s unchecked spending, its advertising blitz and its handouts this year are merely a warm-up for 2012.

With 12 months to go before the presidential election, Mr. Peña Nieto holds a commanding lead in the early opinion polls. If that lead holds, he could return the PRI to power a dozen years after voters swept it out of office and ended 71 years of single-party rule sustained by patronage and corruption.

Mr. Peña Nieto, 44, makes an attractive candidate for an old party trying to persuade voters that it has changed. The other parties argue, though, that he is just a new face on the PRI’s authoritarian past.

“We are operating in the face of political machinery of the old school, but with a lot of money and a lot of technology,” said Manuel Camacho Solís, a leading member of the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD. Mr. Camacho accused Mr. Peña Nieto’s state government of aiding the PRI’s election campaign.

“What we are seeing is the return of the worst of the PRI,” he said.

Mr. Calderón, a member of the National Action Party, or PAN, who cannot run for a second term, put it more obliquely in a television interview last week. In a democratic election, he said, there should be a level playing field, well-monitored campaign spending and transparency in voting, “in short, well, everything that we have yearned for in Mexico and that apparently we had reached, and suddenly we will have to review again.”

The state of Mexico, where most of the population is concentrated in the vast middle- and working-class suburbs north and east of the capital, is a PRI bastion in local elections. While a loss in the governor’s race here would be a severe blow to Mr. Peña Nieto, a victory would build on a perception of strength but offer no guarantee of national success. Even here, the state’s almost 11 million voters can be fickle in national races, suggesting a more independent streak than the PRD and the PAN seem willing to grant them.

Opinion polls show Mr. Peña Nieto with more than 40 percent of the vote against possible contenders from the two other parties.

“We have a public opinion phenomenon in which the PRI is more attractive, more charming, more hopeful, in contrast with public policies that haven’t produced results,” said Lauro Mercado, a pollster with the independent Mercaie research company.

Although the election is still far off and neither the PAN nor the PRD has chosen their candidates yet, the parties will have to work hard to dent Mr. Peña Nieto’s popularity. None of the PAN’s potential candidates have generated much enthusiasm. The violence set off by Mr. Calderón’s war on drug cartels as well as a deep recession and an economic recovery that has yet to create many jobs have hurt the party’s standing. The PRD, meanwhile, is riven by internal feuding.

Since those parties first began to win local elections 20 years ago, “they have not shown that they are superior, or efficient or that they govern for the people,” said Alfonso Zárate, a political analyst. “It is the same PRI as always; it hasn’t transformed, but people still like them as they are.”

By focusing on the PRI’s past, the other parties may be making a mistake in their strategy, pollsters say.

At the local level, not only in the state of Mexico but in other large states, the PRI is viewed as efficient, with governors who build bridges and hospitals. Since torrential rains caused severe flooding in part of the state on Thursday, Mr. Peña Nieto has been seen on news broadcasts meeting with victims.

Time has also softened memories of the PRI’s worst excesses. About 30 percent of Mexican voters were younger than 18 when the PRI lost power in 2000.

“This thing of the PRI of the past, they’re talking about prehistory” to many people, said Francisco Abundis, a pollster with Parametria.

“You have to question how effective this will be and how receptive people will be to this strategy,” he said.

Still, the party’s campaign here is a reminder of how the PRI spares no expense, handing out gifts to voters during the campaign and patronage jobs once in power. The PRI’s candidate for governor, Eruviel Ávila, blanketed the state with advertising and packed his events with supporters. He kicked off his campaign with a promise to give cars to party operatives who could deliver him the most votes, and he handed out CDs of Mexican country music with his photo on the cover.

Starting in March, the PRD complained to the PRI-controlled state electoral board to no avail. A ruling from the federal electoral tribunal finally forced the state board to penalize Mr. Ávila’s campaign for starting early, fining it less than $2,500. A dispute on campaign spending is likely to carry over long after the votes are counted.

Many voters seemed to share the sense that neither the PRD nor the PAN was any cleaner than the PRI — only that they were less efficient and more distant.

“In reality, all the politicians steal a lot of money,” said Guadalupe Montiel, 52, who runs a family-owned stable that offers horseback-riding therapy. “But it seems as though the PRI delivers more of what it promises than the other parties.”

Ms. Montiel’s husband, José Luis Zárate, 55, said, “The other parties did not work out.”

Some accepted what they believed were the PRI’s unspoken conditions. Juana Rangel, a 25-year-old homemaker in the working-class suburb of Ecatepec, where Mr. Ávila was the mayor, said she had been promised a $50 monthly subsidy.

“They say that it is help for working mothers, and they deposit it every month on a card,” she said. “Even though they don’t tell you openly to vote for the PRI, I mean if you are going to keep the aid, well, you vote for the PRI, right?”

*Antonio Betancourt contributed reporting from Ecatepec, Mexico.*