

Lessons for U.S. seen in Mexico election

Lessons seen in elections

Observer lauds pride of Mexico's voters

By Virginia Sullivan
Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Back home in Plano after spending a week as an official observer of Mexico's recent history-making elections, Dr. Juan Hernandez reflected on what the United States could learn from that country.

"To begin with, there was up to 70 percent participation in the elections," he said. "The people had voting cards with their pictures on them, and the voting lists also contained photographs so judges could compare them."

"In addition to photo and signature cross checks, voters had their thumbs marked with a stain that lasts for several days. It keeps people from voting more than once, and you wouldn't believe the pride of people showing their thumbs," said Dr. Hernandez flashing one of his own thumbs in the up position. "The sentiment was very clear. If you didn't vote, than you should be ashamed of yourself."

An associate professor of arts and humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas and director of the university's U.S./Mexico Studies Center, Dr. Hernandez was invited by the Mexican state of Guanajuato to act as an international elections observer. He was a witness July 6 when voters ended the ruling party's 70-year dominance of Congress.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, lost control not only of the lower house of Congress, but also the mayor's office of Mexico City and two of six gubernatorial races. Both the conservative National Action Party, or PAN, and the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD, made unprecedented gains in the lower house or Chamber of Deputies.

During his stay, Dr. Hernandez visited with Guanajuato Gov. Vicente Fox of PAN. With the election results in, Mr. Fox announced that he would resign his post in 1999 to launch a bid for the presidency in 2000. The governor, who has pushed for social democratic reforms, affirmed the country's political swing

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in that direction and vowed to do whatever it takes to ensure a change at the top of the government.

Dr. Hernandez said that quite a bit of change has already taken place. "These were the most important elections since 1929, when the PRI took power," he said. "Up to a few weeks ago most Mexicans would have said there was no true democracy in the country. Not that there haven't been outstanding leaders, but there has not been the checks and balances necessary for true democracy. Most Mexicans voted for a balance of power."

The U.S./Mexico Studies Center, the city of Dallas and the U.S./Mexico Chamber of Commerce will be hosting Mr. Fox for a speaking engagement 5:30 p.m. Monday at the UTD center. It is open to the public and the governor's speech will be on "The New Mexico — A New Way to Doing Business and Politics."

"UTD has a great interest with creating greater links with the Hispanic community," Dr. Hernandez said. "That was the primary reason for creating the U.S./Mexico Studies Center, which currently has two main agreements. One is with the University of Guanajuato and one is with the state of Guanajuato. We have all sorts of joint research projects going on as well as student and teacher exchange programs."

Dr. Hernandez has more than just a professional interest in the politics and culture of Mexico and the state of Guanajuato in particular. His father is Mexican and his mother is a U.S. citizen from Fort Worth. Raised in Guanajuato, Dr. Hernandez came to this country as a college student and decided to stay. Since his mother is a U.S. citizen, his citizenship was automatic. "Some day I hope to be able to achieve dual citizenship, but for now we have to make a choice," he said.

He is married to Estela Hernandez from Mexico, and together they have four children. Dr. Hernandez explained that his wife retained her Mexican citizenship so that their children will have the same choice of citizenship that he enjoyed.

"Our kids are bilingual and bicultural, and they are all very proud of what both countries have to offer," he said. "Depending on their future career choices, they will have equal opportunities on either side of the border."

The Hernandez children seem as interested as their father in establishing connections between the countries. John Hernandez, a 12-year-old student at Wilson Middle School, has worked with that school's librarian to raise nearly 1,000 books for donation to Guanajuato's schools. In recognition of his efforts, Mr. Fox has named him a Junior Ambassador of Goodwill to



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Dr. Juan Hernandez says his wife, Estela, has retained her Mexican citizenship so their children will have a choice when they are adults. "Our kids are bilingual and bi-

cultural," he said, "and they are proud of what both countries have. The children are (from left) John (kneeling), Mariana and Estela.

Meanwhile, 8-year-old Laura Hernandez's school, Shepard Elementary, has begun discussions about forming a sister-school relationship with a Guanajuato elementary.

"Right before joining the UTD faculty, our family spent six months living in Guanajuato while I was on sabbatical," said Dr. Hernandez. "The kids created links with the children there. My son John was particularly interested in keeping those ties. When his school's librarian mentioned the book drive idea, he was very excited. John is currently in the process of delivering those books personally to Guanajuato schools. In fact, we just dropped some off on our last visit.

"I'm really interested in working through the U.S./Mexico Studies Center with the Plano school district and the city. We could look for educational opportunities for scholarships, grants and student exchanges. I would also like to help create civic and business links through the center.

"I'm glad to say that there has been some real interest expressed by the community. The last time Governor Fox spoke at the U.S./Mexico Studies Center, we drew over 300 people including many business and civic leaders from Plano, Richardson and Dallas.

"The U.S. and Mexico have so much to offer to each other and I think people on both sides of the border are beginning to recognize that fact."

Virginia Sullivan is a Plano free-



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Dr. Juan Hernandez (right) is shown with Gov. Vicente Fox during a recent visit to Mexico.