

# James S. Taylor: Mexico faces election as a middle-class nation

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Every 12 years, U.S. and Mexican presidential elections coincide. Unlike the U.S., Mexico has no re-election, guaranteeing a new president and an entirely new Congress. The outcome of Mexico's elections in July has the potential to change that country and, with it, U.S.-Mexico relations. While Mexico's race will turn in large part on personalities and perceptions, it will also depend on which candidate best deals with the three forces transforming Mexico: a changing economy, a growing middle class and rising insecurity.

The electoral field is still taking shape. The PRI, Mexico's longest-standing political party, has coalesced behind Enrique Peña Nieto, a telegenic former governor of the state of Mexico. The leftist PRD party is betting again on Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, their 2006 presidential nominee that President Felipe Calderón bested in a tight (and, for many, controversial) race. Calderón's party, the PAN, has yet to choose its nominee, though polls suggest that Josefina Vazquez Mota, former education minister and congresswoman, is the popular favorite. If chosen, she would be the first woman from a major political party to run for Mexico's highest office.

Many commentators — some rejoicing, others recoiling — expect the PRI to easily take back Los Pinos — Mexico's White House — after 12 years away. As the campaigns define their positions, all must recognize that Mexico is a very different place today.

Mexico's economy has transformed. Now a manufacturing and services powerhouse, Mexico exports far more than any other Latin American nation (including Brazil) and is edging in even on China in terms of competitiveness, particularly for custom manufactured products destined for the U.S. After a steep decline in the wake of the world financial crisis, Mexico's economy recovered and is growing steadily. In 2011, Mexico's economy grew 5.5 percent.

Mexico is now a middle-class nation. While the U.S. bemoans the decline of its own middle, Mexico's has risen. Studies show that this center is now over 60 million strong, more than half of Mexico's population. These families own their homes, buy cars, buy life insurance, take vacations and fuel the rapid growth of private schools and universities. They care about what middle classes everywhere care about — family, education, economic opportunity and security. They vote and are increasingly independent — potential swing voters that could turn the July elections.

The third, more worrisome transformation is security. During Calderón's term, drug-related deaths have topped 50,000. It is not just the numbers but the gruesomeness of the violence that shocks citizens, making security the No. 1 concern for voters. The current administration has made great strides creating a new federal police force and reforming the justice system, but these efforts must continue if Mexico is to truly establish the rule of law.

So far, the strategy of the campaigns is to rally their "voto duro," the party die-hards, to solidify their respective bases. In their stump speeches, both Peña Nieto and Lopez Obrador focus on Mexico's poor; and the PAN candidates suggest that a PRI triumph would undo Mexico's democratic gains.

None of these are winning strategies. The PAN's appeals ring hollow for the 20 percent of potential voters that barely remember the decades of PRI rule. So too does the populist rhetoric of the PRI and PRD for the now majority middle class.

To win, the candidates must adapt to an electoral landscape dominated by increasingly independent voters rather than party loyalists. The experiences of northern Mexico since 2000 hint at the challenges for these national campaigns: Voters in the six northern border states, where per capita income is above the national average, have overwhelmingly supported the PAN in presidential elections but have mostly elected governors from the PRI.

Whoever wins the July election, the real challenge in Mexico will be finding a way to engage the middle class and harness the benefits of a diversified and growing economy while continuing to fight organized crime and strengthening the rule of law.

The challenge for the United States with the next president will be to continue deepening the bilateral relationship as, due to close economic, personal and community ties, Mexico's future matters vitally for our own.

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