Is Mexico Falling into the Authoritarian Trap?

Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer, Kenneth F. Greene

Journal of Democracy, Volume 32, Number 4, October 2021, pp. 56-71 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0052*

IS MEXICO FALLING INTO THE AUTHORITARIAN TRAP?

Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer and Kenneth F. Greene

Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer *is assistant professor at the Centro de Estudios Internacionales at El Colegio de México and academy scholar at Harvard University.* ***Kenneth F. Greene*** *is associate professor of government at the University of Texas–Austin.*

Some two decades after a protracted transition from dominant-party authoritarian rule, Mexico's democracy faces surprising challenges. Until 2018, the country's party system ranked as the second most institutionalized in Latin America.[1] Voters could choose between defined left, center, and right options at the polls; civil liberties expanded; a more independent civil society developed; and although governance problems were apparent, the foundations of constitutional democracy appeared to have taken root. In some ways, the 2018 general elections were a healthy sign of the democratic system channeling citizens' changing preferences and grievances through the electoral arena. After losing the presidency twice as the nominee of the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) won in 2018 with the greatest vote share of any Mexican president since democratization in 2000. He and his National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) enjoyed a strong mandate and, thanks to coalition allies, majorities in both chambers of Congress.

Theorists of democratic consolidation might count this historic win as a decisive step toward the internalization of democratic norms across the political spectrum—candidates from all major partisan blocs had won the presidency, and state institutions proved able to represent the electorate's will without bias.[2] López Obrador might have reacted accordingly, transitioning from a semi-loyal opponent and critic of those institutions to a president who would address Mexico's social deficits in order to build a more inclusive democracy.

The first half of his six-year term tells a different story. On the one hand, AMLO raised legitimate questions about social justice and the

Journal of Democracy Volume 32, Number 4 October 2021

failures of free-market economics to provide for Mexicans. He focused his ire on special interests—calling them the "mafia of power"—that he claimed had usurped the state apparatus from the popular majority. On the other hand, López Obrador used his mandate to centralize power in the executive and challenge core democratic norms and institutions, raising concerns about democratic backsliding. Similar to other populist figures around the world, AMLO has capitalized on widespread citizen discontent to weaken checks and balances and to lock in competitive advantages for MORENA. The constitutional safeguards built into Mexican democracy to prevent the arbitrary use of power are now under stress.

Amid these heightened tensions, the 2021 elections went beyond ordinary midterms to represent a referendum on AMLO's populist political transformation. But if López Obrador and his opponents hoped that voters would send a clear mandate for continuity or change, the results evidence more noise than signal. MORENA captured just over a third of the national proportional vote for the lower house of Congress. This limits claims that AMLO's personalistic movement represents the unified will of "the people" and dashed party hopes of unilaterally rewriting the constitution. MORENA lost support in important urban centers, and the multiclass coalition that voted it into power in 2018 showed signs of narrowing. At the same time, MORENA and its allies won a plurality in two-thirds of Mexico's federal congressional districts, prevailed in eleven out of fifteen gubernatorial races, and captured a majority of state legislatures.

Although risks of democratic backsliding in Mexico remain, AMLO's hegemonic ambitions are stymied by the very state weakness that propelled him to the presidency. Deficiencies in key institutions limit his ability to address major issues, including poverty and inequality, violent crime, the covid-19 pandemic, and the resulting economic slowdown—the worst since the Great Depression. Although MORENA may remain the largest party, intractable governance problems hamper its ability to consolidate a durable supermajority. Populist movements in other democracies have dominated electoral politics for sustained periods of time before imposing authoritarian controls. If this is a guide, MORENA will lack similar political capital, and its hegemonic ambitions will be thwarted.

Although the dangers posed by AMLO's populist movement are less worrisome than many critics fear, the underlying state weakness that put him in office raises significant concerns. Not only will many citizens' rights and demands continue to go unattended, but the government's accountability to the public may weaken further. AMLO's efforts to concentrate power in the presidency have also undermined key state institutions. To fulfill portions of his mandate, he has increasingly turned to the military, an institution subject to little democratic oversight. Its

political clout has grown amid the weakness of other state apparatuses. The biggest challenge to democracy may not be the hegemonic pretensions of a populist movement, but a chronic lack of state capacity to uphold citizen rights.

State Weakness and the Populist Turn

Following Mexico's transition to fully competitive democracy in 2000, many had high expectations: Clean elections promised to bring accountability, equality, justice, and development. Yet by the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, a majority of Mexicans felt that their hopes were unrealized. Genuine electoral competition had produced turnover between the rightist National Action Party (PAN) and the vaguely centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), but neither party had been able to diminish chronic poverty and inequality, address skyrocketing levels of violent crime, or block what seemed like an endless parade of corruption scandals on both the local and national levels.

Most of these governance problems can be attributed to state weakness. Despite the development of strong institutions to manage political contestation, the bulk of the governing apparatus was left untouched or reformed only incompletely following democratization. With some notable exceptions, most public bureaucracies are understaffed, underfunded, and unprofessional. Access to the public services that they provide is limited and unequal, as are government interventions to meaningfully expand economic opportunity. The state taxes little and redistributes even less, public investment is low, crime remains startlingly high, impunity reins, and corruption abounds.

The state struggles to fulfill core functions. According to the World Bank, Mexico's 2018 homicide rate was the third highest among countries with more than ten-million people. In 2019, 29 percent of households had at least one member fall prey to crime. Investigations were opened into only 7.6 percent of all crimes, with convictions made in only a small fraction of these.[3] Out of 42 upper-middle-income countries measured for adherence to the rule of law by the World Justice Project in 2020, Mexico ranked above only Turkey, Iran, and Venezuela. According to Transparency International, perceptions of corruption in Mexico have increased by 12 percentage points since democratization. The Mexican state's ability to protect social rights is also limited: Social spending—such as cash transfers or the direct delivery of in-kind goods and services—was 7.5 percent of GDP in 2019, far below the OECD average of 20 percent.

Despite enjoying basic political and civil rights, many Mexicans feel that democracy has failed to respond to their needs. By the 2018 elections, trust in core democratic institutions was scandalously low. The 2016–17 Latin America Public Opinion Project survey put Mexicans'

trust in Congress at 15 percent, in political parties at 13 percent, and in the president at 11 percent. A whopping 76 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with democracy, well above the regional average of 47 percent.

This deep discontent helped to propel AMLO and his antiestablishment message to the presidency. He constructed a narrative that blamed democracy's deficiencies on institutions created to serve self-dealing elites. Although he railed against "neoliberalism," his implicit definition had less to do with macroeconomic orthodoxy than with white-collar corruption and influence-peddling. While calls to "purify public life," upend the "mafia of power," and advance Mexico's Fourth Transformation might have sounded to voters like radical political surgery in another time, by 2018 these slogans found fertile ground. Chronic governance failures helped López Obrador to assemble a multiclass and pan-ideological coalition into a majority against the status quo.

AMLO has acted on his antiestablishment mandate in seemingly autocratic ways. Chief among concerns is the growing centralization of power in the national executive. Whereas Mexico's transition to fully competitive democracy focused on decentralizing authority away from a powerful presidency, López Obrador has sought to restore the office's broad powers. He has overridden governors and local leaders, imposed personalistic control on the distribution of cash transfers, and weakened the public bureaucracy by slashing salaries and benefits. When making appointments, AMLO has privileged loyalty over technical expertise: He nominated a longtime ally and member of MORENA's national leadership to head the National Human Rights Commission, an agency that is constitutionally shielded from executive interference. AMLO has also weaponized the distribution of resources as a disciplinary tool. Public trust funds that finance universities, the arts, protections for human-rights activists and journalists, disaster response, and long-term public projects have been dissolved to grant the president greater discretion over public coffers.

The populist justification for this executive aggrandizement inverts the basic tenets of modern representative government. Whereas thinkers such as James Madison viewed the decentralization of authority as the antidote to abuse, AMLO claims that the dispersion of power opens avenues for special interests to cannibalize the state. Concentration of power in the national executive is thus advanced as the remedy to corruption and a precondition for realigning the state with popular interests.

The government has also shown little hesitation to employ the state apparatus for partisan ends. Corruption probes, launched from within the executive branch and touted in the media, appear to be designed to intimidate critics and quiet resistance, rather than to impartially enforce the law. AMLO has publicly pressured the judiciary to go along with his plans. In 2019, a Supreme Court justice with ties to previous adminis-

trations was pressured to resign amid an unresolved money-laundering investigation. Corruption allegations concerning AMLO's allies, by contrast, have not been pursued. The president has also targeted institutions that could stand in his way. For instance, the autonomous National Electoral Institute (INE)—which organizes elections and anchored Mexico's democratic transition—has been subject to scathing verbal attacks from AMLO and his allies, budget cuts in the name of "republican austerity," and proposals for a major overhaul that could presage an attempt to subdue it.

Supporters view these actions as the efforts of an incorruptible leader wresting control of the state from an entrenched elite that is antagonistic to the public will.[4] For opponents of AMLO's populist project, however, these actions represent a systematic assault on countervailing checks and balances as well as the fundamental machinery of the state.

AMLO increases tolerance for his democratic transgressions with the skillful use of rhetoric. Like other populists, he galvanizes "the people" against the old order. With heavy symbolism and a permanent presence in the public sphere, López Obrador "plays the game of audience democracy"—appealing directly to supporters and deriding opponents.[5] In daily early-morning press conferences, he rails against critics, the intelligentsia, and independent media, characterizing opposition to his government as orchestrated by corrupt, conspiratorial, and manipulative elites. The public shaming of journalists has led NGOs to express concern about intimidation and media self-censorship, which are already acute problems in regions with powerful crime syndicates.[6]

Supporters tend to shrug off this rhetoric as a sideshow—a series of soft jabs—and playful retaliation for past grievances. But polarizing discourse that vilifies political opponents has contributed to the erosion of mutual toleration between opposing sides. And without a sense of democratic solidarity, publics are less likely to check authoritarian acts.[7] Mexico's democratic achievements aside, weak and unreformed state institutions created opportunities for these populist and antiestablishment attacks in the first place. While these threaten the liberal and constitutional aspects of Mexican democracy, the system has safeguards against leaders who overstep. The 2021 elections allowed voters to weigh in midway through AMLO's Fourth Transformation.

No Ordinary Midterms

In presidential systems, elections in the middle of the executive's term are often mundane affairs with low turnout and little voter enthusiasm. Yet Mexico's 2021 midterms were anything but ordinary, taking place in a context of heightened polarization that at least temporarily reorganized the party system. A previously unimaginable coalition of the right, left, and center made up of the PAN, PRD, and PRI called Go

for Mexico took on the MORENA-led Together We Are Making History bloc. This contest sparked intense interest from voters; turnout was 8.3 percentage points above the mean turnout for midterms held after 2000. An unprecedented number of concurrent subnational contests also contributed to this increase. Such high participation is especially striking given the pandemic and a violent preelection season that saw the murders of 36 candidates and prospective candidates.

Midterm elections frequently deal a blow to the incumbent administration. Economic turmoil, a huge spike in covid-related deaths, and a stubbornly high murder rate could have led voters to reward the opposition at the polls. But if these were the expectations, MORENA has much to celebrate: Victories in the majority of gubernatorial races give the party control of 17 of Mexico's 32 states, which combined are home to 46 percent of the national population. Together with coalition allies, MORENA also doubled the number of municipal presidencies that it controls by winning 683 of the 1,900 contests. Despite this impressive advance in local and state elections, the national results dealt the party a significant setback. As the Table shows, MORENA's vote share in elections for all 500 seats of the Chamber of Deputies fell by 3.2 percentage points, netting nearly 40 percent of the lower-house seats. MORENA holds 62 Senate seats or 48.4 percent of the total, which it won in 2018. While MORENA lost its outright majority in the Chamber, it will—thanks to its coalition allies—maintain a simple majority in both houses of Congress, allowing the party to pass ordinary legislation. Yet it fell short of the two-thirds supermajority needed to alter the constitution.

Although the results will buoy AMLO's populist designs, they are not strong enough for a purely electoral path to the hegemony that he seeks. AMLO appears committed to the presidency's one-term limit, which has been in place since the 1910 Revolution; any whispered hopes of amending the constitution to permit him a second term have been quieted. For the 2024 presidential race, MORENA will have to nominate a new candidate. But neither of the two frontrunners—Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard and Mexico City mayor Claudia Sheinbaum—have AMLO's charisma and thus will struggle to hold together a highly personalist party and diverse electoral bloc.

The 2021 results also narrow the multiclass coalition that elected AMLO. While MORENA retained the bulk of the vote that it had already snatched from the declining PRI in 2018, it lost many middle-class, educated, and affluent supporters, especially those in important urban centers. The effect is most visible in Mexico City, which until the 2021 polls was an undisputed stronghold of the left. Of the city's sixteen mayoralties, MORENA lost six of the eleven that it held, leaving the metropolis nearly split down the center; the less affluent east remained in AMLO's camp while the more affluent west backed opposition parties. Compared to MORENA's 2018 coalition, the party's 2021 base is

Table—Election Results: Mexico's Chamber of Deputies, 2018 vs. 2021

Parties	2018		2021		Change in Vote Share
	Vote Share	Total Seats	Vote Share	Total Seats	
National Regeneration Movement (MORENA)	37.3%	252	34.1%	198	-3.2
National Action Party (PAN)	17.9%	79	18.2%	114	+0.3
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)	16.5%	49	17.7%	70	+1.2
Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)	5.3%	12	3.6%	15	-1.7
Mexican Green Ecologist Party (PVEM)	4.8%	11	5.4%	43	+0.6
Citizens' Movement (MC)	4.4%	24	7.0%	23	+2.6
Labor Party (PT)	3.9%	44	3.2%	37	-0.7
Social Encounter Party (PES)	2.4%	23	2.8%	–	+0.4
New Alliance (PANAL)	2.5%	–	–	–	–
Progressive Social Networks (RSP)	–	–	1.8%	–	–
Force for Mexico (FxM)	–	–	2.5%	–	–
Independents	1.0%	6	0.1%	–	–
Null Votes/ Unregistered Candidates	4.0%	–	3.5%	–	-0.5
Total	**100%**	**500**	**100%**	**500**	**–**

Source: Official Journal of the Federation, 1 September 2021, *http://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5628464&fecha=01/09/2021.*

Note: Seats attributed to each party in 2018 include congressional representatives who joined after being elected under a different party affiliation. In 2021, the PAN, PRI, and PRD ran as part of the Go for Mexico coalition in 176 of 300 single-member districts. MORENA, PVEM, and PT ran as part of the Together We Are Making History coalition in 151 of 300 single-member districts. The remaining 200 seats are allocated by closed-list proportional representation in five forty-member regional districts.

older and less educated. MORENA also lost 11 percentage points among independents.[8] Unaffiliated voters compose nearly half the electorate, making these fickle voters the key to the presidency. A narrower coalition with softening support among independents will make it hard for AMLO's successor to reproduce the president's strong 2018 showing in 2024.

With the electoral path to long-term incumbency in greater doubt, MORENA will likely intensify its pursuit of other ways to tilt the political playing field in its favor. In addition to cowing electoral-management bodies, MORENA intends to alter the Chamber of Deputies'

mixed electoral system that combines 300 single-member districts with 200 proportionally elected seats. Proportional representation favored opposition parties in their bid against the PRI, the dominant party during democratization. In the 2021 polls, MORENA won 61 percent of single-member districts with only 34 percent of the national vote, a high vote-to-seat share comparable only to what the PRI, with its robust national party infrastructure, had ever achieved. To consolidate support throughout the country, MORENA, from its inception, has appealed to voters beyond the traditional bounds of the Mexican left by absorbing aspiring candidates and their supporters from other parties—especially the PRI. Calculating that the proportional-representation seats now advantage its competitors, MORENA is pushing for electoral reform. Should the opposition act in concert, however, it would hold enough seats to deny the ruling party the supermajority needed to enact these changes. If the opposition does coordinate to block MORENA's attempts to lock in partisan advantages, the Mexican party system—long structured around left, center, and right options—may reorganize around support for or opposition to AMLO's movement.

Paths to One-Party Hegemony

Since its 2014 founding, MORENA has overhauled the traditional left and assembled a broad coalition that may help it to remain the largest party for some time to come. Yet the electoral landscape leaves MORENA with few options to secure electoral dominance. A peculiar combination of structure and fluidity in Mexico's party system means that to win, presidential candidates must appeal to an ideological camp and nonaligned voters. Just shy of half the electorate identifies with a party and votes according to ideological predisposition. The other half or more—depending on the measure used[9]—floats between different parties, votes based on the performance of the current administration, or chooses the most appealing candidate in each election. Many of these voters are dissatisfied with the incumbent and increasingly doubt whether democracy in its current form can fulfill their needs.[10] Candidates typically align themselves with one of the three political blocs and then campaign broadly to capture the large group of independent and protest-oriented voters.

This electoral landscape leaves MORENA with three unlikely paths to a long-term majority. First, the party could benefit from a growing left-leaning constituency in Mexico, similar to how other Latin American leftists were swept to power during the so-called pink tide that started in the late 1990s. Yet the ideological proclivities of the electorate have remained static, and most voters identify as centrists. Moreover, exit-poll data show that while MORENA won about the same proportion

of leftists and center-leftists in 2021 as in 2018, the percentage of the electorate that identifies as left-leaning shrank by six points.[11]

A second path would see the party grow its coalition by gutting the PRI's remaining vote share. In 2021, the PRI lost eight governorships to MORENA. Sensing opportunity, MORENA may seek to keep siphoning the PRI's local support and to encourage some PRI elites to switch parties and run under its banner. But this strategy may prove to be poison fruit for MORENA, as it has already produced significant turmoil within the party and alienated part of its base. Moreover, further rapprochement with the PRI erodes the antiestablishment and anticorruption core of AMLO's message. Without institutions to process internal conflict, MORENA might find such factionalism debilitating, leaving it vulnerable to splits.

While state weakness might save Mexico from the perils of hegemonic populism, it also encourages AMLO to substitute polarizing rhetoric for an inability to deliver concrete results.

Third, MORENA may attract enough voters through populist appeals to dominate the political system. AMLO's antiestablishment message cuts across the traditional left-right ideological divide to create a new axis of political competition: the people and their president against the corrupt elite. But the broad and diverse coalition that López Obrador assembled means that aspects of his platform contradict one other. While some elements hail from the left—such as a focus on the marginalized and dispossessed, bolstered cash transfers, and support for state ownership of certain private enterprises—others do not.[12] Although governments in many countries responded to the pandemic with economic stimulus, AMLO committed to fiscal austerity, refused to increase taxes to fund state-service expansion, and even cut the public-health system. These policies as well as social-conservative rhetoric have broadened AMLO's appeal to include centrist and even some rightist voters.[13]

Some signs indicate that a populist political split is taking root. In 2018, we speculated in these pages that partisan competition would likely reorganize into two blocs, with MORENA on one side and a PAN-coordinated opposition on the other.[14] This has largely occurred as alternatives have not gained a foothold. It is now clearer, however, that this divide has gone beyond the traditional left-right ideological split to acquire populist overtones. What unites MORENA backers is not policy preferences or ideological affinity but support for AMLO's populist and antiestablishment message, as well as a commitment to keeping disliked rivals out of power. In response, opponents rallied against AMLO's attempts to erode checks and balances and appropriate state machinery. This awkward anti-MORENA alliance from the

2021 elections helped to undermine a sense of programmatic difference between the traditional parties that participated. A proposed 2022 recall referendum that AMLO has promoted may further his effort to reshape the party system.

Yet for long-term success, MORENA must outgrow its highly personalist character. AMLO's charisma holds together a heterogeneous populist coalition, and the constitutional prohibition on the reelection of an incumbent president means that the potency of this force is likely to fade. The president buttressed his image as a man of the people through untiring campaign tours across the country and a reputation as an unwavering opponent of past administrations. He built a personal connection to many voters, which he deepens by concentrating authority in the executive branch. AMLO shows minimal interest in building a party with an institutional life of its own that could constrain his personal power.

While some organizations—such as Argentina's Peronist Party and the Soviet Union's Communist Party—did benefit from inherited charisma after the departure of their founders,[15] they did so only during a period of prolonged dominance with little opposition. MORENA holds a smaller lead over its competitors and did not sustain a majority in its first midterm elections, even with AMLO at the helm. Furthermore, his potential successors lack his magnetic personality and will probably struggle to approach his vote share, let alone turn MORENA into a hegemonic party with the electoral force to engineer an authoritarian reversal of democracy.

MORENA's main routes for establishing a durable majority thus appear uncertain: It must retain a complicated coalition amid major governance challenges after its founder leaves office in 2024. Partly at AMLO's urging, many voters have grown very sensitive to incumbent performance, and so enduring state weakness presents the most serious roadblock to MORENA's electoral hegemony.

AMLO's Catch-22

The inability of deeply deficient state institutions to fulfill citizen demands has produced two seemingly contradictory outcomes.[16] On the one hand, chronic governance problems helped propel AMLO to power with an antiestablishment message focused on popular dissatisfaction with prior administrations' performance. On the campaign trail, he hammered his predecessors' failure to combat poverty, reduce deep regional and socioeconomic inequalities, and control violence. On the other hand, state deficiencies limit his ability to resolve these problems. A notable portion of MORENA's 2018 supporters are likely to punish the party for governance failures at the 2024 polls. Losing these voters alone may be sufficient to prevent the supermajority that AMLO needs to establish long-term dominance.

While state weakness might save Mexico from the perils of hegemonic populism, it also encourages AMLO to substitute polarizing rhetoric for an inability to deliver concrete results, change the rules of the democratic game for partisan gain, and rely on the military to execute long-term governance projects. The further weakening of a precarious state looms as the biggest challenge to the quality and stability of democracy in Mexico.

In an attempt to live up to the high public expectations for redress under his administration, AMLO changed how state power is exercised by centralizing authority in the presidency and converting service-based and conditional poverty-alleviation programs into direct cash transfers. These transfers tend to be more generous than in the past but are not as transparent or accurately targeted to the poor. The percentage of households receiving cash transfers increased from 28 to 30 percent between 2018 and 2020. But the poorest 10 percent of households that received transfers decreased from 56 to 37 percent during the same period.[17]

Moreover, the impotence of the state apparatus and AMLO's failure to address it hamper his ability to fund and deliver the public goods that many citizens expect. Mexico's fiscal capacity—the tax-to-GDP ratio hovers around a meager 16 percent—is well below that of Argentina or Brazil and even of less developed Andean countries with historically weak states, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. Social spending and public investment remain capped at low levels, regardless of how the government distributes funds. Inadequate public-goods provision has produced anemic economic growth and increased the disparities between Mexico's prosperous and poor states. In the absence of tax reform and amid economic crisis, social inequalities remain intractable.

Low fiscal capacity also leaves critical government institutions—such as the police, courts, tax collectors, hospitals, and schools—without the resources, personnel, and expertise to effectively perform their functions. A nonmeritocratic system of selection and promotions plagues many state bureaucracies with venality and inefficiency. In most government agencies, no civil service exists. Instead personal connections, political alliances, and membership in public-sector unions determine employment outcomes. The secretary of finance resigned six months into the administration, citing the imposition of unqualified staff and disregard for evidence in decision-making. In several regions, criminal organizations have infiltrated the local state apparatus and run protection rackets with complicit police and corrupt or cowed officials. The state's reach across the national territory is highly uneven, and coordination problems between levels of government in the federal system abound. Government institutions seldom carry out tasks with reasonable efficacy and as a result, citizens' rights—although formally recognized—are ignored with an alarming frequency.

The covid pandemic offers a tragic example of the consequences of

both institutional debilities and AMLO's further weakening of the state. As of July 2021, Mexico ranks fifth in accumulated excess deaths per thousand among countries of more than three million. It has the fourth most confirmed covid deaths worldwide, despite having a relatively young population that is only the world's eleventh largest. Longstanding inequities in the delivery of health services severely disadvantage poor and rural populations that have limited access to tests and adequate care.

AMLO's drive to dismantle preexisting government programs, preference for discretionary as opposed to bureaucratic decision-making, and disdain for expertise have gravely exacerbated covid's impact. He failed to heed scientific evidence, continued with hasty reforms and cuts to the health system, and scrapped an insurance scheme for the many informal-sector workers and their families. The share of the population without access to health services is estimated to have swelled from 16 to 28 percent between 2018 and 2020. [18]

High expectations coupled with policy missteps and the state's limited ability to act makes holding together any electoral coalition difficult. Signs that AMLO's heterogeneous base of support is eroding are apparent in the 2021 election results. Mexico's protracted crises have softened voters' impressions of MORENA: Although at 60 percent AMLO's August 2021 approval rating was strong, 2021 polls show that his government is under water when evaluated on economic performance, public security, and the public-sector corruption that he repeatedly promised to combat.[19]

Populist incumbents who have underdelivered may still hold winning coalitions together by maintaining, as if they were still in the opposition, a "permanent campaign" against the elite.[20] Other tactics include acts that symbolically recognize the dignity of low-status groups, repeated performances of proximity to "the people," and nationalist discourse. Like other populist leaders who rail from the bully pulpit, AMLO has resorted to these strategies. But while rhetoric can be a powerful tool, it is a short-term substitute for concrete improvements in citizens' lives. The longer that populists remain in office, the more difficult it becomes for them to blame unmet promises on the establishment. Without better performance, antiestablishment leaders with authoritarian designs can find themselves hostage to the same problems of sustaining support as did their predecessors.

Unlike other populist figures who eroded democratic institutions enough to inaugurate competitive-authoritarian regimes, AMLO has challenges in maintaining a durable electoral majority. Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori each benefited from special circumstances that permitted them to maintain high levels of mass support—more than what López Obrador currently enjoys—as they proceeded to override checks on executive authority and ultimately tilted the playing field to undermine the basic fairness of

elections.[21] Fujimori defeated the Shining Path insurgency and through economic reform, used inherited hyperinflation to his benefit; Chávez directed huge profits from high oil prices to make obvious improvements in the lives of many poor citizens; and Morales used windfalls from the commodities boom in the 2000s and 2010s to vastly expand social programs and launch an unprecedented social-inclusion project. The legitimacy generated from those successes gave these populist incumbents political capital and electoral momentum to use as a wrecking ball against liberal-democratic institutions.

AMLO is unlikely to follow in the footsteps of his South American counterparts—not because Mexico lacks crises that he could address to maintain support, but because the state has little room to maneuver. Hostage to a limited state machinery and without access to large windfall revenues, AMLO's government cannot produce meaningful improvements in governance or markedly expand social policy. His response to the pandemic—a mix of austerity cuts to the public sector and healthcare—has left the state on even weaker footing. Moreover, unlike other populist leaders who successfully instituted competitive authoritarian regimes, AMLO faces opposition parties that—though weakened—maintain substantial sway. Rather than gaining steam, MORENA overall lost ground in its first midterm contest. In the 2024 general election, many voters will judge the party on its performance.

This leaves Mexican populism in a catch-22 situation: The same weak institutions behind the governance failures that drove support for AMLO's antiestablishment platform are now hampering his ability in office to effectively respond to citizen demands. Although this paradox may limit his ability to run roughshod over democratic institutions, it makes democracy vulnerable in another way. Confronted with state incapacity, many democratic governments increasingly turn to the military—often one of the few trusted institutions—which in turn demands greater concessions. Despite his campaign promises, AMLO has now deepened the military's role in government.

While the military's subordination to civilian rule was a key element of Mexico's political development during the twentieth century, pressing circumstances are generating change. Under the previous three presidential administrations, nationwide military deployment has been the main strategy for combating organized crime. As the military's role in domestic matters has expanded, the military has extracted concessions from the president, including exemption from budget cuts, discretion to manage its affairs, and participation in his core infrastructure projects. Among these are the construction of a new airport for Mexico City, branches of a new national bank, and part of a tourist train line in the Yucatán peninsula. Under this arrangement, the military will keep some of the profits, giving it power vis-à-vis current and future presidential administrations. On the surface, the National Guard that AMLO created

in 2019 to assume the military's public-safety role would seem to clip its wings. But in practice, the armed forces exert budgetary and operational control over the National Guard, and a new proposal would put it under the full control of the Secretariat of National Defense.

The military's increasingly prominent role is a concerning sign for Mexican democracy. Its involvement in public safety has not brought violence under control. The armed forces have been implicated in human-rights abuses, and the few investigations of their conduct that do occur are shielded from public view. In addition, the military's tutelary role and budgetary independence give it increased political sway. While not as influential as those that have toppled democracies in the region, the Mexican military has accrued enough power to merit questions about its political leanings, long-term goals, and de facto ability to override government decisions.

Democracy, Populism, and the State

The balance for liberal democracy at the midpoint of AMLO's presidency is mixed. Democratic institutions continue to successfully manage political conflict and have not succumbed to the pressures of a charismatic, antiestablishment leader whose will to power has stressed the constitutional system. The 2021 midterm elections demonstrate that the political institutions built during Mexico's democratic transition have a strength that other state institutions lack. For instance, the INE still asserts its political independence and organizes elections with remarkable proficiency. While AMLO and MORENA's attempts to subordinate the INE are unlikely to cease, high public trust in it will help it to withstand such attacks and administer elections fairly.[22] A vigilant and capable press, engaged civil society, and a federal system of government give Mexican democracy a strong backbone. In addition, AMLO's movement has brought unattended-to citizen demands to the fore and provided a new sense of representation to many of those who felt disenchanted and alienated from other political parties. Mexico's democracy has real strength.

Still, López Obrador's exercise of power has challenged core democratic norms and values, starting with the tolerance of opponents and acceptance of pluralism. Although his inability to sustain hegemonic levels of mass support may ultimately constrain his autocratic temptations, his drive to concentrate power in the national executive erodes state institutions. As the deterioration in public-health services during the pandemic illustrates, careless reforms, austerity cuts, and the destruction of bureaucratic capacity have further diminished the public sector's ability to respond to complex governance problems. Furthermore, AMLO has targeted nonpartisan bodies that lie at the core of the constitutional order with hostile rhetoric that may damage citizen trust.

Although the system is likely to withstand the populist test, a democracy without committed democrats is inferior.

Yet the weakness of the Mexican state presents deeper challenges. Mexico's populism exemplifies the corrosive effect that sustained failures in government performance can have on party systems and political representation.[23] Populist movements may capitalize upon governance crises, but the very lack of state capacity that opened their way to power can come back to defeat their hegemonic pretensions, again leaving voters searching for alternatives. While this may protect the basic framework of democracy in the short run, it comes at the long-run cost of fractured representation and unaddressed governance problems that corrode citizens' rights. The risk is that in hopes of finding a solution to their ills, voters may validate democratic transgressions and tolerate yet more authoritarian power grabs. Mexico's democratic project thus rests on the difficult task of state-building.

NOTES

1. Scott Mainwaring, ed., *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

2. John Higley and Richard Gunther, eds., *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. 2020 data available at *www.inegi.org.mx/programas/envipe/2020*.

4. For evidence of this see Michael Albertus and Guy Grossman, "When Do Voters Support Power Grabs?" *Journal of Democracy* 32 (April 2021): 116–31.

5. Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 133.

6. "Mexico: Article 19 Urges Obrador to Focus on Protecting Journalists at Home," Article 19, 7 May 2021.

7. Milan W. Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30 (October 2019): 20–32.

8. Alejandro Moreno, "¿La clave del revés a Morena? Los apartidistas," *El Financiero* (Mexico City), 8 June 2021.

9. Estimates of voters without a party identification vary. A February 2021 Buendía and Laredo survey shows that 48 percent of respondents held no party identification. A May 2021 Moreno and Sotnikova survey indicates that 64 percent of respondents did not identify with a party. Studies available at *www.ine.mx/voto-y-elecciones/encuestas-electorales/encuestas-proceso-electoral-2020-2021*.

10. Kenneth F. Greene and Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer, "Latin America's Shifting Politics: Mexico's Party System Under Stress," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (October 2018): 31–42.

11. Moreno, "¿La clave del revés a Morena?"

12. Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer, "Mexico 2019: Personalistic Politics and Neoliberalism from the Left," *Revista de Ciencia Política* 40 (June 2020): 401–30.

13. Moreno, "¿La clave del revés a Morena?"

14. Greene and Sánchez-Talanquer, "Latin America's Shifting Politics."

15. Caitlin Andrews-Lee, "The Politics of Succession in Charismatic Movements: Routinization versus Revival in Argentina, Venezuela, and Peru," *Comparative Politics* 52 (January 2020): 289–315; Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992).

16. Samuel Handlin, *State Crisis in Fragile Democracies: Polarization and Political Regimes in South America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Steven Levitsky, "Latin America's Shifting Politics: Democratic Survival and Weakness," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (October 2018): 102–13.

17. Instituto de Estudios sobre Desigualdad 2020 data available at *https://indesig.org/docs/Resultados%20preliminares%20de%20la%20ENIGH%202020.pptx-2.pdf*.

18. Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social 2020 data available at *www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/MP/Paginas/Pobreza_2020.aspx*.

19. Alejandro Moreno, "AMLO recupera popularidad: 60% aprueba su mandato," *El Financiero,* 3 August 2021; Moreno, "Aprobación de AMLO da un 'pasito' para atrás a 56%," *El Financiero,* 5 July 2021.

20. Urbinati, *Me the People*, 125.

21. V. Ximena Velasco Guachalla et al., "Latin America Erupts: When Does Competitive Authoritarianism Take Root?" *Journal of Democracy* 32 (July 2021): 63–77; Kurt Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the United States," *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (June 2020): 389–406.

22. Public trust in the INE remains high at 60 percent, which is just behind the military at 64 percent and ahead of AMLO at 52 percent. See 2020 surveys by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. Available at *www.inegi.org.mx/programas/encuci/2020*.

23. Scott Mainwaring, "The Crisis of Representation in the Andes," *Journal of Democracy* 17 (July 2006): 13–27.