



OCTOBER 15 TABASCO GUBERNATORIAL RACE RIPE WITH NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

George W. Grayson and Emily Unverzagt

OVERVIEW

- Voters in Mexico's southeastern state of Tabasco will elect their next governor, 18 state legislators, and 17 mayors on October 15.
- Polls indicate that Andrés Manuel López Obrador—Mexico's self-proclaimed "legitimate president"—will receive a setback because of the likely defeat of his handpicked candidate, César Raúl Ojeda Zubieta, in the gubernatorial showdown.
- The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has pulled out all the stops to prevent an Ojeda/López Obrador victory, including stockpiling gifts for voters. At the same time, the PRI accuses the Ojeda camp of engaging in skullduggery.
- The absence of Roberto Madrazo, the PRI presidential nominee who lost every state and the Federal District in the midyear presidential contest, from the Tabasco race indicates that his political career is nearing an end.
- Although the National Action Party (PAN) has its own candidate, many *panistas* will vote for PRI nominee Andrés Granier Melo on the grounds that he appears ready to work with President-elect Felipe Calderón Hinojosa and he has no ties to Oaxaca-besieged governor Ulises Ruiz. Nevertheless, the likely challenge to a Granier victory will confront outgoing president Vicente Fox with yet one more headache before he leaves office on December 1.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) may suffer a setback this Sunday. The candidate of the "For the Good of All" coalition—dominated by the leftist-nationalist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD)—screamed "fraud" when Mexican officials declared National Action Party (PAN) standard-bearer Felipe Calderón winner of the July 2 presidential contest by 230,000 votes out of nearly 42 million ballots cast. AMLO promptly convened a National Democratic Convention in Mexico City's Zócalo central plaza where tens of thousands of haphazardly chosen "delegates" elected him the nation's "legitimate president"—with his inauguration scheduled for November 20.

To gain momentum for his "parallel government," López Obrador returned to his home state of Tabasco to barnstorm for César Raúl Ojeda Zubieta, his handpicked choice in the gubernatorial confrontation.

At first blush, it appeared that Ojeda would waltz to victory. He piled up 390 votes to capture last October's nominating convention, soundly defeating PRD heavyweight Auldárico Hernández Gerónimo (58 votes), Rogelio Barriaga Díaz (9 votes), and Iturbide Villamil Arévalo (1 vote).

Ojeda, 54, enjoys widespread name recognition, thanks to two previous gubernatorial races and his service in the Chamber of Deputies (1994–1997) and the Senate (2000–2006). Money seems to be no problem for this

affluent businessman and grower who forms part of the state's economic elite.

In addition to Ojeda's attributes, the PRD enjoys a strong political presence statewide—currently governing 11 of the state's 17 municipalities (with the Institutional Revolutionary Party [PRI] governing the 6 other municipalities),¹ and occupying 14 of the 35 seats in the State Legislature (with the PRI holding 14 seats; the PAN, 3, the Mexican Ecological Green Party, 2—and 2 independents).

This political presence combined with AMLO's popular appeal enabled López Obrador to win 56 percent of the vote in the state in the July 2 presidential matchup, trouncing the PRI's Roberto Madrazo (38 percent) and the PAN's Calderón (4 percent). In fact, AMLO tallied the second-highest percentage of the vote in his native state, only slightly below his portion in Mexico City (58 percent)—the PRD's crown jewel.

It is not surprising that López Obrador arrived in Tabasco on September 20 to kick off the first of his frequent campaign appearances to boost Ojeda's candidacy. For his part, Ojeda has embraced AMLO's positions—declaring that Calderón attained the presidency “fraudulently,” affirming AMLO as Mexico's “legitimate president,” pledging to adhere to López Obrador's Alternate National Plan (Proyecto Alternativo de Nación), and inveighing against any move to privatize the oil and electricity sectors. The “For the Good of All” coalition has gone all out in Tabasco—even promising to forgive the unpaid electricity bills of those *tabasqueños* who backed an AMLO-led civil resistance movement in the mid-1990s. The PRI alleges that pro-AMLO activists from Mexico City and elsewhere have swarmed into Tabasco, using resources of the city government to assist Ojeda, intimidating probable Andrés Granier Melo voters, and striving to discredit the results.²

Ojeda exuded such confidence that he put his gubernatorial candidacy on hold while functioning as one of five leaders of the Citizens Networks,

¹ Current municipal distribution of 17 governors by party: PRD (11)—Balancán, Cárdenas, Centla, Cunduacán, Huimanguillo, Jalpa de Méndez, Jonuta, Macuspana, Nacajuca, Paraíso, and Teapa; PRI (6)—Centro, Comalcalco, Emiliano Zapata, Jalapa, Tacotalpa, and Tenosique.

² Roberto Barboza Sosa, “Foráneos quieren abortar el proceso,” *El Universal* (Mexico City), October 10, 2006, Internet ed.

established by López Obrador to drum up support for his presidential crusade. After obtaining the nomination, Ojeda told his supporters: “I am not going to launch a pre-campaign as candidate for governor; I am going to campaign for the President of the Republic”³

While Ojeda was beating the bushes for AMLO, the PRD's internal strife, which had raged for years, erupted into a civil war. After Ojeda captured the nomination, third-place finisher Barriaga and his followers stormed out of the convention and promptly burned dolls representing Ojeda and state PRD president Juan Manuel Fócil Pérez. Meanwhile, Hernández lashed out at the political plums that López Obrador awarded to former *prístas* like Arturo Nuñez, a Tabascan whose support for AMLO landed him a Senate seat.

A revolt also erupted in the Cárdenas municipality where Dr. Carlos Wilson Gómez, an early collaborator for López Obrador and the first PRD mayor in Tabasco, bolted from the party to become the PAN's mayoral candidate in Cárdenas.

In a related development, erstwhile AMLO confidant and former senator Humberto Mayans Canabal—upset at being passed over for the governorship—became the coordinator of advisers for the PRI's Granier, Ojeda's chief opponent. In Balancán, local deputy Miguel Salim also cast his lot with Granier.

A survey published in the newspaper *Reforma* (Mexico City) during the run-up to Sunday's balloting found Ojeda trailing Granier by nine points.⁴

Although strongly backed by popular governor Manuel Andrade Díaz, Granier is no political hack. He defeated Madrazo's favorite, Florizel Medina Pereznieto, the outgoing municipal president of Villahermosa, in the party's selection process. After the field of candidates was narrowed from six to three by public-opinion polls, Granier obtained more than two-thirds of the votes cast in an April 9, 2006, PRI primary to trounce Medina Pereznieto and Sen. Oscar Cantón Zetina. Madrazo has not been seen in Tabasco in the run-up to the voting.

³ Quoted by Carlos Mari in “Abandera Raúl Ojeda al PRD en Tabasco,” *Reforma* (Mexico City), October 31, 2005, Internet ed.

⁴ “Encuesta / Aventura PRI en Tabasco,” *Reforma*, October 5, 2006, Internet ed.

Born in Villahermosa in 1948, Granier has a compelling life story. As a youngster, he suffered a severe injury that required him to use a wheelchair for years. According to his Web site: “His desire to play, run and be with his friends impelled him to leave Tabasco to have various operations that allowed him to walk ... [he learned that] decisiveness and perseverance can help achieve goals but above all faith produces miracles.”

Thanks to several operations, he was able to arise from his wheelchair and earn a degree in pharmacological biochemistry, earning his nickname of “the Chemist” (“*el Químico*”). He began his career in public service in areas related to his profession. Soon, though, he entered the political fray and captured the municipal presidency of Villahermosa in 2000.

In that position, he concentrated on education, furnishing materials so that teachers and parents could improve school buildings, providing stipends for transportation to increase pupil attendance, and constructing basketball courts for recreation. He established the Program for Creating Entrepreneurs, which assisted young people in founding or consolidating businesses. He also created the first Center for Attention to Women in the state capital—with more than half the staff comprising females. This body became a model for Tabasco’s other 16 municipalities.

In addition, he garnered praise for arriving in his office at 4 or 5 a.m. in order to attend to the concerns and petitions of poor people before they began work in Tabasco’s withering heat.

Although far from united, the PRI has powerful incentives to elect Granier.

To begin with, Andrade and other PRI bigwigs are hoping that one of their own will not launch probes into the alleged dubious activities of officials of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which has never lost the governorship. As a result, PRD deputies claim that the items they discovered in a Villahermosa warehouse—10,000 red bicycles, 5,000 cooking pots, and 8,000 rolls of aluminum wire—were stockpiled to garner support for Granier. Caches of school supplies, building materials, and other giveaway items known as *despensas* have turned up elsewhere. Ojeda has lodged protests with Tabasco’s Institute for Elections and Citizen Participation, claiming that the PRI has spent more than 200 million pesos—10 times the legal

ceiling.⁵ (*El Químico* claims that he knew nothing about this trove of goods.)

PRI stalwarts like Senator Georgina Trujillo Zentella, the 44-year-old state party president and daughter of a former governor, believe that a successful Granier administration will pave the way for her or someone from her generation to become state executive in six years.

Even dinosaurs like Gustavo Rosario Torres are lending a hand to this PRI contender who—between July 19 and August 13—ran 1,836 TV and radio spots, compared with 46 for Ojeda.⁶

Finally, the PRI is collectively salivating at the idea of sucking the wind out of López Obrador’s sails. His swearing-in as “legitimate president” on November 20 will appear all the more bizarre if AMLO’s favorite son—for whom he feverishly campaigned—fails to win his home state.

Juan Francisco Cáceres de la Fuente, the PAN candidate who is running a distant third, has concentrated on bashing Ojeda. His television commercials dramatize the PRD’s blockage of streets in the Mexico City following the presidential election and excoriate Ojeda’s failure to recognize Calderón’s triumph.⁷ Many *panistas* are expected to vote for Granier on the grounds that he, along with an overwhelming majority of PRI governors, can work with the next chief executive to enact mutually beneficial reforms. Moreover, Granier—unlike Madrazo—has no love lost for Ulises Ruíz, the besieged governor of convulsed Oaxaca state.

If Ojeda loses, he and López Obrador will cite the PRI’s use of traditional tactics in seeking to have the Federal Electoral Tribunal void the gubernatorial election in 2006, just as it did six years ago. Incidentally, this would end up being the first dispute to be adjudicated by the seven new judges of the Federal Electoral Tribunal, which is the ultimate arbiter of political contests.

⁵ Carlos Marí, “Urge Ojeda a indagar el reparto de enseres,” *Reforma*, October 9, 2006, Internet ed.

⁶ Carlos Marí, “Encabeza PRI gasto por spots en Tabasco,” *Reforma*, August 28, 2006, Internet ed.

⁷ Carlos Marí, “Copia Guerra sucia el Pan en Tabasco,” *Reforma*, October 9, 2006, Internet ed.

Even as López Obrador cries “foul,” he will reiterate his belief that the nation’s political regime is rotten to the core, stress his determination to fight the “monstrous” poverty afflicting the poor, launch sit-ins and marches to use disputed results in Tabasco to energize the radical-left base of his movement, and

take up the cause of the 4,000 Oaxacan teachers who brought their protest to Mexico City earlier this week. Such brouhaha would confront Fox with yet one more political challenge before he leaves office on December 1.

Table 1. Recent Elections in Tabasco

Election	Alliance for Mexico	%	For the Good of All Coalition	%	PAN	%	Others	%	Total Vote
	PRI+PVEM		PRD+PT+Convergencia						
Presidential* 2006	344,526	37.8	512,753	56.3	31,975	3.5	6,167	0.7	911,113
State Legislature** 2003	297,341	43.1	299,499	43.4	65,054	9.4	12,249	1.8	689,954
Gubernatorial** 2001	364,688 (Andrade)	50.7	300,721 (Ojeda—backed by PRD+PT)	45.9	14,949	2.1	1,620	0.2	719,747
Gubernatorial** 1994	297,365 (Madrazo-- PRI)	56.1	200,087 (López Obrador— PRD)	37.7	13,410	2.5	6,636	0.02	530,142
Gubernatorial** 1988	205,515 (Salvador Neme—PRI)	77.9	55,874 (López Obrador— National Democratic Front)	21.2	No candidate	n/a	2,309	0.88	263,698

Source: *Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). Invalid votes and votes for nonregistered candidates not included.

** State Electoral Institute (Tabasco). There were 15,399 (2.2 percent) invalid votes cast in the 2003 election, when the participation level was 56.5 percent; and there were 7,717 (1.1 percent) invalid votes cast in the 2001 election, when the participation level was 63.2 percent.

About the Authors

Dr. George W. Grayson, who teaches at the College of William & Mary and is a senior fellow at CSIS, has written *Mesías Mexicano: Biografía Crítica de Andrés Manuel López Obrador* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2006). gwwgray@wm.edu.

Emily Unverzagt, a former intern-scholar at CSIS, is an analyst with HSBC in New York City.

***Hemisphere Focus* is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

© 2006 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.