

AMLO's Legacy Is on the Ballot in Mexico

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Analysis

One of the 15 key elections to watch in 2024's historic global vote.

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By **Allison Meakem**, an associate editor at *Foreign Policy*.

Mexican presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum speaks.
Mexican presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum speaks during a meeting with supporters of the Morena Party in Coyoacan, Mexico, on Dec. 9, 2023. Jaime Nogales/Medios y Media/Getty Images

In North America, much of the world will be fixated on the United States' presidential election this November. But that contest is expected to be fought between two geriatric white men who have both held the presidency before. In terms of representation and generational political change, neighboring Mexico's June 2 general election promises to be much more groundbreaking. That's because the victor will almost certainly be a woman, for the first time in Mexican—or, for that matter, U.S.—history.

Incumbent President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, is facing a one-term limit after six years in office. But he's played a central role in his own succession race, securing the nomination of his protégée, Claudia Sheinbaum, as his Morena party's presidential candidate. Sheinbaum was until recently the mayor of Mexico City but stepped down from her post last summer to hit the campaign trail. She will face Xóchitl Gálvez, a former senator who is heading a coalition of opposition parties.

López Obrador founded the leftist-populist Morena party in 2011 with the express purpose of running for president and maintains great sway over the organization. His 2018 election shook up Mexican politics, which have traditionally been dominated by the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). From 1929 to 2000, all of Mexico's presidents hailed from the PRI; López Obrador's immediate predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto, was also a member of the party. Last June, Morena seemed to breach the PRI's last defenses—ousting the party in elections in the State of Mexico, the province surrounding Mexico City, where the PRI had been in power without interruption for almost 100 years.

For the time being, many observers in Mexico consider Morena—and its popular president—to be a seemingly unstoppable political force. As of November 2023, López Obrador's approval rating stood at 66 percent—far higher than the paltry 23 percent enjoyed by his PRI predecessor at this point in their respective presidencies, according to polls cited by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas. Morning Consult pegs López Obrador as the second-most popular democratically elected leader in the world after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

López Obrador's presidency has hardly been smooth sailing; his response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for one, was an undisputed catastrophe. While investing heavily in public works to ensure support from his electorate, which includes Mexico's poor, López Obrador has spurned the private sector and consolidated power over many of his country's institutions. (The president is set to up spending on social programs by 25 percent ahead of June's election.) The Mexican economy has grown sluggishly during his time in office. And perhaps more irreversibly, Mexico's democracy has declined, too.

Throughout López Obrador's tenure, the Economist Intelligence Unit has downgraded Mexico from a "flawed democracy" to a "hybrid regime." The president's most recent anti-democratic moves include an attempt to gut funding for Mexico's respected election watchdog, the National Electoral Institute, in a reform that would "strip the agency's independence," Rocío Fabbro reported in *Foreign Policy* in March 2023. The proposed changes prompted mass protests across the country but did not dent López Obrador's popularity. Mexico's Supreme Court ultimately struck down part of law, calming some fears that it could have impacted this year's vote.

The president has also tried his hand at rewriting the rules of Mexico's security policy. Violence remains one of the country's most persistent problems. "It is estimated that cartels control nearly half of Mexico's territory—a figure that could be an undercount," the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Ryan C. Berg wrote in *Foreign Policy* in September 2023. "Seven of the 10 most homicidal cities globally on a per capita basis are now in Mexico."

Much of this insecurity has U.S. roots: As journalist Chantal Flores reported in *Foreign Policy* in October 2023, "[a]t least 70 percent of guns recovered at crime scenes in Mexico between 2014 and 2018 were trafficked into the country from the United States."

Mexico itself is home to only one authorized gun store.

When López Obrador came to office, he vowed to take the Mexican military off the streets in a policy he called “hugs, not bullets.” But he soon reversed course, merging multiple national police forces into a civilian-led gendarmerie known as the National Guard with the justification that existing police units had been corrupt. Later into his term, López Obrador attempted to transfer the National Guard to military control, raising alarm bells for advocates concerned about the militarization of public safety. Once again, Mexico’s Supreme Court put a stop to López Obrador’s machinations.

The irony is that the United States is keen to work with López Obrador on security cooperation, as well as on key issues like immigration and drug trafficking. But the Mexican president has made the defense of national sovereignty—and resentment for his country’s domineering northern neighbor—one of the pillars of his political brand. As just one example, López Obrador could be the spoiler to a new U.S.-China plan to curb the illegal trade of fentanyl—a rare area where the two superpowers now appear to see eye to eye, FP’s Catherine Osborn, the author of *Latin America Brief*, reported in November 2023.

As contenders for the Republican presidential nomination seriously suggest the United States invade Mexico in a 21st-century resurrection of the disgraced Monroe Doctrine, bilateral relations between the two countries hang in the balance. It’s rare that Mexico and the United States hold concurrent presidential elections; depending on who is elected north and south of the Rio Grande, neighbor diplomacy in the coming years could look very different. Last year, Mexico became the United States’ top trading partner amid U.S. attempts to boost “nearshoring.” That trend could continue—or rupture—under new leadership.

More Elections to Watch in 2024

Sheinbaum and Morena are the clear front-runners in Mexico’s race. In addition to picking the country’s next president, the general election will also see voters select all 628 seats of Mexico’s bicameral legislature; the 500 members of the lower house, or the Chamber of Deputies, serve three-year terms, while the 128 members of the upper house, or Senate, are in office for six years. Both chambers are elected through a mix of majoritarian and proportional representation. Some states and localities are holding contests, too.

Ahead of the vote, Morena formed a left-leaning coalition with smaller parties named Let’s Keep Making History. That group leads polls with 60 percent as of December 2023, according to an aggregate of surveys compiled by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas. The opposition coalition led by Gálvez—the Broad Front for Mexico—followed at 33 percent. And a third camp, the center-left Citizens’ Movement, earned 7 percent. The results were slightly narrower when voters were asked about their intended choice for president in November 2023: Forty-eight percent indicated Sheinbaum, followed by Gálvez’s 24 percent and the Citizens’ Movement’s Samuel García’s 8 percent. Candidates need just a plurality of votes—rather than a majority—to win.

Gálvez’s Broad Front, which includes the PRI, is a big-tent movement united by little other than distaste with López Obrador. Gálvez was until recently a member of the conservative National Action Party, which traditionally rivals the PRI but has chosen to work together to try to dislodge Morena from power. She now considers herself to be on the center-left and boasts a rags-to-riches story that she hopes will inspire popular support.

For now, the race is Sheinbaum’s to lose. The extent to which she would follow in López Obrador’s footsteps is unclear. Osborn has called Sheinbaum more of a pragmatist; the erstwhile mayor of North America’s largest city is an environmental scientist by training and is known for her progressive, green credentials. She made Mexico City’s school uniforms gender neutral and became the first mayor to attend the city’s Pride march. On grimmer issues, she has also been effective—bringing down the capital’s murder rate significantly during her time in office.

Who Sheinbaum or Gálvez would be on the world stage—and in bilateral U.S.-Mexico relations—is yet to be seen. One certainty, however, is that the annual “three amigos” summits between the United States, Mexico, and Canada will soon seem a little less like an awkward college fraternity reunion. The White House might want to start updating Mexico’s invitations so that they end with an “a.”

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