



July 17, 2018

Mexico’s 2018 Elections: Results and Potential Implications

On July 1, 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his leftist MORENA party dominated Mexico’s presidential and legislative elections. López Obrador won 53.2% of the presidential vote, more than 30 percentage points ahead of his nearest rival, Ricardo Anaya. MORENA’s coalition also won majorities in both chambers of congress. These results demonstrated voters’ dissatisfaction with the traditional parties and gave López Obrador a strong governing mandate. He is to succeed Enrique Peña Nieto as president on December 1, 2018, and serve a single, six-year term.

Election Results

The scale of this year’s elections, combined with record electoral-related violence that resulted in the deaths of more than 150 candidates or politicians, tested Mexico’s electoral system. Despite these challenges, most observers deemed the elections free and fair. Observers generally praised the National Electoral Institute, the entity that administered the elections of more than 18,000 posts.

Many analysts described Mexico’s 2018 elections as a competition between candidates who supported continuity and those who promised change. Most analysts predicted that presidential candidates Ricardo Anaya, José Antonio Meade, and Jaime Rodríguez would maintain Mexico’s 2013 constitutional reforms (including those that opened the energy and telecommunications sectors to private investment and an education reform that increased teachers’ standards) and liberal internationalist foreign policy orientation. Analysts had more uncertainty about a López Obrador presidency. Some observers feared that López Obrador might roll back Mexico’s market-friendly reforms and adopt a more isolationist foreign policy.

Presidential Candidates

Andrés Manuel López Obrador led a coalition of MORENA, the socially conservative Social Encounter Party (PES) and the leftist Labor Party (PT). López Obrador is a 64-year-old former mayor of Mexico City (2000-2005) who ran for president in the past two elections. After his loss in 2012, he left the center-left Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) and established MORENA. In 2018, López Obrador promised to bring about change by governing differently than recent Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and National Action Party (PAN) administrations that have presided over periods of moderate but stable economic growth, rising insecurity, and ongoing corruption. He focused on addressing voters’ concerns about corruption, poverty and inequality, and escalating crime and violence.

Ricardo Anaya led an unconventional coalition of the conservative PAN, the PRD, and the leftist Citizens’ Movement (MC). Anaya is a 39-year-old lawyer, former legislator, and recent PAN party president. Despite his

political skills, analysts questioned Anaya’s level of experience, and his coalition lacked ideological coherence.

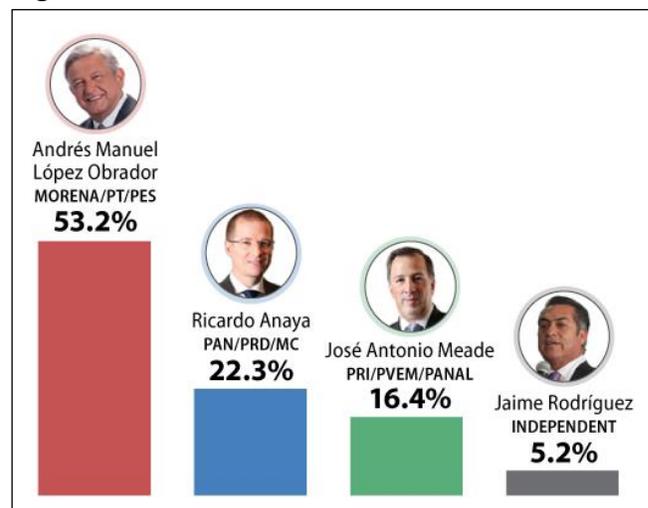
Jose Antonio Meade led a coalition of the PRI, the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM), and the New Alliance (PANAL). Meade is a 49-year-old economist who has served as a Cabinet minister in PAN and PRI administrations, most recently as Peña Nieto’s finance minister. He does not have strong ties to the PRI, but the party’s reputation for corruption and President Peña Nieto’s historic unpopularity hurt his chances.

Jaime Rodríguez became Mexico’s first independent presidential candidate. He is a 60-year-old agricultural engineer who became Mexico’s first independent governor in 2015 (Nuevo León).

Presidential Results

Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s commanding victory signaled a significant change in Mexico’s political development. López Obrador won in 31 of 32 states, demonstrating that he had broadened his support from his base in southern Mexico. The 2018 elections stand in sharp contrast to previous presidential contests in which the victor garnered less than 40% of the vote and won by narrow margins of 6.6% (2012) and 0.5% (2006).

Figure 1. Presidential Vote Results



Source: Mexico’s National Election Institute.

The presidential election results have prompted soul-searching within the traditional parties and shown the limits of independent candidates. Anaya’s defeat has provoked internal struggles within the PAN. Some maintain that Anaya should continue as a party leader, while others, particularly conservatives aligned with former President Felipe Calderón, blame Anaya for the defeat because of the alliance he created with the PRD. Meade’s poor

performance has similarly demonstrated voters' deep frustration with the PRI, the party that governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000. The PAN and the PRI each will still control 12 governorships, but MORENA won five governorships (including in Mexico City) and the MC won one. One of the other two governors is from the PVEM; the other is an independent (Rodríguez).

Preliminary Legislative Election Results

In addition to the presidential contest, all 128 seats in the Senate and 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies were up for election. 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. Final election results are not yet available.

According to preliminary results, MORENA's coalition won majorities in the Senate (69 of 128 seats) and the Chamber (307 of 500 seats). The PAN is likely to edge out the PRI as the second-largest party in each chamber, followed by the PRD. The MORENA coalition lacks the two-thirds majority it needs to make constitutional changes or overturn reforms passed in 2013 (such as the energy and education reforms). It may be able to form alliances with the center-left PRD or others on specific issues, however.

Prospects for a López Obrador Presidency

Mexican voters gave President-elect López Obrador a mandate to change the course of Mexico's domestic politics, but he will face constraints in enacting his agenda. López Obrador has set high expectations for his government and promised many things to many different constituencies, some of which appear to conflict with each other. As an example, he has promised to govern austere, but has proposed a number of new social programs. Key **domestic goals** that he has proposed include

- Increasing prison sentences and prohibiting bail for those accused of corruption and electoral crimes;
- Implementing an austerity plan to cut high-level government officials' salaries and benefits;
- Establishing a universal pension for the elderly;
- Combating root causes of insecurity by giving youth stipends to study or complete internships, enacting a transitional justice law that may reduce prison time for nonviolent offenders, and revising drug policy;
- Reviewing all energy contracts for any irregularities and bolstering Mexico's refining capacity;
- Modifying or repealing the education reform; and,
- Boosting expenditures on infrastructure and revitalizing the domestic agricultural sector.

In the area of **foreign policy**, President-elect López Obrador generally has maintained that the best foreign policy is a strong domestic policy. His future foreign

minister, Marcelo Ebrard, has said that a López Obrador government is likely to return to Mexico's traditional, non-interventionist approach to foreign policy (the so-called *Estrada doctrine*). As an example, Ebrard predicted that Mexico could scale back the role it has played in seeking to address the crises in Venezuela. Many analysts predict that Mexico would continue to engage on global issues that it deems important, such as climate change. The government also is likely to continue participating in pro-trade fora, such as the Pacific Alliance, and seeking to diversify its export partners to reduce its reliance on the United States.

Considerations for U.S. Policy

There is some uncertainty over what López Obrador's victory means for the United States. Whereas some analysts predict he is likely to take stronger stances in opposition to any U.S. policies perceived as hostile, others predict he will be pragmatic. During his July 1, 2018, victory speech, he focused primarily on his vision for Mexico but said he would seek a good relationship with the United States. He aims for a relationship "always based on mutual respect" and will prioritize "the defense of the countrymen and migrants who live and work" in the United States.

President-elect López Obrador's position on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which he used to criticize for hurting Mexico's agricultural sector, has evolved. He supports ongoing negotiations to modify the agreement. His chief NAFTA negotiator, Jesús Seade, has suggested that the incoming government would accept an agreement negotiated by the outgoing administration.

The future of bilateral security and migration cooperation is unclear. Some observers are concerned that López Obrador has discussed potential amnesty for nonviolent criminals. Others are wary that he does not seem to support an independent prosecutor general's office. López Obrador's advisers have not ruled out legalizing marijuana or decriminalizing opium poppy cultivation. López Obrador has said that he will not aggressively deport Central American migrants but will seek to promote development in that region as a way of stopping illegal emigration.

After the election, López Obrador had a "cordial" congratulatory call with President Trump on July 2, 2018. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described his meeting with the President-elect in Mexico on July 13, 2018, as "wonderful." Although this goodwill may not last, observers are hoping that the transition period before President-elect López Obrador takes office on December 1, 2018, provides time for more Cabinet-level meetings. For more information, see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*; CRS Report RL32934, *U.S.-Mexico Economic Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications*; CRS In Focus IF10578, *Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2018*.

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