

# Mexico holds presidential elections this year, and voters in Dallas could hold the key.

*[Alfredo Corchado, Border-Mexico correspondent](#)*

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MEXICO CITY — Mexico’s presidential election this year is expected to be violent, dirty and fiercely combative, with high stakes on both sides of the border, including in North Texas.

Dallas has the second-largest number of Mexicans registered to vote in the July contest, trailing only Los Angeles and surpassing Chicago, Houston and New York City, according to Mexico’s National Electoral Institute, or INE. The number of registered voters (55,473) represents a surprising surge in the North Texas region, which historically has taken a back seat to Houston — and its vast energy sector — in terms of economic importance to Mexico.

More than half a million Mexicans living in the United States have applied for the voter ID credentials that would allow them to vote in the July 1 presidential election. That’s six times higher than the last election in 2012 and the highest number recorded since 2006, when the vote abroad was granted, according to INE. The deadline to register is March 31.

The presidential race is expected to be close and contentious, and votes from abroad could play a crucial role in determining the outcome, according to election experts. The election comes during a tense time for Mexico-U.S. relations, with President Donald Trump’s call for a border wall and the North

American Free Trade Agreement's uncertain future creating ripple effects for the more than 35 million Americans with roots in Mexico.

“We are seeing the culmination of a growing trend that started years ago,” said Francisco de la Torre, the Mexican consul general in Dallas. “That is that more and more Mexicans in North Texas are people who follow binational lives and have big stakes on both sides of the border. We won’t know what the scope of this will be in the long term, but for now, their commitment in participating in the upcoming elections is clear.”

The voter registration numbers highlight the election’s high stakes for the increasing number of binational residents living in North Texas who are deepening economic ties to Mexico.

North Texas is home to about 2.1 million Hispanics, the sixth-largest region of that demographic in the U.S., and 84 percent of them have roots in Mexico, according to a 2016 U.S. Census Bureau study. Nearly 60 percent of Hispanic households in this country are bilingual, according to the study.

Of the estimated 100 Mexican-owned companies in the state, 33 are based in North Texas, according to Southern Methodist University.

Among those registered to vote in the Mexican election is Luisa del Rosal, executive director of the Tower Center at SMU and founding executive director of the Mission Foods Texas-Mexico Center on its campus.

“Of course I’m voting; especially with the situation with the United States, Mexican leadership is important,” she said. “What’s at stake in Mexico’s upcoming election is the battle for stability amidst a wave of rising nationalism.”

The elections will be closely watched worldwide. During a speech last month at the Jamestown Foundation's terrorism conference, Lt. Gen. H.R.

McMaster, the national security adviser, warned of possible Russian interference in Mexico's election.

The issue, reported Saturday in Mexico City's newspaper, *Reforma*, has worried Mexican authorities, who are closely monitoring Russian interference in other countries' elections. INE has expressed concerns over a misinformation campaign via social media platforms.

Early polls indicate the election is a three-way race led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, 64, a nationalist candidate who's run twice before and is campaigning as the populist founder of the Morena party.



National Regeneration Movement (Morena) presidential hopeful Andrés Manuel López Obrador greeted supporters during a pre-campaign rally in Mexico City on Dec. 15, 2017.

(Eduardo Verdugo/The Associated Press)

A recent poll by Parametria, a leading Mexican polling firm, had López Obrador, known to his supporters simply as AMLO, with 31 percent, followed by former Finance Minister Jose Antonio Meade at 20 percent.

Meade, 48, is widely embraced by the business community and is running as the candidate for the much-maligned Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, the current party of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Meade is followed by Ricardo Anaya, 38, who's heading a coalition between his National Action Party, or PAN, and what remains of the once-strong, left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD. Anaya, polling at 19 percent, is portraying himself as a fresh face and a clean-cut candidate on a mission to straighten out a corrupt, violent Mexico.

The Parametria poll, with a margin of error of 3.5 percent, also included potential independent candidates — former first lady Margarita Zavala and Nuevo Leon Gov. Jaime Rodriguez — giving them 10 percent and 2 percent, respectively.



Jose Antonio Meade posed for selfies with supporters as he arrived for an event celebrating his registration as a candidate for the presidential nomination of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico City on Dec. 3, 2017. Although not a party member, Meade got the support of most of the party's leaders at an event in which he registered, pretty much unopposed, for the party's nomination for the July 1 elections.  
(Rebecca Blackwell/The Associated Press)

All candidates have pledged to fight corruption and inequality and return security to a country that experienced widespread violence last year at the hands of criminal organizations. More than 27,000 people were killed in Mexico in 2017, the worst violence in recent years.

Last week, López Obrador promised he'd end violence one-third of the way through his six-year term and said he might even offer criminals amnesty in return for peace.

Election years in Mexico are traditionally marked by a spike in violence and death. The uncertainty over the elections is expected to heighten the violence as cartels continue to compete in their own power struggle. Last year, several politicians were killed, including five mayors.

One city on edge these days is Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso. Juarez ended 2017 with more than 772 killings, its highest number since 2012, when it was known as the epicenter of cartel drug violence.



Ricardo Anaya, candidate of the PAN-PRD coalition  
(Special Contributor)

This year literally started with a bang there. In the first four days of January, 18 people were killed, including 14 on Thursday. Two people were shot, one fatally, during Friday's rush hour.

"We're seeing more and more bodies on the streets, like a dark memory hanging over us that won't go away," said Manuel Parra 36, who moved to Juarez 17 years ago from Veracruz to work at a factory. "That's why I'm voting for AMLO, because he's getting to the root of the problem, which is inequality

and poverty. Until we address that, we'll always be a country on either the brink of greatness or darkness.”

For now, all eyes are on López Obrador, the former mayor of Mexico City. He's seized on the discontent by calling the political establishment “a mafia of power” and pledges to use money lost to corruption to enhance social welfare spending.

His populist talk has the business elite and foreign investors nervous. He once promised to repeal energy reform, making Texan oil and gas executives, among others, a bit uncomfortable. Tony Garza, a Texan and former U.S. ambassador to Mexico and counsel at White & Case in Mexico City, said continuity is important for investors, especially Texans, which means favoring Meade or Anaya.

“I have got to imagine that having AMLO looking across the table at Trump would only compound the uncertainty we all felt in 2017, and likely lead to some real volatility in the marketplace,” Garza said. “Who wins? Some very nimble currency traders. Who loses? Everyone else.”

In recent months, López Obrador has softened his fiery rhetoric, adopting a more disciplined and statesmanlike image. He's even defended NAFTA. But he has a history of self-destruction, once losing a 16-point lead in the 2006 election after he refused to participate in a nationally televised debate.

The winning candidate will need to address poverty, corruption and security, issues of great importance to voters on both sides of the border, analysts say.

Between 1970 and 2007, roughly 11 million Mexicans headed to the U.S. to seek opportunity. Even as the number of Mexicans coming across has dwindled significantly in the past 10 years, half of Mexico's 124 million people still live in poverty and face growing violence. Today, many of those fleeing insecurity include Mexico's middle class, with homes and hopes on both sides of the border.

“The number of people voting here in Mexico or there in the United States is still low, too low,” said Primitivo Rodriguez, a human rights activist and an early pioneer of the vote abroad movement. “But immigrants, whether middle class, or the overwhelming poor, are awakening to the reality of transnational politics. They will make a significant contribution in the years to come to Mexican democracy.”



Gabriel Leal's family owns Minuteman Press in Plano. He plans to vote, saying much is at stake for residents on both sides of the border.  
(Alfredo Corchado/The Dallas Morning News)

Carlos Gonzalez Gutierrez, the consul general in Austin and long a proponent of immigrants participating from abroad, summed it up this way: “The possibility of participating from abroad is one way to substantiate the sense of belonging that Mexico nurtures with its diaspora.”

North Texas residents Gabriel Leal and Rodrigo Ricaud plan to vote this summer.

“If the political left in Mexico wins, I’m afraid we can expect further deterioration with the U.S. and Trump,” said Leal, 37, whose family owns a Minuteman Press franchise in Plano. “This would directly affect border states like Texas and its residents.”

Ricaud, 22, is an economics and sociology major at SMU and president of the university’s chapter of the Association of Mexican Entrepreneurs, which promotes business opportunities in the U.S.

With Dallas’ large Mexican population, “many of our citizens could have a significant impact on the outcome of the elections,” he said, noting the 2006 election in which the PAN’s Felipe Calderón edged out López Obrador with nearly 35.9 percent of the vote to 35.2.



Rodrigo Ricaud, 22, a student at SMU, is one of tens of thousands planning to vote in the July 1 presidential election in Mexico.  
(Alfredo Corchado/The Dallas Morning News)





**The top 5 U.S. cities for registered Mexican voters**

-- Los Angeles 68,003

-- Dallas 55,473

-- Chicago 54,207

-- Houston 38,619

-- New York 19,623

SOURCE: Mexico's National Electoral Institute