

# Why is Lopez Obrador's approval rating high and what role do his mañaneras play?

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## Introduction

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, commonly referred as AMLO, was the president of Mexico from the 1st of December 2018 until 30 of September 2024. For some he is a hero of the Mexican people, a reformist who is bringing social change to Mexico through generous social programs, and a charismatic leader who puts the common people as its priority. For others is an individual with dictator tendencies, a left-wing populist and a power-hungry liar. In this paper I will tackle the question: Why is Lopez Obrador's approval rating high and what role do his mañaneras play? I will discuss AMLO's path to the presidency, how his "mañaneras" (morning briefings) help him control the narrative and maintain a positive public image, and the reasons why even with persistent corruption, and highest number of homicides ever recorded in Mexico, he, nevertheless, enjoys the highest approval rating in history for a Mexican president<sup>1</sup>.

AMLO gained power thanks to a Mexican electorate who rejected past governments. The Mexican population lost trust of the PRI and PAN and saw, AMLO's personalist party<sup>2</sup>, MORENA as the solution. Once president, he enjoyed a high approval rating because his mañaneras allowed him to maintain control of the news that surfaced during his term, this way manipulating public perception.

To understand the reasons behind AMLO's approval rating, I will reference the work of Dr. Rodrigo Castro Cornejo, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell and Associate Director of the UMass-Lowell Center for Public Opinion, who specializes in the influence of political campaigns on voting behavior. His papers, "The AMLO Voter: Affective Polarization and the Rise of the Left in Mexico" and "Same Scandal, Different Interpretations: Politics of Corruption, Anger, and Partisan Bias in Mexico," provide new lenses in understanding his popularity.

## **AMLO's rise to power and popularity.**

AMLO ran for presidential office three times over the course of the 2006, 2012 and 2018 elections. He ran for president with the PRD (Partido de la Revolucion Democratica) a left-wing party, in 2006 and 2012, where he lost on both occasions by only a small margin. His victorious election in 2018 occurred with his recently formed party MORENA (Movimiento de Regeneracion Nacional).

His 2006 and 2012 presidential runs resulted unsuccessful but laid the foundation for his future ambitions. In 2006 was a candidate for the PRD (Partido de la Revolucion Democratica) a left-wing party, where he lost by less than one per cent of the vote share to the PAN (Partido Accion Nacional) a right-wing party, candidate Felipe Calderon. For this loss he blamed “the power mafia” (la mafia del poder) for electoral fraud.<sup>4</sup> These are the political elites, leading business figures, and owners of major media outlets who consolidated wealth and power at the expense of ordinary citizens with their neoliberalist policies and institutions. For example, the main media conglomerates (Televisa and TV Azteca) have been criticized for promoting neoliberal agendas that favour elite interests<sup>5</sup> and opening Mexico’s oil industry to private and foreign investment<sup>6</sup>. In 2012 he lost by just 6.6% <sup>7</sup> to the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) a centre-right party, candidate Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) and he again denounced this occasion as fraud. Later that year AMLO leaves the PRD. This happened because the PRD decided to join the “Pact for Mexico”<sup>8</sup> which was a political multiparty agreement to build a common ground between the PAN, PRI and PRD to approve reforms in Congress<sup>9</sup>. This caused significant shifts in AMLO’s approach to politics.

In 2014 he forms his personalist party MORENA, which some may define as a left-wing nationalist social movement and political party<sup>10</sup> and starts contemplating presidential campaign for 2018. At first MORENA’s support was relatively modest. In the 2015 legislative elections, which were the first in which MORENA participated, the party secured 8.4%<sup>11</sup> of the national vote, translating to 35 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. This initial performance indicated a growing, yet still limited, base of support during its early years. In June 2017, MORENA’s candidate, Delfina Gómez Álvarez, secured 30.8%<sup>12</sup> of the vote in the State of Mexico gubernatorial election. Although she did not win, this strong performance in a key state highlighted MORENA’s expanding appeal. In the same year, national polls indicated a rising support for MORENA, with 23% of respondents expressing their intention to vote for MORENA in the upcoming 2018 presidential election. The PAN followed in second place with 20% support, while the PRI held third place with 16.5% of respondents indicating support<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the president’s approval rating was the lowest recorded by the CSES, 18% of voters approved how Peña Nieto governed<sup>14</sup> and the National Electoral Study (CIDE-CSES) revealed that at the start of the 2018 presidential campaign, 52% of voters indicated they would never vote for the PRI, and 23% said the same about the PAN, while only 11% ruled out voting for MORENA<sup>15</sup>. This shows that AMLO has a great chance of achieving victory in 2018

In 2018, AMLO won the presidency with MORENA. During his campaign, he avoided explicitly policy-oriented goals and decided to skip on controversial topics (gay marriage/abortion).

On this attempt he focused on 3 main points: highlight PRI and PAN's corruption allegations, condemn the neoliberal economic model and divide the country into two opposite sides. During the campaign first and third points that resonated the best with the electorate and gained him the support from most of the population. What he sought by attacking the political parties was to build an anti-government narrative, this way he managed to shift the perspective so that the Mexican electorate perceive the PRI and PAN as the same choice (this being true or false)<sup>16</sup>. This narrative worked for AMLO<sup>17</sup>. The idea of the union between the PRI and PAN the "PRIAN<sup>18</sup>" became true, this resonated with people's idea about the Mexican government and placed him and MORENA, in the electorates' view, as the only true alternative. And finally, like a good populist, he divided the country into two sides. On one side is "the people" (el pueblo) who are the virtuous and honest Mexican workers according to his comments. This is the middle- and low-income households who have been taking advantage of by the other side, the "power mafia"<sup>19</sup> and its voters, the "neoliberals" and "conservatives". Unlike 2006 and 2012, the Mexican electorate was very critical of the current situation, with two thirds of voters considering that the economic situation was worse than in the previous elections<sup>20 21</sup>. This environment created a favorable context for López Obrador to mobilize and rally voter discontent, which he effectively leveraged by framing corrupt politicians and "conservative" opponents, the middle and upper classes, as responsible for the country's problems<sup>22</sup>. Resultingly, AMLO won with 53% of the popular vote on 2018 and his coalition "Together We Will Make History" (Juntos Haremos Historia), made up of MORENA, PT (Partido del Trabajo) and PES (Partido Encuentro Social) gained an absolute majority in both chambers<sup>23 24</sup>, something which had not happened since 1991<sup>25</sup>.

## Las Mañaneras

In this section I will explain what the mañaneras are and how they helped AMLO retain power and shift public perception. AMLO's most sophisticated and completely new media tool are his "mañaneras" (morning briefings). These are daily press conferences that provide information on the presidential agenda. Since the first days of the presidency AMLO has his daily morning briefings, which he holds from Monday to Friday at 7am for around two to three hours. During his 6-year term he held 1,435 mañaneras<sup>26</sup>. The mañaneras are divided into three phases: First the president starts by speaking about a topic of his liking<sup>27</sup>, then he concedes the floor to an invited guest (ministries, law makers, judges, etc...), to conclude he opens a question round with reporters and the media present<sup>28</sup>. Besides, on Wednesday he holds a special section called "Who is who with the lies?". Here he accuses individuals publicly who criticise his government by calling them out as neoliberals<sup>29</sup>, conservatives and part of the mafia power. Critics argue it poses significant risks to press freedom and journalist safety in Mexico. The "Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos" (CIDH) expressed concern that this segment may increase violence against journalists<sup>30</sup>. This in a country where in 2018 alone, 544 attacks against journalists were documented<sup>31</sup>. To synthesize, the mañaneras have helped AMLO maintain and consolidate power by modifying the news so that it benefits his

public image. He uses this space to exonerate his family members and supporters, as well as to criticize journalists, social organizations, opponents, and the Mexican middle class<sup>32</sup>. The *mañaneras* are considered as one of the hallmarks of his administration.

On top of being broadcasted daily, AMLO has effectively used social media as a key tool to control and spread his message directly to the general population<sup>33</sup>, often bypassing traditional news outlets. In Mexico, 64% of news are consumed through social media<sup>34</sup>, a factor that has bolstered AMLO's ability to reach a wide audience online. According to Dr. Marian Elena Gutiérrez-Rentería, the scholar leading the research on digital news consumption in Mexico<sup>35</sup>, AMLO's government utilizes social media to connect with voters. By breaking his *mañaneras*, into smaller, easily digestible clips, AMLO ensures his message resonates with the common social media user. He reduced his dependence on traditional news outlets (Televisa, TV Azteca, Reforma), which he has accused of acting in a propagandistic manner with previous administration.

In addition, the *mañaneras* set the executive's agenda for the day, allowing AMLO to emphasize his preferred topics, maintain significant control over the narrative and as a responding platform to critical news outlets, caling them fraudulent and neoliberal media<sup>36</sup> who serve the power mafia. This has contributed to a steady decline in public trust in mainstream news, with confidence levels dropping from 50% in 2019 to 36% in 2024<sup>37</sup>. Through these strategies, AMLO strengthens his connection with the public while undermining opposers and traditional media's criticism.

Moreover, AMLO's *mañaneras*, are characterized by a populist tone<sup>38</sup>, a lack of fact-checking mechanisms and rhetorical strategies that restrict open dialogue. The *mañaneras* have raised concerns regarding the accuracy of the information shared. Due to this, the non-governmental organization "Article 19", conducted a research fact-checking the *mañaneras*. Article 19 solicited data to revise what AMLO said in 34 occasions throughout various *mañaneras*. They found that<sup>39</sup>: 1. In 26.5% of the cases were proven false by government data. 2. In 58.8% of the cases the information was not presented by the institution. 3. In 5.6% of the cases were backed by government data. He also uses discursive methods to cancel the opportunity for a constructive debate when confronted with a case of maladministration from his government. For example,<sup>40</sup>: 1. He decides who to speak with, removing the possibility to speak to those who confront him. 2. It does not matter the question, if the president does not want to answer he will state he "has other data" immediately cancelling a debate because the topic now is who is right and who is wrong<sup>41</sup>. 3. He chooses who says the truth. During the segment "Who is who with the lies?"<sup>42</sup> he unveils opposing individuals or organizations and attempts to cancel their opinion.

The *mañaneras* are a tool for manipulation of the truth which allow AMLO to control the narrative of the news, he sets up the narrative which motivates the media outlets to portray his message; this then spreads in social media until the next *mañanera*. By being in the news cycle daily, rejecting opposers, using oratory tools to not engage in debate, disproving metrics by "having different data", deciding who in the press can ask questions, exposing journalists

and dispersing his message of change thorough social media the mañaneras help keep approval rating high.

IV. Understanding AMLO's High Approval Rating According to Oraculus, AMLO started his term with an approval rate of 76% December 2018, and he finished with 74% September 2024, the highest presidential approval in Mexico's history<sup>43</sup>. However, during his presidency Mexico had the highest number of homicides ever recorded, one of the biggest corruption scandals in Mexican history took place (the SEGALMEX case where 540 million USD in public funds were misappropriated) and the economy grew 0.81%<sup>44</sup> annually during his presidency. I will start by comparing security and corruption metrics with the approval ratings between AMLO and his predecessor Peña Nieto (2012-2018). I will conclude this section by shedding a light and understand why AMLO's approval remains high. For this, I will use Dr. Rodrigo Castro Cornejo's works. These papers focus on the perception and bias the electorate has of AMLO and why the practical results of his term may not have as much influence in his popularity.

The reasons for Mexico's insecurity is a complex topic that could easily be its own paper, but it is generally accepted that: state weakness<sup>45</sup>, criminal impunity<sup>46</sup>, economic inequality, social marginalization, drug trading and organized crime (Cartels)<sup>47</sup>, are some of the root causes of deep security unrest in the country. Security has not improved under AMLO, as a matter of fact it has gotten slightly worse. During AMLO's presidency there were 151,26648 homicides in Mexico. The highest number in history. 24 states saw an increase in their homicide rates between 2015-2022 and femicides rose by 135% (from 427 to 1,004 victims) between 2015-2021<sup>49</sup>. During his presidency 47 journalists were killed<sup>50</sup> and 130 acts of violence against them were recorded<sup>51</sup>. A poll recorded by "El Financiero", a Mexican newspaper, found 59% believed the handling of the security had been negative and 58% of the respondents believe public security is the country's biggest problem. The second deadliest presidency was Peña Nieto's with 150,451 homicides<sup>52</sup>. Mexicans are aware of the situation and acknowledge that the government must do something about it but is not enough to decrease the approval rating.

Due to weak institutions, political patronage, economic inequality and organized crime corruption has been a consistent issue in Mexico way before AMLO<sup>53</sup>. Despite that fighting corruption was one of AMLO's main promises<sup>54</sup>, there have not been changes of this trend. In 2017, 77% disapproved of Peña Nieto's effort to fight corruption<sup>55</sup> and it is clear why. Its administration was found guilty of the Master Scam (Estafa Maestra<sup>56</sup>) where 420 million USD from public funds were diverted through social programs to universities and the White House scandal (Casa blanca<sup>57</sup>) where USD 7 million in public funds were used in the building of a mansion for the president. On the other hand, in 2023 AMLO's administration was involved in one of the biggest corruption scandals in Mexican history, where 540 million USD in public funds disappeared<sup>58</sup>. These funds were supposed to be distributed by SEGALMEX, an institution founded by the president in 2019, made to provide food security for low-income households, but they were diverted through fraudulent contracts and unauthorized financial activities. Until this day nobody knows where the money is located. On top of that, the

president's family have been protagonists on multiple serious corruption allegations. For example, his brother was recorded receiving 2 million pesos<sup>59</sup> in cash allegedly for his brother's presidential campaign and his cousin received projects worth 4 million pesos in the energy sector<sup>60</sup>. AMLO's government is still involved in corruption, yet corruption is no longer the biggest issue for Mexicans. In 2018 29% believed corruption was Mexico's biggest problem<sup>61</sup>, nowadays only 4%<sup>62</sup>, even if there are no reasons to be less worried about corruption in 2024 than in 2018. In sum, AMLO's term was not significantly better than Peña Nieto's and is worth reminding, when Peña Nieto left office, he had a 23% approval rate and AMLO 76%<sup>63</sup>.

Thus, AMLO did not had a much better term than Peña Nieto, and the literature backs up the idea that high insecurity and corruption perception should create a change in popularity. Research shows countries with high levels of corruption, fighting it may be important because citizens often judge their leaders by how they address it <sup>64</sup>. However, even if corruption is a big topic, it doesn't always change voter preference (Altamirano and Ley 2020). The same happens with security, the is electorate considerate of the state's security situation<sup>66</sup>,but this does not motivate a significant change in voter preference (Altamirano and Ley 2020). This means typically security and corruption perception do change approval ratings but do not affect voting tendency.

This links back to the question, after being aware of the security and corruption scene in Mexico, why does AMLO enjoy such a high presidential approval? To examine the underlying factors contributing to this, I will reference two papers by Dr. Rodrigo Castro Cornejo. The first one highlights that voters have varying biases, leading them to perceive the same action differently depending on the politician involved<sup>68</sup>. The second one explores the possibility that voters turned to AMLO not because of his policies but because he represents a break from the 'PRIAN', with resentment towards past governments fuelling AMLO's support<sup>69</sup>. I selected these papers because they provide valuable insights into the factors influencing AMLO's voters offering a deep understanding of why they remain sympathetic towards him after an unsuccessful presidential term.

Dr. Cornejo in his paper "Same scandal, different interpretations: politics of corruption, anger, and partisan bias in Mexico"<sup>70</sup> reveals that public opinion about a candidate, is not about facts, it's about perception, and how individuals receive the same information but process it differently. He did this by conducting a survey during the 2018 presidential elections. The study informed voters about an anonymous candidate engaging in a corruption act, and respondents considered the action as corrupt, but when the name of the candidate was mentioned, voters rejected to label him as corrupt. His findings included "(...)citizens hold partisan attitudes and are motivated to protect these partisan predispositions, which make them interpret common events in different way. In particular, when this study informed voters that an unnamed candidate engaged in corruption, respondents unequivocally considered such actions as corrupt". But when voters learned their preferred candidate was involved in the same actions, they refrained from labelling the behavior as corruption, showing a clear partisan filter in their judgment. "However, when the name of their co-partisan candidate was explicitly mentioned as engaging in the same activities, voters rejected to qualify them as corrupt. This means

partisans actively reinterpret events to align with their own biases and justify the actions of their co-partisans. “Partisans are not “tolerating” or “condoning” corruption; partisans tend to choose interpretations that rationalize their partisan priors and justify their co-partisans’ behaviour.” They concluded that “Voters can perceive the same event and interpret it differently. In this case, voters judge differently depending on the people involved in an illegal activity: they tend to qualify actions as corrupt if their co-partisan candidate was not involved”<sup>71</sup>. In other words, voters may interpret identical events in varying ways, with their judgments differing based on the individuals implicated. This explains why AMLO’s popularity does not decrease if he is involved in acts of corruption

In his second paper “The AMLO Voter: Affective Polarization and the Rise of the Left in Mexico”<sup>72</sup> Dr. Cornejo studies the reasons behind voters change from PRI and PAN to AMLO. To do this he used data from 2018 National Electoral Study, and used logistic regression models<sup>73</sup> to analyse the voting choice, with this he drew four possible hypotheses, voter changed parties due to: H1. Ideology<sup>74</sup> H2. Negative Retrospective Evaluation<sup>75</sup> H3. Perceived Convergence<sup>76</sup> H4. Affective Polarization<sup>77</sup> He found affective polarization<sup>78</sup> is the main factor for support of AMLO, whereby “in the 2018 presidential election, support for López Obrador was not driven by ideology (H1) or retrospective evaluations (H2) but associated with the perception about partisan convergence (H3) and, especially, affective polarization (H4)”.

Furthermore, he made two other discoveries worth mentioning: 1. “(...) retrospective economic evaluations (one of the most important predictors of voting behavior in Mexican elections) are not associated with voting choice when controlled for competing hypotheses”. 2. “Similarly, ideology is not associated with the vote; both left and right-wing voters had a very similar probability of voting for López Obrador”. The first point is relevant because the fact that the economy was not a decisive factor for supporting AMLO conflicts with previous literature regarding the economy and voting behavior in Mexico<sup>79</sup>. The second point shows that Mexico is not part of the “Pink Tide”<sup>80</sup>, and cannot be referenced as a move to the left from the Mexican electorate. This allows us to exclude economic factors and ideological alignment as potential reasons for supporting AMLO.

As we have seen there is insecurity and corruption just like in past governments, or worse, but these papers provide a different way of understanding AMLO’s approval rating. The first paper showcases demonstrates that citizens hold strong partisan biases, which drive them to interpret events differently based on their political affiliations. As long as biases towards their political counterparts exist a change of behaviour in the polls should not be forecasted. The second paper showcases that since the beginning of his presidency people did not choose him for his policies or ideology, but because he embodied the rejection of previous administrations. However, there are plenty of limitations to this research. There are still have in the understanding of presidential approvals and how voters shift voting preferences. Moreover, there is a reason behind the lack of information available on this topic. Since 2019, Mexico’s research centres and universities have been attacked and defunded by the government. Mexico’s main research funding agency the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) had a 50% budget reduction<sup>81</sup>.

V. Conclusion AMLO owes his support to the social discontent of the Mexican electorate towards the PRI and PAN. First, he represented a new option from, distancing from his counterparts by creating his own political party and publicly criticising the government. Second, he was able to convince that the PRI and PAN are the same option, they are part of “mafia power” and they are taking advantage of the people. This resonated with the Mexican public, and is how we gained massive popularity. Once he gained power, he used his *mañaneras* to control the news cycles and narratives. He used his *mañaneras* to respond personally and transform public opinion, so it fits his narrative. He uses repetitive rhetorical strategies like blaming the “mafia power” for the misfortunes that happen during his term, and, when questioned, stating he has “other data”<sup>82</sup> so there is no room for a debate. On the one hand it can be argued that AMLO gained power by establishing a pronounced distinction between himself and the ‘PRIAN’. On the other hand, he was able to maintain this popularity because of the media control his *mañaneras* provided. As long as his message resonates with the Mexican electorate and retains control of the media, he does not have to worry much about security, corruption, ideology or the economy. These are the reasons why he enjoyed the highest presidential approval in Mexico’s history when his term concluded.

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- 1 Oraculus. (n.d.). Aprobación presidencial. Retrieved from <https://oraculus.mx/aprobacion-presidencial/> 2 Personalist parties, in our view, are parties where the leader has greater control over the party compared to other party elites. Frantz, E., Kendall-Taylor, A., & Wright, J. (n.d.). The origins of elected strongmen: How personalist parties destroy democracy from within. 3 These are long-standing influential political figures, business magnates and media owners who consolidated wealth and power at the expense of ordinary citizens through their neoliberal policies and institutional frameworks. 4 Poiré, A. (2007). Graphics on Mexican democracy [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/PoireGraphics-18-1.pdf> 5 Márquez-Ramírez, M. (2014). Post-authoritarian politics in a neoliberal

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16 Them being the same depends on individual interpretation regarding them being a “power mafia” and overlapping neoliberal policies.

17 “For example, data from the National Electoral Study (Beltrán et al., 2020) show that 46% of voters believed that the PAN and PRI represented the “same political alternative” (false, 36%) and 45% believed that it is true that the PAN, PRI, and PRD represented the same alternative (false, 37%). In other words, a sizable proportion of voters appears to agree with López Obrador about the existence of the “PRIAN”. Castro Cornejo, R. (2020). The AMLO voter: Affective polarization and the rise of the left in Mexico. *Latin American Research Review*, 55(4), 679–696. <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.679>

18 How AMLO called the PRI and PAN to place them on the same foothold.

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binary outcome as it's a binary outcome (1 = MORENA, 0 = PAN/PRI), logistic regression is suitable for this type of data because it estimates the probability of a certain choice, allowing the researcher to observe how different factors (like ideology, retrospective evaluations, perceived party similarity, and affective polarization) influence the likelihood of voting for MORENA. 74 López Obrador offered an alternative to the neoliberal governments of the PAN and the PRI. Cornejo 75 voters perceived widespread corruption and failed governance under the incumbent PRI. Cornejo 76 the PAN and the PRI—increasingly perceived as the same political option. Cornejo 77 making stronger the connection between out-party animus and the vote. Cornejo 78 For Hypothesis 4, which examined affective polarization, the research measured emotional distance between voters' views of MORENA (in-group) and the opposition parties PAN and PRI (out-groups). This was done by calculating the difference between respondents' favourability ratings for MORENA and their ratings for PAN and PRI, creating two affective polarization scores. These scores were then analysed to see if stronger emotional distance correlated with a higher likelihood of voting for MORENA. 79 Altamirano, M., & Ley, S. (2020). The economy, security, and corruption in the 2018 presidential election campaign: Issues and electoral preferences in Mexico. *Política y Gobierno*, 27(2), ePYG1275. <https://doi.org/10.22201/cide.16578269e.2020.27.2.1275> 80 Castro Cornejo, R. (2020). The AMLO voter: Affective polarization and the rise of the left in Mexico. *Latin American Research Review*, 55(4), 679–696. <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.679> 81 Else, H. (2019). Mexico's ambitious science reforms raise concerns. *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02332-x> 82 Conferencia mañanera de AMLO y la cultura de la cancelación. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374637629\\_Conferencia\\_mananera\\_de\\_AMLO\\_y\\_la\\_cultura\\_de](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374637629_Conferencia_mananera_de_AMLO_y_la_cultura_de)

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