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Corruption and the 2018 Mexico Election

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Corruption and the 2018 Mexico Election: What Comes Next?

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Why was corruption a prominent issue in the 2018 election?

The 2018 Mexican election was [the largest in the country's history](#), with more than 3,400 legislative seats open nationwide in addition to the presidency. The election, held on July 1, 2018, presented voters an opportunity to voice their frustration with the ongoing corruption scandals in Mexico's government.

By most metrics, corruption has been a pervasive and persistent issue in Mexico for years. Mexico currently ranks 135 out of 180 countries surveyed in [Transparency International's public corruption index](#), scoring 29/100 and falling into the bottom 25% of countries. Corruption impacts the [day-to-day lives](#) of most Mexicans, with 61% reporting that they have paid a bribe to the police and 55% reporting that they have paid a bribe to the judiciary. Transparency International reports that [91% of Mexicans](#) perceive Mexico's political parties to be either corrupt or extremely corrupt. Corruption [also plays a role](#) in Mexico's tax administration, customs administration, and legislative process. Most disturbingly, [a combined 73%](#) of Mexican citizens feel that the government has been ineffective or very ineffective at fighting corruption.

Frustration over government corruption swelled during the administration of outgoing president Enrique Nieto. After being elected in 2012 on a strongly anti-corruption platform, a [series of scandals](#) marred President Nieto's popularity and the Mexican public's perception of his integrity. Among these scandals was an allegedly corrupt deal involving his wife's [purchase of a \\$7 million home on credit](#) from a government contractor with ties to the president. Mexican law limits presidents to serve a single six-year term. If current polling data holds, President Nieto will leave office in December 2018 with an approval rating below 17%.

What is the role of money in Mexico's electoral process?

Although [Mexico strengthened](#) their campaign finance laws in 2007, they have had difficulty enforcing disclosure requirements for private donations. Declarations filed with the [National Electoral Institute \(INE\)](#), an autonomous public organization tasked with the administration and oversight of Mexico's elections, report that candidates from the top three parties [have spent \\$32.1 million USD](#) on campaign efforts. However, that number is considered to be inaccurate. [According to former INE president Luis Carlos Ugalde](#), "private donors prefer to give without reporting [their donations] to buy access." Recent analyses by watchdog groups suggest that for every peso that is reported to the Institute, another [six to ten unreported pesos are given to campaigns](#). [Other estimates](#) put that number as high as fifteen pesos or more.

[It has also been reported](#) that Mexican political parties engaged in wide-spread efforts to buy votes with money, gift cards, and other incentives. In a [poll in June 2018](#), more than a third of Mexicans reported that political parties had attempted to solicit their vote with vote-buying schemes.

Who won the 2018 Election?

After a hard-fought presidential election with four contenders, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) [emerged the victor](#). López Obrador has run as the candidate for various left-wing coalitions in the [last three consecutive Mexican presidential elections](#), and currently represents the left-wing nationalist MORENA party. Appealing to his populist base, López Obrador was able to secure more than 50% of the vote in 2018, besting his closest rival, Ricardo Anaya of the National Action Party, by more than 30%. In addition to the presidency, MORENA also won substantial pluralities in both houses of the Mexican national legislature.

López Obrador's past political experience includes one term as mayor of Mexico City from 2000-2005. During his term, he famously drove to work each morning in his Nissan Sentra, bolstering his [populist image and reputation](#).

What is President-elect López Obrador's stance on corruption?

López Obrador is outspoken on the issue of corruption. In keeping with his populist persona, López Obrador has vowed to avoid the traditionally luxurious trappings of the Mexican presidency. Along these lines, he has promised to transform [Mexico's Presidential Palace into a public park](#), vowed never to make use of a [\\$218 million USD presidential plane](#) purchased by President Nieto, and [reduced his own salary by 60%](#). He has also said that [his first bill](#) will be to end presidential immunity from being tried on corruption charges.

Publicly, López Obrador has stated his belief that he can [lead by example](#), and that his personal honesty will set a tone for a, “sober, austere government—a government without privilege.” One [proposal](#) he made is, “to lower the salaries of those who are on top [in order] to increase the salaries of those on the bottom.” [Corruption experts](#) are critical of this approach, saying it will likely cause officials to augment their income through illegitimate methods like soliciting bribes.

López Obrador has been criticized for a lack of specifics in his proposals when it comes to bolstering anti-corruption enforcement efforts in Mexico. The [U.S. State Department](#) has noted that, “the law [in Mexico] provides criminal penalties for conviction of official corruption, but the government [has] not enforce[d] the law effectively.” In part, this is due to Mexico's failure to establish a robust anti-corruption oversight organization. Although the [National Anticorruption System \(NAS\)](#), a landmark package of anti-corruption legislation passed in 2016, provides the legal framework for that oversight, the Senate has been [slow to fill the positions](#) of NAS magistrates whose jobs it would be to investigate and prosecute corruption. Notably, the outgoing Senate has [yet to appoint](#) an Anti-Corruption Chief Prosecutor—known as the “Fiscal Anticorrupción.” Without these offices fully established, impunity levels for corruption crimes [remain over 98%](#).

Are there allegations of corruption against President-elect Obrador?

There are no current investigations into López Obrador himself. However, during his time as mayor, a number of close aides to López Obrador were involved in corruption scandals. In 2004, López Obrador's Finance Chief Gustavo Ponce was accused of [involvement in the disappearance of \\$3 million of government funds](#). Likewise, René Bejarano, a city legislator and former personal secretary to López Obrador was caught on camera taking [\\$45,000 in bribe money](#) from a construction contractor with business before the city's legislative assembly.

Although neither scandal involved López Obrador directly, both call into question his claims that his ability to lead by example is sufficient to serve as a catch-all net for fighting corruption.

What comes next?

President-elect López Obrador [will be sworn](#) in on December 1, 2018. Addressing whether López Obrador will be successful in fighting corruption, [Earl Wayne, former US ambassador to Mexico from 2015, offers that](#), “transforming [his] rhetoric into cases against the corrupt that are actually successful will be a major task given the weakness in Mexico's law enforcement and judicial system.”

It is likely that López Obrador will begin his term by reviewing government contracts to identify wasteful spending and corruption. For example, with regard to a \$13 billion government-funded project to build an international airport in Mexico City, López Obrador [has promised to convene](#) “a joint team . . . to analyze what would be in the best interest of the public.” This is a departure from what had until recently been his promise to cancel the project outright, and may signal his willingness to soften some of his more radical campaign positions once in power.