

# [***Hats, T-shirts and dolls reflect outgoing Mexican president's outsized presence in upcoming election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BKM-98S1-JC5B-G0WY-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

March 20, 2024 Wednesday 12:36 AM GMT

Copyright 2024 Associated Press All Rights Reserved

**Section:** INTERNATIONAL NEWS

**Length:** 1073 words

**Byline:** MEGAN JANETSKY, Associated Press

**Dateline:** MEXICO CITY

**Body**

MEXICO CITY — Souvenirs bearing the image of 70-year-old Mexican President [*Andrés Manuel López Obrador*](https://apnews.com/hub/andres-manuel-lopez-obrador) sell like T-shirts at a Taylor Swift concert.

Just outside of [*Mexico’s presidential palace*](https://apnews.com/hub/mexico), throngs of mostly Mexicans crowd around a booth selling plush talking dolls, earrings, plastic sandals, stickers, hats, mugs, lighters and even coloring books plastered with the face of the highly popular leader.

The populist López Obrador, best known by his nickname AMLO, has long had a feverish following, but he’s become a larger-than-life figure in Mexican ***politics*** after leading the nation for nearly six years.

Now, despite not being eligible to run for reelection in the upcoming June 2 presidential vote, the nationalist looms larger than any of the candidates competing for the helm of Mexico’s government.

“López Obrador is going to be present without even being on the ballot,” said Carlos Pérez Ricart, a political analyst at Mexico’s Center for Economic Research and Teaching. “For better and for worse, he has managed to make all national ***politics*** revolve around him.”

Armando Monter, a follower of López Obrador for 17 years, opened his memorabilia booth three months ago in downtown Mexico City, selling just a few dolls and keychains.

“It was really small, but then more and more people were interested,” said Monter. “Now, we sell pretty much everything because the image of the president is so loved.”

While presidential front-runner and López Obrador ally [*Claudia Sheinbaum*](https://apnews.com/article/mexico-election-claudia-sheinbaum-97dfa20d06e722574dcf37f96cc5a04d) attempts to mirror the president, her closest competitor, [*Xóchitl Gálvez*](https://apnews.com/video/mexico-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-mexico-city-spain-government-national-317d25400d80479685b8c7c3b0564f89), has sought to villainize him as she lags in the polls.

López Obrador has been part of Mexico's national ***politics*** for decades, gaining a spotlight in 2006 when he narrowly lost the presidential election, which he insists was stolen. In 2018, he swept to victory, ousting the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) from the presidency.

Despite facing a range of controversies and high levels of violence in the country under his leadership, López Obrador is adored by many like 56-year-old Carmen Andrade, an informal vendor in the nearby state of Morelos.

Andrade traveled three hours by bus on Thursday to Mexico City, just to buy a small, $8 cartoon López Obrador doll for her home. She said the slog into the capital was worth it because he's leaving office, and she wanted something to remember him by.

López Obrador has catered to working class voters in a way no other recent Mexican leader has, his popularity helped along by the nation's strong economy.

He speaks candidly and he has pushed social programs, bumped up the minimum wage and proposed sweeping pension reforms. In the first four years of his presidency, Mexico’s government said 5 million people were pulled out of poverty.

“He’s my grandpa! \u2026 We all love him,” Andrade said, cradling the doll on her chest. “By doing nothing more than focusing on the poor and the elderly, he’s pushed aside all other presidents. They only thought about themselves.”

López Obrador is closing his presidency with soaring approval ratings, with nearly seven in 10 Mexicans approving of his administration. That’s a sharp contrast from previous governments, with his predecessor ending his term with barely 20% approval after waves of corruption scandals.

“He’s been able to connect with the working class that felt tossed to the side," Pérez Ricart said. “He speaks like them, he looks like them, and that’s won him a lot of legitimacy.”

Andrade, who planned to travel another three hours home that evening, said she would have bought another doll for each room of her house, if only she had the money.

In the upcoming elections, Andrade plans to vote for front-runner Sheinbaum, who she said “carries the teachings” of López Obrador as the candidate of the president's political party, Morena.

Nestled among López Obrador merchandise in Monter's tent was a growing number of dolls, magnets and keychains emblazoned with Sheinbaum's face.

Monter said he had never seen merchandise of any Mexican president until López Obrador. Over the past month, he said, more and more customers have come asking for souvenirs of Sheinbaum, who is on the path to become Mexico's first woman president.

Sheinbaum is largely seen as a continuation of López Obrador, leading in recent polls by a healthy margin. She has closely tethered herself to her mentor, appearing next to him in campaign billboards and mirroring his tone and political platforms.

"Much has changed in these six years,” Sheinbaum said in her official campaign launch, ticking off dozens of López Obrador’s accomplishments. “I ask you, do you feel the transformation in the country? ... We are going to continue with that transformation.”

López Obrador, too, has [*thrown his support behind Sheinbaum*](https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2023/09/07/yo-apoyo-a-claudia-sheinbaum-presidente-entregara-baston-de-mando-para-que-continue-la-transformacion/), to the point where electoral authorities asked the politician to refrain from commenting on the election. What remains to be seen is if he will continue to wield power in the incoming government if Sheinbaum wins. He has said he will retire from ***politics***.

Still, many voters have grown disgruntled with some changes under the populist's leadership. Cartel violence across the country [*has reached new extremes*](https://apnews.com/article/mexico-police-cartels-officers-killed-86548e81e62689628078bc3f1df042e2), López Obrador has [*attacked critics and journalists*](https://apnews.com/article/mexico-president-published-reporters-phone-number-ef537c9c37b3506ff67ea18ebe40629e) and [*carried out electoral reforms*](https://apnews.com/article/politics-mexico-government-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-caribbean-democracy-40ffd7917502b729d2ced3b11a073cdb) one official said could “wind up poisoning democracy itself.”

Last month, [*tens of thousands of Mexicans*](https://apnews.com/article/democracy-mexico-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-opposition-48f454552fab8d52c2b17aac82d44016) took to the streets to rail against the president in what they dubbed a “march for democracy.” Opposition parties latched onto the leader's perceived failures, with presidential candidate Gálvez centering much of her presidential campaign around criticizing López Obrador.

“The opposition to López Obrador lives off of López Obrador," said Pérez Ricart, the CIDE analyst. “I don't know what they're going to do when López Obrador is no longer in power.”

Many supporters of the president planning to vote for Sheinbaum said the bloodshed and his attacks on journalists have made some of their enthusiasm for their leader wane.

Still, Andrade, who grinned as she held her cartoon López Obrador doll on Friday, was quick to defend the politician. “He does what he can, and he's done the best he can. There are always going to be people who judge him,” she said.

As Andrade walked away from the booth teeming with customers trading pesos for figures of the president, she added: “I'm leaving happy.”

\_\_\_\_

Follow AP’s coverage of Latin America and the Caribbean at [*https://apnews.com/hub/latin-america*](https://apnews.com/hub/latin-america)

**Load-Date:** March 19, 2024

**End of Document**