Politics in Mexico takes place in a framework of a federal presidential representative democratic republic whereby the President of Mexico is both head of state and head of government. In a governmental that is built on a congressional system, the President is also the head of the multi-party system. Although the President the president does not control parliament, governors, social organizations, the army and the judiciary like in the “mild authoritarianism” of the first half of the 1900s, the position does still possess a disproportionate level of authority. The president is elected to a six-year term and cannot be reelected. The executive government branch is headed by the President, advised by a cabinet of secretaries that are independent of their legislature. Legislative power is vested upon the two-chamber Congress of the Union, consisting of the 128-member Senate and the 500-member Chamber of Deputies. Senators are elected for six-year terms through a mix of direct voting and proportional representation, with at least two parties represented in each state’s delegation. In the Chamber of Deputies, 300 members are elected through direct representation and 200 through proportional representation, each for three-year terms. The judiciary consists of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation, the Council of the Federal Judiciary and the collegiate, unitary and district tribunals. After judicial reform in 1995, the power and independence of the Supreme Court increased. Its members are now appointed by the Senate (and no longer by the President), who chose from among three nominees nominated by the president for each post. Since the reform, the Supreme Court has ruled against the president on several occasions. Nevertheless, Mexico has recently seen a president able to secure a Supreme Court appointment for a person close to him. This appointment is a sign of the decreased autonomy of Congress.
Until the turn of the century, Mexico was ruled by a hegemonic state party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), for 71 years. Despite a relatively mild and integrative form of authoritarianism, a growing discontent with the political regime developed from the end of the 1960s. These developments coincided with economic re-structuring, and led to a relatively peaceful end to PRI’s political dominance in 2000. The rightwing National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) candidate Vicente Fox won the 2000 presidential elections but could not fulfill the high expectations. In highly polarized electoral setting, the PAN candidate, Felipe Calderón, won the 2006 elections on the basis of a very small margin (0.56%) after a campaign marred by allegations of fraud. Calderón’s decision to send the army into the streets in order to fight the drug cartels was taken in part as a political tactic. In this way, the President tried to gain legitimacy and silence the opposition mobilized by Party of the Democratic Revolution’s (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD) leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Amongst others this political move has fueled what has become the country’s most important issue, as drug cartel violence escalated to unprecedented levels.

Peña Nieto won the 2012 presidential election running for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In second place was Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador. After a 38 vs. 31 percent close call, the result was anything but uncontested. Although López Obrador refused to accept the final results, alleging infractions such as widespread vote buying, overspending, and media bias, the Federal Electoral Tribunal found insufficient evidence to invalidate the election (Freedom House 2017).

At the beginning of Peña Nieto’s presidency, the new government’s “Pact for Mexico,” signed with the two other main parties in Congress, received national and international hail for enabling reforms that had been blocked for the past 18 years. Slowly but steadily, however, this image crumbled. According to Bertelsmann, political and economic developments – above all the terrible 2014 Tlatlaya and Iguala massacres – have marked the presidency of Peña Nieto. From the hailed progressive force that started in 2012, the administration is now seen as “sluggish, clumsy, and generally insensitive”.

Weak accountability for human rights violations also generated political discontent throughout Mexico, specifically those surrounding the Iguala disappearances. Judicial processes surrounding the disappearances continued against scores of local police, drug gang members, and the mayor of the city and his wife, but as of year’s end no convictions had been achieved. On a broader level, Mexico’s justice system is plagued by delays, unpredictability, and corruption, leading to pervasive impunity. Presidential authority over the armed forces is extensive, but the military has historically operated beyond public scrutiny (Freedom House 2017). In the summer of 2014, a massacre in Tlatlaya came to the light, in which the army had killed 22 people who had surrendered (Bertelsmann 2016).
Mexico’s multiparty democratic system features few official restrictions on political organization and participation. Despite the fact that independent organizations are assigned to organized free and fair elections, there have been question-marks as to what happens in between campaigns and elections and outside of the polling booths. It is clear that the dominant broadcaster Televisa were promoting President Peña Nieto and that this coverage contributed substantially to his election win. For all political parties Bertelsmann signals the persistence of undemocratic, “clientelistic” practices. Both ruling and opposition publicize official public programs as their own as well as distribute food, household appliances, construction material, money and other gifts in order to gather people for their meetings or for elections.

Mexico’s constitutional guarantees regarding free assembly and association are largely guaranteed by the government, but political and civic expression is considered restricted in some parts of the country. Freedom House’s 2017 country report mentions the extensive and controversial 2016 teacher’s union protest as an alleged crackdown on dissenting voices. Also, NGO’s are said to face violent resistance from time to time, including threats and murders. Government officials have strengthened this dynamic by verbally attacking prominent human rights advocates. Bertelsmann’s 2016 report adds to this that, “as most crimes in Mexico go unpunished, [...] political enemies or local governments may command the assassination of some of their opponents with relative impunity, something that has surely made political, social and journalistic activity more risky.”
In general, Mexico knows of no government impediments to free and open discussion. As for journalists, the security environment remains highly problematic (Freedom House 2017). The distribution of government advertising still affects coverage, particularly at the local level. Besides these government-linked restrictions on freedom of expression, organized crime again plays a restrictive role for journalists. Self-censorship has increased, as reporters probing police issues, drug trafficking, and official corruption face an increasingly high risk of physical harm. This same fear of criminal monitoring might restricts citizens’ willingness to converse publicly about crime. Free internet-access is one of the spearheads of the Mexican civil movement, and the government has made access to internet an official civil right in a 2013 constitutional amendment. However, here again organized crime plays a restrictive role. According to Freedom House, criminal gangs have targeted online journalists as well as bloggers who report on organized crime, issuing threats and periodically murdering online reporters.
Official corruption remains a serious problem. Billions of dollars in illegal drug money—as well as large quantities of powerful firearms—enter the country each year from the United States, and such funds affect politics, particularly at the state and local levels (Freedom House 2017). Corruption is ingrained even in the highest political circles. Late 2014, two corruption scandals dubbed ‘The White House Scandals’ were revealed that directly implicated the president’s wife and one of his closest associates (the finance minister). Transparency International's 2015 corruption perceptions index lists Mexico, at 95th, as the most crooked of all countries in the OECD. Over the past year, Mexico’s ruling party has been embroiled in a string of scandals, including accusations of wild overspending in regional election campaigns, systematic malfeasance by state governors and an attempt to gut a newly-created national mechanism to fight corruption. Corruption might not be at the top of the Mexican government’s crisis-list, but it is said that the big problems that Mexico has to face now - organized crime, violence, poverty, lack of economic growth - all are costs or directly aggravated by corruption.

Drug cartels and other forms of organized crime remain the country’s biggest anti-democratic factors. The number of deaths attributed to organized crime rose sharply each year between 2007 and 2011, declined from 2012 to 2014, and subsequently began to rise again up to 2016. The last two governments have taken a number of soft power and hard power measures to curb this national problem. In contrast to the Calderón administration’s public “war against organized crime,” the Peña Nieto government completely ceased publicly discussing organized crime and media coverage of violence had become minimal. Nevertheless, Peña Nieto has maintained many of the former administration’s strategies, including the use of the military.
The large indigenous population has been subject to social and economic discrimination in Mexico, and 70 percent of the indigenous population lives in poverty (Freedom House 2017). Indigenous groups have also been harmed by criminal violence. In addition, disputes over land issues within indigenous groups have occasionally become violent, particularly in the southern provinces. Although the indigenous population has been and still is mostly marginalized and discriminated against, there has not been a violent conflict along these lines. Nonetheless, there is a clear-cut class cleavage between those that have benefited from the new neoliberal economic model and those that have not.

According to Freedom House, women play a prominent role in social and political life. Nevertheless, gender inequality is high when compared to developed countries but also when compared to other Latin American countries. Although reduced in recent years, the percentage of women in the labor force is one of the lowest in Latin America, 38.5%. This may have to do with the role of women in the traditional family structure. Bertelsmann mentions that “Mexico is a very “machista” society, where women are discriminated against and mistreated. There is a very strong racism against [...] other minorities, such as sexual minorities. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is less pronounced in places such as Mexico City, where same-sex marriages are legal. Mexico has taken significant steps toward LGBT equality. A Supreme Court rulings in 2015 struck down state laws defining the purpose of marriage as procreation. However, implementing the jurisprudence in all Mexican states will take time, as the court’s rulings do not apply in blanket form. In May 2016, Peña Nieto proposed a constitutional amendment legalizing same-sex marriage, but the project encountered opposition from the Catholic Church and was shelved.
III UPCOMING ELECTIONS — PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

Mexico is getting ready for the July 2018 general elections. The country will be going to the polls to choose a new president as well as fully renewing the two chambers of Congress. The race for the presidency is shaping up to be very competitive. Since 2000, three parties have established themselves as the dominant political entities in the country (PRI, PRD, PAN). However, this may now be set to change as popular frustration with the workings of the political system is increasing, and opportunities for popular outsiders (like AMLO’s MORENA) or independents to seek their claim to deliver a different type of government may start to develop.

As The Economist explains AMLO’s popularity, it neatly phrases the position the country is now in. “Mexico, like some richer countries, may now want more drastic politics. Voters are enraged by corruption, crime, which is rising again after a drop, and feeble economic growth. […] Many Mexicans have stopped believing that either of the parties that have governed Mexico this century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of President Enrique Peña Nieto or the opposition National Action Party (PAN), will do much about such horrors. And now they face a confrontation with an American president who wants to end free trade, deport millions of Mexicans, build a wall and force Mexico to pay for it.”

All major political parties will be designating their candidates by the end of this year. Most of them are doing so in coalition with the rest of the small parties. Besides the presidential race, more than 3,000 elected positions are up for grabs, making that the outcome of this election will determine the political coalition possibilities that for both political governance and public policy options in Mexico.
Both the 2012 (general) and 2015 (legislative) elections were generally considered free and fair, but complaints persisted (Freedom House 2017). Mainly the ruling party has been accused of spoiling a fair electoral race by its control of the media and misuse of public resources in election campaigns. Furthermore, there were accusations of vote rigging and even vote buying. Mexico’s National Electoral Institute (INE) supervises elections and enforces political party laws, including strict regulations on campaign financing and the content of political advertising. The 2013 political reform broadened the INE’s power to oversee state elections, and the agency was generally considered to have competently managed balloting in the 2015 midterms and 2016 state races. Despite the INE’s monitoring, numerous irregularities were reported in the 2016 elections, including carousel voting and destruction of ballots. As PRI ruled Mexico without interruption from 1929 to 2000, many Mexicans still question its commitment to full democracy. Its ally the Green Party is viewed as a particularly feckless seeker of control over public funds.

Accusations against government officials, particularly at the state level, contributed to multiple losses for the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in gubernatorial elections in June 2016 (Freedom House 2017). These results illustrated the effects of mounting corruption scandals involving government officials. PRI candidates lost races in several states in which incumbents had been accused of graft, including the populous states of Veracruz and Chihuahua; notably, the elections also marked the first time in the PRI’s history it lost the governorship of Veracruz, as well as those of Quintana Roo and Tamaulipas.
Organized crime and related violence have limited the effective governing authority of elected officials in some areas of the country, mostly infiltrating at local government level. Politicians and municipal governments have been subject to significant pressure from criminal groups in recent years. Six mayors were assassinated in 2016, adding to a tally of over 80 mayors and ex-mayors killed since 2006. The general impression during the first two years of the PRI-administration was that the party was succeeding where the National Action Party had failed; in controlling violence and advancing major liberalizing reforms. After the administration’s second year, however, this image collapsed. Armed self-defense organizations have emerged in the Mexican state of Michoacán to fight against the criminal gangs that controlled their towns and villages, making normal life. In the summer of 2014, the magazine Esquire revealed the above mentioned massacre in Tlatlaya, in which the army had killed 22 people who had surrendered. Then, national and international public opinion completely turned with the abduction and assassination of 43 students from a primary teacher’s school in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, one of the poorest, most violent, drug infested and gang-controlled regions of the country. The fact that there was a sweeping collaboration between local politicians, municipal police and a drug gang profoundly shocked the public. This terrible event has marked the presidency of Peña Nieto and the fight against crime (linked to corruption) will be an important topic in the 2018 electoral race.

Although Mexico’s economy is widely considered to be completely healthy yet, the Pena Nieto government should be credited for its revitalization since 2012. At the heart of this revitalization has been Pena Nieto’s embrace of market- and investor-friendly reforms that boost competition and production, especially of oil. Opening the oil-industry to private investment and competition strengthens the country’s economy, at least over the longer term, while reducing government vulnerability to volatile oil prices. In the telecom sector, reforms are breaking up long-held private monopolies, and the financial system has been overhauled to strengthen competition and lower borrowing costs. Some of these reforms have already paid off handsomely and promise to deliver better results in the future. But the resilient government Pena Nieto’s administration contributed to might not be the most important issue for voters.
Ever since now President Donald Trump started his race to get to that position, he has did everything he could to escalate the relationship with the Mexicans. Pena Nieto has been slandered over his ‘soft’ attitude towards the US. Though some Mexican politicians and political analysts insist Peña Nieto had to remain good diplomatic ties with Washington, populist politicians will do everything possible to make use of the growing polarization between Mexico and its northern neighbor.
Continuous flops have turned a promising Pena Nieto presidency into a currently faltering administration. The late reaction to the disappearance of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero in 2014, the across-the-board criticized invitation of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump to the president’s house and the multiple corruption scandals involving his family, his administration and PRI governors have undermined voters’ confidence in the PRI, costing them several governor races over the last couple of years. A number of PRI ministers are considered potentially strong presidential contenders, including the minister of the interior, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, the minister of foreign affairs, Luis Videgaray Caso, the minister of finance, José Antonio Meade Kuribreña. Given the PRI’s low opinion poll ratings overall, however, the party could struggle to achieve another presidential victory in 2018. In the June 2016 regional elections, Mexico’s ruling party lost 7 of the 12 governor’s races to its rivals, dealing a blow to the standing of Mexican President.

The main challengers to the current ruling political party are the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the right-leaning National Action Party (PAN). The PAN-party’s two most prominent players in the race for the presidential nomination are Margarita Zavala, the wife of the former president, Felipe Calderón (2006-12), and Ricardo Anaya Cortés. The PAN is still remembered for the ‘narco-war’ which they waged during their time in government; good by some people, bad by a lot of others.

Internal division has weakened the PRD; however, the leader of the government of Mexico City, Miguel Ángel Mancera, a former PRD member has been gaining attention. National Action Party also came out the big winner of the June 2016 regional elections, positioning itself as contender to return to presidency.
Besides these four big-shots, other parties are said to get between 10% and 15% of the vote in 2018. The Green Party (PVEM) is considered the fourth biggest political party in Mexico. It currently holds 8 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, 5 percent of the Senate and the governorship in the state of Chiapas, which is up for election in 2018. The Greens, as well as the New Alliance Party (PANAL), Citizen’s Movement Party (Movimiento Ciudadano) and the Social Encounter Party (PES) could all form alliances with the bigger parties, as most of them have done in the past.
IV OTHER ACTORS — CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS - MOVEMENTS

Ley 3de3 has brought together intellectuals, academics and civil society in what is known as a citizens’ initiative to fight corruption. The campaign tries to use a clause in Mexican law which allows people to introduce a law if the equivalent of 0.13% of those on the electoral register support it. Then Congress is obliged to debate and vote on the issue. Ley 3de3 has been running a campaign video asking what most unites Mexicans - is it the national anthem, the football team or perhaps tacos? The answer it suggests is instead corruption. Leading civil society groups have spearheaded the campaign, and universities and even for-profit businesses have gotten involved (see here and here). When the law was first delivered to the Mexican Senate on March 17th, it had over 300,000 signatures. A second installment of almost 325,000 more signatures was delivered nineteen days later. The legislation works to fill a number of important holes in the Mexican anticorruption landscape.
In both the massive demonstrations in December 2012, when Peña Nieto took office, as well as the most recent ones in Mexico City demanding the return of the Ayotzinapa students, groups of young anarchists have appeared. Although these movements have created complex situations in some localities and at some specific moments, they have not spread to the general population. Nonetheless, they point to a potential danger if violence, impunity and corruption cannot be checked in the next years (Bertelsmann 2016).

The primary accusations of disturbances of the electoral process in 2012—which concerned alleged instances of vote buying and collusion between the PRI and dominant broadcaster Televisa—were instrumental in sparking a significant anti-PRI student movement. Yo Soy 132 became a social movement composed for the most part of Mexican university students from private and public universities, residents of Mexico, claiming supporters from about 50 cities around the world.

Finally - Read a very interesting article about the role and value of social movements in Mexican society here (OpenDemocracy).
GENERAL SOURCES:

Bertelsmann 2016

Oxford Business Group on 2018 elections

Economist - Finance minister steps down to run for presidency

Bertelsmann 2016

Freedom House

Wilson Center 2018 Mexico elections guide

ARTICLES:

CanningHouse

EurAsiaReview

PulsAmerica

ON THE 2018-ELECTIONS

See this link

And this one

And this one

And this Economist One

BakerInstitute

SOME NICE OPINIONS


[1] Also see: https://itsgoingdown.org/mexico-anarchists-cisen/


For a long time Mexico was a single-party dominant system. While other parties existed, only candidates from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) won Presidential elections. This is not unusual in less developed countries, for a variety of debated reasons.
THE CANDIDATES:

AMLO OF MORENA
(HIS OWN PARTY, WHICH HE MADE)

• Top of voter opinion polls consistently, his lead ranging from 5% – 18%.
• Ran for the presidency twice before
• Got himself into a little bit of hot water when, following regional elections, he contested the results of the election
• Populist candidate with a nationalist bent
• His economic policies are very leftist, and if he is elected would likely bring Mexico in line with other Latin American leftist countries
• Particularly, he plans substantial oil policy reforms, moving away from neoliberal policies
• Most of his followers are supporting him because of HIM not an ideological platform which he supports, since MORENA is more of a personality vehicle for him. AMLO should be examined as a populist candidate, who formed his own party. The political clout this party wields comes, mainly, not from supporters who agree with the ideals, but with the charisma and personal political power which AMLO lends to the party, adding legitimacy to its involvements.
• His main ideology is “anti-establishment” which works well to get supporters from those Mexicans who are frustrated with the institutionalized political parties and the status quo they uphold.
• While planning his structural changes, he has proposed the idea of holding referenda to gauge citizen opinions.
• **NARCOS POLICY:** Suggested the idea of amnesty for drug cartel kingpins. This idea was met with outrage from the people, despite the fact that it is still better than other politicians who work secretly but with the cartels. His suggestion also offers an alternative to the government’s usual strategy of deploying military and police, who are often accused of human rights violations themselves, and have a despicably low investigation, let alone arrest, let alone guilty verdict, rate. His suggestion would perhaps offer an alternative to the cycle of violence that plagues Mexico currently, but many find it disrespectful towards the victims of cartel violence - thousands of families whose members have been threatened, disappeared, killed. A large issue with this is, following the fragmentation of the larger cartels 5 years ago, it is significantly more difficult to negotiate with the new multitude of leaders who compete with each other. His take on corruption in the current administration: leave it up to an independent judiciary to do what they will, talking again about forgiveness and reconciliation.

• Usually in second place, polls conflict if he is gaining or not.

• Embroiled in a corruption scandal relating to property deals, and he is currently under investigation by the Attorney General’s office

• Has pledged to fully investigate Pena Nieto and his administration for corruption if/once he takes office, a striking difference from AMLO’s strategy
• Meade is the official choice of the PRI: however, he was selected in a way very reminiscent of times when the PRI held complete power, revealed as a hand-picked candidate by the ruling president (Nieto) and without much voter or party consideration.

• He worked for both PAN and PRI administrations, leading PRI supporters and members of the party to question his allegiances and earning him less support—causing him to trail behind in the polls. His willingness to work for both parties in relatively high positions reminds of the frequent party switching that has undermined faith in political parties as stable institutions in Mexico. This weakening of faith also likely makes it easier for independent candidates to enter the arena, which can be observed as this year a greater number of independent candidates are running for congressional seats.

• Expected to take votes away from Anaya as she is also connected to PAN so support from PAN members may be split a little.
• Nicknamed El Bronco
• Former governor of the state of Nuevo Leon
• First independent governor there
• Originally was not included on the ballot due to a lack of signatures when the National Electoral Institute (INE) claimed over half his signatures were falsified
• Mexico’s electoral tribunal ordered the INE to reinstate Rodriguez on the ballot because of a failure to double-check the invalidated signatures or allow him to validate them
• Relies on his personal experience of poverty and as a victim of crime to rally support

For the first time, Mexico is allowing Mexican citizens who have moved abroad to register at their local consulate to vote in the July elections. This has resulted in a flood of applicants across the US, Mexicans looking to register to express their voices in this election. In fact, the numbers were so large that the Dallas consulate was overwhelmed, and scheduled applicants out into April, past the March 31 deadline. The Mexican community reacted angrily and the consulate agreed to extend hours and set up alternative locations to nearly double its appointment capacity. Some of the Mexicans living in the US suspect that the Mexican government was announcing the change so close to the deadline to prevent those voters in the US from being able to register. Many of the Mexicans living in the US are expected to vote for AMLO, giving him a larger support base and drawing yet a larger difference between Meade (of the ruling party) and AMLO. This comes as some polls report that Meade may be overtaking Anaya and become AMLO’s primary challenger, since Anaya’s corruption scandal and the presence of Zavala could drag him down away from second place.
• Press in the last two elections provided somewhat biased coverage, and often disparaging or ignoring AMLO. However, with the rise of easy internet access younger voters are able to get information, and AMLO can reach out more directly to constituents.
• The PRD was not a major player at this time, and split from the PRI in ‘89. It was a left leaning party, but its base is now being pulled to MORENA.
• Freedom House aggregate score has dropped 3 points, from 65 to 62, in 2018.
• No matter what, a party must have a game plan of some kind to address corruption and organized crime in Mexico, as it presents the largest threat to security within the state.
• 2017 had the highest rate of murders since 1997, when Mexico started keeping records.
• There are more independent candidates this election cycle than ever before.
• While non are likely to win the presidency, their presence illuminates the public shift towards less entrenched/institutional politics, away from the establishment. AMLO earlier in his career broke away from the PRD, which fragmented before the 2015 legislative elections, and is now the head of MORENA which he formed.
• Last September, the PAN (which ruled for two terms from 2000-2012, interrupting the PRI’s streak) joined with the PRD and the Citizen’s Movement to form an alliance, anticipating a fight against AMLO and the PRI in the 2018 elections. Anaya is PAN’s candidate.
• As well, there have been no large elections for the citizens to express their reaction to the US’s new administration: the 2018 general elections will be the first chance.
• These elections are also the first time that congressional members (senators and representatives) will be able to run for re-election since the 1920’s. Mexico will for the first time see incumbent candidates joined by a higher number of independents running, since 2013 reforms allowed for independent candidates and current members to run for Congressional seats.
• One should always return to this: how can corruption be reduced? Will this strategy help with reducing corruption? And, how can drug cartel power be reduced?