

Election Watch for the Digital Age

Mexico

Preelection assessment

Legislative elections set for June 2021

Mexican citizens will take to the polls on June 6 to elect all 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies, as well as 15 governors and thousands of local positions. The vote is seen as a test of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's popularity and that of his National Regeneration Movement (MORENA). It will also determine whether he can retain control of the Chamber after his party secured a majority with the help of its coalition allies in the 2018 elections. The three main opposition parties, the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), have formed an unlikely and ideologically incongruous alliance known as Go for Mexico (Va por México) in an effort to wrench the majority away from the current left-wing populist government.

The 2018 election was seen as a repudiation of the incumbent political establishment and was marred by unprecedented levels of election-related violence, as well as allegations of illegal campaign financing, vote buying, and the misuse of public funds. Paired with budget cuts to the National Electoral Institute (INE) and accusations that Obrador's government has sought to lessen electoral oversight and roll back government transparency, these issues raise concern about the administration of the upcoming election. The COVID-19 crisis has further complicated the electoral environment, as the country finds itself with the world's third-highest death toll. Mismanagement of the pandemic response sparked antigovernment protests in the months leading up to the election, which were further fueled by a recent economic recession, record-high homicide rates, and dissatisfaction with Obrador's public comments on gender-based violence.

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Harassment and violence:** Mexico is the most dangerous country in the Western hemisphere for journalists, and reporters for online and offline platforms regularly face threats and sometimes deadly violence in retribution for their work. Those who cover organized criminal groups or sensitive political topics are particularly at risk, including journalists attacked in connection with their reporting on the 2018 election. Obrador's frequent anti-press rhetoric has also contributed to a threatening environment in which critics often face harassment on social media. Political tensions ahead of the election could exacerbate existing trends of intimidation and violence in response to online speech.
- **Cyberattacks:** Technical attacks, including malware infections and DDoS attacks, have been deployed during recent elections and been used regularly to suppress freedom of expression for journalists and activists. The National Action Party website was targeted with a DDoS attack two

weeks ahead of the 2018 election after publishing content that was critical of Obrador. On election day, predictive polling website, Oraculus, was rendered inaccessible to the public due to a cyberattack. Cyberattacks against journalists and activists are regularly paired with the use of spyware software Pegasus, which provides attackers full access to victims' devices. The targeting of activists, journalists, and political figures could increase self-censorship and lessen critical engagement during the election period, when maintaining accurate reporting and robust civil society is most crucial.

- **Influence operations:** Supporters of President Obrador have historically used automated bot accounts to target critical journalists and everyday users with smear campaigns. Other political parties have also been found to instrumentalize fake accounts and partisan bots in the most recent elections. Bots have been used for political purposes in the country as far back as at least 2010, and may continue to impact online discourse in Mexico's increasingly digital pre-election context.

Mexico has a score of 61 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects extreme violence from organized crime, severe rule of law deficits, government corruption, and a highly dangerous atmosphere for online and offline journalists, all within a relatively robust political and electoral environment. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 62 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and **Partly Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 61 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Mexico country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).