Mexico’s 2018 Elections

On July 1, 2018, Mexicans are scheduled to elect more than 3,400 national, state, and local officials, including a successor to President Enrique Peña Nieto and an entirely new congress (senate and chamber of deputies). This year’s elections may lead to shifts in Mexico’s domestic and foreign policies, particularly if Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a leftist populist who has led the presidential polls since the campaign began, is elected. With presidential candidates vowing to adopt tougher stances toward U.S. policies perceived as hostile, the elections also could affect bilateral trade, energy, migration, and security issues.

Political Climate

In 2012, the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000 returned to the presidency after 12 years of conservative National Action Party (PAN) rule. In that election, Enrique Peña Nieto edged out López Obrador (then standing for the center-left Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD) to win the presidency by 6.6%. Voters hoped the PRI would reduce crime and boost economic growth, despite misgivings about its reputation for corruption.

Six years later, many Mexicans have expressed frustration that the PRI government has failed to distinguish its policies from those of the PAN and has been marred by widespread corruption. President Peña Nieto shepherded structural reforms through the congress in 2013, including a constitutional reform that opened Mexico’s energy and telecommunications sector to foreign investment and an education reform that boosted standards for teachers. Even with the reforms, Mexico’s economic growth has averaged 2% (as it did under the PAN government). Homicides surpassed historic levels in 2017, yet the PRI has continued the PAN’s military-led approach to public security. Corruption scandals have implicated the president’s family and top advisers, as well as many former PRI and PAN governors. High-profile cases of human rights abuses allegedly committed by security forces have occurred and gone unpunished. President Peña Nieto’s approval rating stood at roughly 20% in February 2018, a historic low.

Electoral Process

The July 1, 2018, elections are to be the largest in Mexico’s history and the first to include independent candidates, including in the presidential contest. The presidential candidate who receives the most votes on election day will win the election; an absolute majority is not required. The president-elect is scheduled to assume power on December 1, 2018, after a five-month transition period. He will be limited to a single six-year term.

In the legislative race, voters will choose 128 senators and 500 members of congress (deputies). Senators serve for six years, and deputies serve for three. Beginning this cycle, both senators and deputies will be eligible to run for reelection for a maximum of 12 years in office. The composition of the legislature is likely to be a key predictor of the next president’s success. In addition, 9 out of 32 states are holding gubernatorial elections. There are also nearly 1,600 mayoral elections and more than 970 municipal assembly elections.

The scale of this year’s elections will test the National Electoral Institute (INE), a government entity charged with administering all federal, state, and local elections. Many observers are concerned about the INE’s capacity to protect the elections from voter fraud and outside influence. Observers have questioned the adequacy of efforts to prevent election-related violence and intimidation.

Election-Related Violence in Mexico

For more than a decade, violent crime perpetrated by warring criminal organizations has threatened security and governance in parts of Mexico. In 2017, Mexico experienced record levels of homicides. Since September 2017, 130 candidates or politicians have been killed in Mexico, according to Etellekt, a Mexican security consultancy. According to a January 2018 study by Justice in Mexico, a U.S. research entity that studies crime in Mexico, local politicians are 12 times as likely as other Mexicans to be murdered. Election-related crimes underscore the severity of the security crisis that Mexico faces but also raise concerns about whether criminal groups may unduly influence election results.

Presidential Candidates

Many analysts describe the 2018 elections as a competition between candidates who support continuity and those who will bring about change. López Obrador, now standing for the leftist National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), is campaigning on the promise of change. Because MORENA is new and has never held executive power, López Obrador has portrayed his party as free of the corruption that has plagued the traditional parties. Some observers are concerned, however, that López Obrador may seek to change Mexico’s market-friendly economic policies, which are supported by all of the major candidates and parties.

This year marks the first time that parties across Mexico’s political spectrum have built coalitions to boost their support. The candidates and coalitions are listed below in order of their favorability rankings in the latest polls (See Figure 1, below).

Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador’s “Together We’ll Make History” coalition consists of the leftist MORENA, the Labor Party (PT), and the conservative Social Encounter Party (PES). López Obrador
is a 64-year-old former mayor of Mexico City (2000-2005) who ran for president in the previous two elections. After his loss in 2012, he parted with the PRD and established MORENA as a social movement and political party. Since announcing his candidacy, López Obrador has worked to dispel concerns that he is too radical. He has proposed combating corruption, adopting economic austerity, improving educational and job opportunities for youth, boosting agriculture, and revisiting the 2013 energy reforms to increase domestic production. Despite efforts to moderate his image, some investors are concerned that he would implement protectionist economic policies. Other civil society groups are concerned about whether or not he would support the implementation of pending reforms such as an independent prosecutor general’s office and the National Anticorruption System.

**Ricardo Anaya.** Anaya’s “For Mexico in Front” coalition includes the PAN, PRD, and the leftist Citizens’ Movement (MC). Anaya is a 39-year-old lawyer, former legislator, and recent PAN party president. Despite his political savvy, analysts question whether Anaya has the experience needed to serve as head of state. Anaya has been the target of a recent graft investigation by the attorney general’s office, which many have dismissed as politically motivated. Anaya’s trade, security, and foreign policies are likely to be similar to those of the two previous governments, but some say his platform has yet to square the significant ideological differences that historically have separated the conservative PAN and center-left PRD.

**José Antonio Meade.** Meade’s “Everyone for Mexico” coalition includes the PRI, the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM), and the New Alliance (PANAL). Meade is a 49-year-old lawyer and former minister and, most recently, as finance minister. Meade does not have strong ties to the PRI; he was an independent until 2017. A main reason the PRI supported Meade is because he is free from the taint of corruption that has hurt the party’s image, but he has not proven to be a particularly charismatic campaigner. Meade has stated that he favors stronger anti-corruption measures. He is fiscally conservative and favors pro-market policies.

**Jaime “El Bronco” Rodríguez** is Mexico’s first independent presidential candidate. He is a 60-year-old lawyer, former mayor, and former member of the PRI. In 2015, Rodriguez became the first independent candidate to win a gubernatorial election in Mexico. He served as governor of Nuevo León from October 2015 to December 2017. He has endorsed tough security policies but maintains similar types of pro-business economic policies as Meade and Anaya.

**Outlook**

Many analysts are predicting that Andrés Manuel López Obrador is likely to win Mexico’s presidential election. López Obrador has been the front-runner since the campaign began in March 2018 and has a 20-point lead over Ricardo Anaya in recent polls. Analysts are uncertain, however, about whether any coalition will capture a legislative majority. Some speculate that MORENA congressional candidates may benefit from López Obrador’s popularity to capture a large share of seats.

Most observers predict that Anaya, Meade, and Rodríguez would maintain Mexico’s recent reforms, globalist foreign policy orientation, and pragmatic approach to the United States. There is more uncertainty surrounding a López Obrador presidency. Skeptics maintain that López Obrador would adopt tougher stances in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) renegotiations, limit investment in Mexico’s energy sector, and scale back migration and security cooperation with the United States. Others believe that López Obrador would be pragmatic once in office and that his policy options would be limited by Mexico’s economic dependence on the United States, particularly if he fails to capture a legislative majority.


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