

Mexico is poised to elect a woman president: does this matter for the elections?

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The two women competing for the Mexican presidency went into attack mode during April's presidential debate. Government party candidate Claudia Sheinbaum referred to her rival, opposition candidate Xóchitl Gálvez, as "the corrupt one." Not to be outdone, Gálvez called Sheinbaum "the candidate of lies" in nearly every intervention.

With Sheinbaum and Gálvez estimated to collectively draw [93% percent](#) of the vote, one will surely win the Mexican general election on June 2, 2024.

The significance of this achievement cannot be understated. Sheinbaum or Gálvez will be Mexico's first woman president – and lead Latin America's second-largest economy and the United States's [most important](#) trading partner. At the same time, she will operate on a global stage still dominated by men, where fewer than 20 countries are currently governed by women.

Yet shattering Mexico's highest glass ceiling may be the easiest part. In 2019, Mexico adopted a constitutional requirement for gender parity – or 50/50 representation – in all elected and appointed offices. This measured capped [decades of progress](#) on bringing women into elected office—women like Sheinbaum and Gálvez, who have extensive experience holding top political posts. Mexicans see plenty of women leading, suggesting they are 'ready' for a woman president.

The challenge for Sheinbaum and Gálvez is not winning as a woman, but tackling the profound problems facing Mexico, from crime to climate change.

The most complex elections in Mexican history

The official campaign opened 1 March. Up for grabs are more than 20,000 posts at the federal, state, and municipal levels, including nine governorships (counting Mexico City), the entire Congress (500 lower-house seats and 128 Senate seats), seats in 31 of 32 state legislatures, and municipal governments across the territory.

These are the [largest elections](#) in Mexican history. Everyone will cast votes in down-ballot races, with consequences for Sheinbaum's or Gálvez's government.

Currently, politics is dominated by the left-wing party Morena and its allies. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador – also known by his initials AMLO – founded Morena in 2011, parting ways with the long-time left party that previously sponsored his presidential bids. Morena finally carried AMLO to victory in 2018. The parties current coalition [holds](#) 55% of each the federal lower and upper house and 23 of 32 the governorships. They lost seats in the [2021 midterms](#), but gained governorships.

AMLO's populist, personalist, and autocratic style [has divided](#) Mexico. The traditional left, center, and right parties have united against him, an uneasy alliance born of necessity.

These strange bedfellows do not always walk together, however. In some state and local races, the traditional parties join forces; in others, they remain rivals. Also competing are newer parties in neither coalition, like the progressive Movimiento Ciudadano. Their presidential hopeful, Jorge Álvarez Máynez, remains in the single digits, but the party's [popularity](#) with younger voters may sway subnational races.

No clear mandate for the victor

The very real possibility that Mexican voters split their tickets means that, unlike AMLO, neither Sheinbaum nor Gálvez will enjoy a congressional majority. Polling [suggests](#) Morena and its allies will win about 45 percent of Congress and the opposition coalition about 30 percent.

Divided government complicates prognostications about how Sheinbaum would govern. Mexican presidents are term-limited, and AMLO long ago anointed Sheinbaum as his successor. She bested her male rivals in the party primary and [has stuck to](#) AMLO's policy priorities, including anti-poverty measures and physical infrastructure projects that target underserved communities.

But no congressional majority means no blank check. Either woman will need to negotiate to pass any law. And since the opposition alliance may not even hold after the election, a President Gálvez would need to broker more details than a President Sheinbaum. On the one hand, negotiation forces moderation, but on the other hand, the first woman president will surely face [higher standards](#) – and more criticism when she can't craft majorities.

Violence and other problems

Violence constitutes another major governance challenge. The problem is longstanding, but 2024 marks [the most violent](#) election season ever.

In April alone the think tank Data Civica [recorded](#) 70 acts of political-criminal violence, meaning armed attacks, threats, kidnapping, and assassinations of current or former officials, including candidates. The total is more than double compared to the 2021 midterms.

The attacks [cross](#) the political spectrum, depending on cartels' own rivalries and goals. And the violence is not just in politics: [the murder rate](#) is nearly 30 in 100,000, compared to under 10 for the United States.

No Mexican president has successfully tackled insecurity. When former presidents Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón waged war on the cartels, violence escalated. AMLO's alternative – to pursue a 'narco peace' by ignoring the problem, avoiding confrontations, and even negotiating truces among the cartels – has [not worked](#) either. For her part, Sheinbaum [offers](#) to continue AMLO's approach of tackling the crime's underlying causes, such as poverty, whereas Gálvez [has proposed](#) to build mega-prisons.

And insecurity is not the only problem. Climate change has brought severe drought, with Mexico City and southern states facing [acute water shortages](#). And – [as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index \(BTI\) just stated recently](#) – rising public debt caused by AMLO's social welfare spending as well as persistent cronyism and corruption is as pressing an issue as ever.

The 'first woman' legacy

Sheinbaum and Gálvez will also confront persistent gender inequality. Their all-women competition marks decades of legal progress on women's political rights, but Mexican women remain unequal. They [are](#) underemployed in the formal economy and make less money. They [trail men](#) in digital medial literacy and access.

Against this background, also many of Mexico's other problems are gender problems at heart. Within the crime data are staggering figures related to femicide: [some estimates](#) suggest ten women are murdered a day. Women are also vulnerable to climate change, as they are more likely to be poor and to live in precarious neighborhoods and conditions.

Observers [keep asking](#) whether Sheinbaum or Gálvez will 'act for' women—something rarely asked of men presidents.

However, that question just perpetrates double standards. Like the men before them, Sheinbaum or Gálvez have to tackle large problems. They should be assessed on their own terms, not on the question whether women are up the job.