

Peña Nieto's victory in Mexico is a vote for the old regime

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Mexicans have backed the old guard of the PRI. But allegations remain that Peña Nieto's Televisa links skewed the vote

Two Mexicos confronted each other at the polls on Sunday. One of them, formed by thoughtful citizens who want a different country and are determined to support Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The other, those who are afraid of change, obedient to political hierarchies and passively consume the television narrative, who voted for [Enrique Peña Nieto](#).

Exit polls signal a [return of Mexico's long-ruling party](#), the Revolutionary Institutional party (PRI), which ran the country for seven decades until 2000. About 49 million people voted – 62% of registered voters. Peña Nieto appears to have won 38% of the vote, against López Obrador, with 31%.

Both presidential hopefuls spent the last six years building their candidacies. López Obrador formed a civic-electoral movement; he managed to be nominated by the three registered centre-left parties; he toured every municipality in the country and headed the fight against the privatisation of the oil industry.

Along the way, he changed his leftist oratory and tried to get closer to sectors that are usually hostile to him. In a meeting with agricultural businessmen, traditionally conservative, he said: "I am moving to the centre, while you are getting radical. I'm glad of it."

Enrique Peña Nieto was nominated by the PRI, which under different names ruled in Mexico from 1929 to 2000. With the exception of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), those who headed those governments were authoritarian and had little respect for human rights. The Nobel prizewinning writer Mario Vargas Llosa called [the PRI regime "the perfect dictatorship"](#).

Before becoming a presidential candidate, Peña Nieto governed the powerful state of Mexico, home to one of the most influential groups in Mexico's industry and politics. From there he established a close alliance with [Televisa](#), the leading television network in the country, to promote his image and project himself as a rock star, disguising paid propaganda as news coverage. The so-called "channel of the stars" and its patrons turned the presidential election into a soap opera, and made Peña Nieto a star.

At the same time, the PRI put in place the machinery to trade the poorest people's vote for money or food, casting doubt on the freedom and fairness of the election. In the last few months, the agency in charge of prosecuting electoral crimes has secured 300

convictions for various misdeeds, and more than 667 complaints of possible violations of the rules pile up in its offices.

The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) is investigating more than 17 complaints about allegedly irregular financial operations involving the distribution of hundreds of thousands of chainstore debit cards, worth 700m pesos (£33.3m), to buy votes for Peña Nieto. The presidential campaign has a legal spending limit of 330m pesos (£15.7m) per candidate.

The social networks are flooded with photos and videos appearing to document the commission of severe misdeeds, from the manipulation of electoral stationery to manoeuvres to win votes by bribery or force. Article 403 of the federal penal code states that political operators can go to jail for "soliciting votes by payment, gifts, promises of money or rewards whatsoever", or for "violating for whatever means the citizens' right to cast their votes in secret."

The big loser in the presidential race was the rightist Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), which has governed [Mexico](#) since 2000. Its candidate, Josefina Vázquez Mota, fell to third place in the poll. The voters made the Felipe Calderón administration pay for an erratic government that, among other things, has left more than 60,000 dead in a war against drug trafficking that has neither stopped the flux of drugs to the US nor diminished the business.

Josefina Vázquez Mota benefited from the contempt many PAN members felt for president [Felipe Calderón](#), but once nominated, that advantage vanished and her campaign lost its force. Two of the most prominent leaders in PAN abandoned ship. Former president Vicente Fox, who threw the PRI out of Los Pinos – the president's house – in 2000, urged [citizens to vote for Enrique Peña Nieto](#). The businessman Manuel Clouthier, son of the late "Maquío" – the man who projected the PAN to Mexico's mainstream political arena – has been chosen by López Obrador to be his anti-corruption chief.

In the later stages of the presidential campaign, the apparent calm was disrupted by the emergence of a forceful movement of university students, named #YoSoy132 (#Iam132). Young people, angered to have a candidate imposed on them by television, mobilised to repudiate Peña Nieto and demand the democratisation of mass media.

Unexpectedly, thousands of people throughout the country effectively rearranged the pieces of the electoral chessboard, where supposedly the outcome was already known. The formation of a vigorous, unpredictable movement against Peña Nieto changed the game.

Without aligning themselves with any political party, the students denounced what they saw as an original sin in the electoral process. For them, a Peña Nieto victory is not the result of a democratic process that must therefore be accepted, but an imposition by an unregulated power: that of television networks and of those interests that congregate around them.

On Sunday, Mexicans voted longingly for the past. The old authoritarian regime was restored. Mexico will have now its own Vladimir Putin.

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