

## Geography In The News™

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### THE PROBLEM WITH MEXICO

Mexico's recent presidential election resulted in a hotly contested battle between the country's political right and left. The final vote was close, leading to street demonstrations in Mexico City and a politically-charged recount.

Conservative Felipe Calderon on the right has a razor-thin lead, while Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's leftist supporters have challenged the July election results. Although demonstrations are a traditional part of Mexico's electoral process, Obrador's supporters have camped out in Mexico City's business district, blocking traffic and slowing the normally frenetic pace of this city of 20 million to a crawl.

More serious demonstrations may follow the September 6 meeting of the Federal Electoral Tribunal. On that date, it will either declare one of the two candidates the winner or void the entire election. Neither option will likely satisfy the majority of Mexicans.

Recognizing the differences between the political right and left in Mexico is essential to understanding the current political debate. In general, the right consists of conservatives who believe that government should limit its involvement in social programs. This position is attractive to the higher economic and social classes.

The left, on the other hand, is more liberal and anxious to make sure that the lower economic and social classes share

in the distribution of Mexico's wealth. In general, these supporters want social and economic programs that benefit a broader segment of society than the conservatives want.

Mexico has a modestly growing population owing in part to Roman Catholic traditions, the religion of 89 percent of its 105 million people. Sixty percent of the population is Mestizo, 30 percent is Amerindian and only 9 percent is white. The Amerindian population predominates in the southeastern part of the country, while the Mestizo population occurs throughout. Generally, the Amerindian population is among the poorest, while whites are among the wealthiest and most politically dominant.

With a natural population increase of 1.67 percent annually and a gross domestic product growth rate of only 1.2 percent, Mexico's economy tends to lag behind its population growth. As a conse-

back to families.

Mexican politics are volatile. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) dominated Mexican politics for more than 70 years. Some of the major events during this time included Mexico joining the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. There was an Amerindian uprising by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas in 1994, precipitating a national crisis. A presidential candidate was assassinated at a political rally in Tijuana in 1994 and the United States saved Mexico's currency from certain collapse in 1995.

In 2000, PRI lost its majority and opposition leader Vicente Fox won the presidency. By 2003, however, Fox's National Action Party had a setback during midterm elections.

In the current election, leftist presidential candidate Lopez Obrador appeals to the lower socio-economic classes,

particularly the Amerindian population, the rural Mestizos and the urban underclasses. Largely bypassed by Mexico's economy for the past six years, these supporters see an opportunity to make their voices heard.

Political scientists are watching Mexico's election results carefully. The rise of the political left is a trend across Latin America, as exemplified by elections of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales.

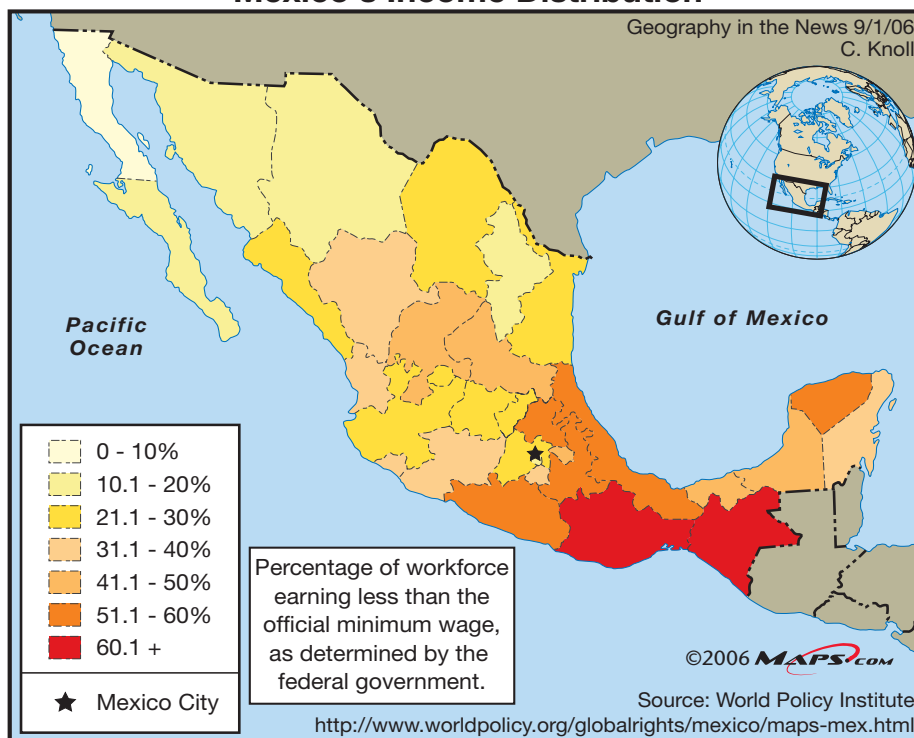
Two of the strategies often used by leftists to redistribute economic resources are land confiscation/redistribution and

nationalization of private industry. With heavy U.S. investment in Mexico, there is some concern by U.S. investors about the rise of the left. Others, however, see a more equitable sharing of Mexican wealth as a positive move for our southern neighbor.

And that is *Geography in the News*™, September 1, 2006. #848.

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### Mexico's Income Distribution



quence, much of Mexico's population, particularly in rural and Amerindian regions, is underemployed.

Only 12 percent of the country's land is arable, but 18 percent of the population is employed in that sector. Fifty-eight percent is involved in the service industry. As in the developed world, agricultural mechanization and free trade are rapidly reducing the demand for labor. Hence, one of Mexico's largest exports is its workers, some of whom seek better opportunities in the United States and send remittances