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WEBINAR

MEXICO'S MIDTERM ELECTIONS: THE FUTURE OF THE LÓPEZ OBRADOR PRESIDENCY  
AND US-MEXICO RELATIONS

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Good morning. I am Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and director of the Brookings Initiative on Non-State Armed Actors. Welcome to today's conversations about Mexico's mid-term elections and the implications for U.S.-Mexican relations.

On Sunday, June 6, Mexican citizens will vote in the mid-terms to select the chamber of deputies of the Mexican Congress and 15 of the country's 32 governorships. At stake, is whether President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and his party, MORENA, will be able to retain a majority in the Congress and which is currently a choice of solid majority in the lower chamber and simple majority in the Senate and thus be able to continue with his transformative agenda on which he campaigned and which he laid out as president.

These elections have taken place, as President Lopez Obrador seeks to redistribute wealth to the poor and focuses on inward-looking economic nationalism, has pulled back from some of the economic liberalization policies of his predecessor, and also has attempted to recentralize power in the Office of the President.

For him this is all part of the fourth revolution of the transformation of Mexico's institutions to eliminate, reduce what he calls the power of the mafia to tower the institutional economic political establishment and empower poor segments of Mexican societies. Good things, however boring, that what we are witnessing in Mexico is weakening of checks and balances.

President Lopez Obrador has repeatedly criticized the variety of institutions and civil society actors in Mexico including independent media, universities. He has also threatened institutions such as the Transparency Institute and the National Electoral Institute, and he has adopted a whole variety of changes regarding the Mexican judiciary, an independent branch of power in Mexico, including recently extended the power of the president of the Mexican Supreme Court, who is also the head of the Federal Judicial Council that sets career advancements and direction, career advancements for Mexican judges and direction for Mexican judiciary, so a very powerful, important institution.

Meanwhile, the Mexican economy is facing critical changes, suffering from the greatest economic downturn in decades. The government's response to the COVID-19 has been more hands off,

described by some as meek and inadequate, and of course criminal violence in Mexico continues unabated at extraordinarily debilitating levels.

We have a fantastic set of speakers today to discuss these issues with us. I am delighted that we are joined by Dr. Lorena Becerra, a political analyst and head of the public opinion research for Mexico's, one of Mexico's leading newspapers, Reforma. She has two decades of experience in researching public opinions, open to public and private sectors in Mexico including in the Office of the Presidency, President Felipe Calderon. And Dr. Becerra also has been an editorial writer in Reforma and political and other newspapers and magazines in Mexico.

We are also joined by Dr. Pamela Starr, who is the director of the U.S.-Mexico Network and a professor of practice of international relations of public diplomacy at the University of Southern California. Dr. Starr is one of the most renowned analysts of Mexico and U.S.-Mexican relations. She has advised both the U.S. government, as well as Mexican government, and frequently participates in vital debates on U.S.-Mexican relations.

I am also delighted to be able to have Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan join us today in the debate for many reasons, and the discussions for many reasons, including because Ambassador Sarukhan is a non-resident senior fellow at Brookings.

He is the president of Sarukhan and Associates and was Mexican ambassador to the United States. He holds a variety of other positions such as associate fellow, Chatham House, a distinguished visiting scholar at the University of Southern California, Annenberg Public Diplomacy School, among many others.

Ambassador Sarukhan was a career diplomat having held various positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mexico, being a crucial member of the diplomatic team that negotiated NAFTA in 1993, and then also played a key role in the campaign of then candidate Felipe Calderon, and later was appointed ambassador by President Calderon.

And, finally, it is an enormous pleasure to introduce also Ambassador Earl Anthony Wayne, who is a distinguished diplomat-in-residence at the American University School for In-Service, and a public policy fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars where he co-chairs its

Mexico Institute Advisory Board, and he holds many other affiliation.

I just want to note that he is also a co-chair on the Board of the American Academy of Diplomacy. Ambassador Wayne's distinguished career, like, Ambassador Sarukhan's we're pleased with numerous awards included Ambassador Wayne's appointment as ambassador to Argentina, as deputy ambassador in Afghanistan and U.S. ambassador in Mexico, of course.

He was also an assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs in the U.S. State Department. And in 2010, the U.S. Senate confirmed him as career ambassador, the highest rank, the highest aware, a U.S. diplomat can achieve.

So a terrific, extremely knowledgeable team that I am delighted that we will be able to enjoy listening to and engaging with today.

Dr. Becerra, let me please start with you and ask you to give us your latest take on what's happening with polls where the mid-term seems to be heading, what's happening with predictions, what are the prospects for MORENA and President Lopez Obrador to maintain the absolute maturity in the lower chamber and in simplifications for how the elections are like they are now? What are the trends that we are seeing?

Over to you please.

MS. BECERRA: Thank you very much. Hi, Vanda, it's a pleasure to be with such a distinguished panel today. I appreciate the invitation from Brookings Institution and from Vanda.

I have a very small presentation because I think it's important because of the size and the complexity of this election just to illustrate some of the factors that are going to playing into the minds of voters and the regional dynamics that we are going to be looking at. So I'll try to go through it briefly. Can everybody see my screen?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Yeah.

MS. BECERRA: Okay. So what's at stake, aside from many of the important points that you mentioned, it is basically MORENA's power to reform the constitution that we are seeing at stake in this election, also the strength of President Lopez Obrador during the second half of his term. Basically, this election, aside from being a mid-term election, it's the largest election in the history of our country

because of all of the state and local elections that are taking place at the same time.

So this is the largest episode of political redistribution that is going to be happening during Lopez Obrador's term. So that's why a great part of his strength will depend on the result of this mid-term election, his strength towards the second half of his term, also the possibility of the opposition to regain territorial and political strength.

As you can remember in 2018, the traditional party system became practically obliterated with the 53% vote that Lopez Obrador got, and with the huge super majority that his party and its coalition obtained in the lower chamber. So this is a possibility for the opposition to start gaining traction again and this towards the 2024 presidential election.

As many of us know, in Mexico right after the mid-term, the president starts becoming sort of a lame duck because everybody starts talking about who is going to be his successor, so this is very important. And the size of this election is just -- you mentioned it yourself, it's the renewal of the entire lower chamber of Congress.

For the first time, we are seeing the possibility of reelection, Mexico in history for the congressmen. We have to see how that plays out because congressmen in Mexico are still not that well known by their constituents. They still have not formed that huge base of support. They are still very dependent on their parties. So we have to see whether they start forming these links with their constituents.

Fifteen governor races out of 32 states, and some of these states are very huge. And the importance of these states economically and regionally is tremendous, like, Nuevo Leone, like, Guerrero, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Sonora, some of these states are states where we have seen important threats in terms of insecurity, like, Michoacán, for instance, where the Narco has displayed itself for decades now.

So these are very important elections. We also have 30 local congresses that are going to be elected. In order to reform the constitution you need 17 local congresses. MORENA right now holds more than that. So we have to see whether NORENA still has the power to keep all of the different basis of reforming the constitution including the local congresses.

And we have 1900 municipalities, 30 states are electing their municipal leaders, only two

of them are not, which are Durango and Hidalgo. And this is very important for MORENA because this is the local, the local-most election, the local more -- most segment of government. It's the closest to the elector. The voters know who their municipal president is. They are attentive to this election and MORENA performed very well in 2018 in the municipal election.

So that's why all of this is important. So what we are seeing is a tension between federal and local variables. Basically, when we have presidential elections, we see coattails towards the local election. They influence powerfully on the local elections.

But because of the size of this election and all of the factors that are at play, we have huge potential for inverse coattails. And some of the reasons that we can think about this is, first of all, Lopez Obrador is not going to be on ballot like he was in 2018.

In 2018, just the mere presence of Lopez Obrador in the ballot had a homogenizing effect on the entire electorate. We saw him with landslide victories across states, regions, across age groups, across gender, across social classes and educational levels.

Right now that homogenizing effect has been diluted. And we are seeing we are going back to the pre-2018 scenario where votes, the party, the vote intention for the party is cutting across educational levels again. We are seeing huge rejection towards MORENA from the more scholarized sectors where they are also seeing differences in age and gender, and gender gaps in several different states.

And the regional differences that used to be very important part of the Mexican political system are becoming salient again and this has to do with the fact that it's more of a local election that we are holding and because Lopez Obrador is not going to be on the ballot.

Even though he tries to be present every day in his morning conferences and he is trying to do a lot of things that are stepping over the law, he is still not going to be on the ballot, right.

Another factor is because MORENA is not as strong as Lopez Obrador, never has been. It's vote in 2018 was 39%, as opposed to Lopez Obrador, who is 53%. So MOREENA has to fend for itself without Lopez Obrador, right. And the National Electoral Districts are going into that briefly where MORENA is strongest are not having concurrent governor races, so that complicates the scenario a little

bit more for MORENA.

Some of the important trends that we see is that the ruling party traditionally loses votes in the mid-term election. So these are the votes where each of the presidents, the former presidents was elected. That president's party got in the presidential election and then the votes that that party got in the mid-term election.

And we have seen how all of these parties, accepting for the PRI with Bania, for the PRI with Pena, for the PRI with Pena, they have all traditionally lost votes in the mid-term election. This is a trend that we see and this has to do, basically, with the erosion that they suffered for governing and because they are held accountable for the mistakes of the president, in spite of the fact that most of these presidents had good approval levels when they went into their mid-term elections.

Actually, Lopez Obrador's approval rate today, which is around 60 to 63%, is not historically salient, it's not an outlier. It was similar to the approval levels of Calderon and Fox in their mid-term elections.

They both lost their mid-term elections and Pena Nieto, who had, like, around 29 to 30% approval rating during his mid-term election didn't perform that badly and that was precisely because of the local movement that we saw with the PRI governor and the governors and the alliances that they formed with the Green party.

So there is no guarantee that the approval level of Lopez Obrador is going to translate into MORENO votes and this approval level is not any outlier historically in a historical perspective.

Another thing that we have to keep in mind is that 2018 was an exceptional race. MORENA and its allies -- so the country is divided in 300 districts. MORENA and its allies won 218 out of those 300 districts and 43.5% of the national vote. This was something that we hadn't seen before the PRI, like, the hedge-a-monic era of the PRI, this was huge. And the rules of overrepresentation resulted in that super majority, right.

In order for a party to have 50% plus one of the lower chamber, they need 42.2% of the national vote which MORENA exceeded with its allies in 2019 under 167 districts. So, here, MORENA has to defend that differential, 51 districts, right. It has to defend in the entire country which, in my

opinion, proves very complicated because of what I will go into next.

The recent decision of the Electoral Tribune to enforce the rules of overrepresentation are going to make a difference in my opinion. In the law, a party cannot be overrepresented in the chamber by its vote by more than 8%, and when we -- I'll show you the composition, what we have. This was a huge overrepresentation. If these rules are enforced, as the Electoral Tribune decided a couple of weeks ago, then MORENA is also facing some trouble.

Many of the states where MORENA won the majority of the electoral districts are very competed right now, either because they have competitor governor races or because MORENA has performed very poorly in their government, like, Vera Cruz, MORENA, and Puebla. So we expect some vote of punishment in those states.

There is also a natural tendency in Mexico for increased turnover at the municipal level. So all of these factors can hurt and can help the opposition. And as I was mentioning before, because this is a local election, the governor and municipal figures are more important than the national figures, the congresspersons. People don't even know who their congresspersons are.

This is the percent of municipal turnover historically since 1979 to 2018. As you can see, it's just a trend. Traditionally, people in most districts, in most municipalities in Mexico, we see municipal turnover up to 66%; this plays against MORENA.

The PAN and the PRI have also defended their turfs. In their post-2018 local elections, we have seen them performing fairly well, like, Tom Olivas, when we relay dialogue was caliente, and they have maintained their electro machineries. We are seeing those machineries in action today.

The three new parties that are looking for registry are drawing votes from MORENA, most of them, but the determinants of votes in Mexico also play against MORENA, which are basically the issues that the people focus on which are economy, security.

Health and COVID have become recent issues and the president is truly evaluated in all of these issues and MORENA is even worse evaluated when there are local leaders in these elections. This is just a historical trend of the issues that the population is concerned about.

And, as you can see here with Lopez Obrador, we started seeing a very important

concern for security but now we have a concern for security, economy, and COVID, and Lopez Obrador is not well-evaluated in these issues.

This is just to show you what happened in 2018. MORENA got 39% of the vote and it today holds 51.2% of the seats, just MORENA, right. But when we add to this coalition which is the PT and the Partido Encuentro Social and sometimes the Green party that is now going in alliance with MORENA.

That is why it had such a huge overrepresentation after 2018. If the electoral rules of overrepresentation are enforced this time, we can expect the Congress to resemble the national vote more than it did in 2018.

And let's keep in mind right now that the vote intention for MORENA is around 39% to 41% at the national level. They find under are still between 19 and 17, and MORENA allies are between 3% and 4%.

So MORENA is definitely going to need the alliance at least with the Green party to have an absolute majority, in my opinion, and the constitutional majority is basically close to zero possibilities for MORENA, the two-thirds majority in the lower chamber because of all of these factors that we're talking about.

And this is the 2018 elections, all of the districts, these are the states where MORENA won all of the local districts, so this was just a huge trend that we saw in Mexico at that time; right now we are not seeing that.

These are the national districts, the circunscripciones, where MORENA -- I'm sorry -- where the country is divided, the 300 districts are grouped into five huge circunscripciones, and MORENA is mostly strong in circunscripciones three and four, which are down in the south and the southeast of the country. But the rest of them are very, very competitive.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Terrific comments. Can I please ask you to wrap up the initial presentation.

MS. BECERRA: Yeah, I am finishing. I'm actually finishing. This is the next slide. The governor races are not concurrent with the district, with the circunscripciones where MORENA is

strongest.

As we can see, this is where MORENA is strongest and most of the governor races are happening in the circunscripciones where MORENA is more competitive -- I'm sorry -- where MORENA is finding more competition and where the other parties are more competitive.

And what we are seeing here in the projections for the local races is that MORENA is probably going to perform very well in around seven states, but the rest of them are very, very competed. And this is going to have an effect on the congressional election and that this is because we are seeing is the inverse coattails from the local and the state towards the federal districts.

Sorry if I extended myself, that was about it.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, terrific comments, and I look really forward to the conversation among all of us about some of those dynamics that you outlined. You know, I was struck by the three issues that you said both sides are paying attention to voting on the economy, security and COVID, which is of course highly surprisingly that one would assume those would be the primary issues, yet for a considerable amount of time President Lopez Obrador was nicknamed the Teflon President that seemed to be able to get away with poor performance in all of those three issues.

With that, let me turn to you, Professor Starr, to give us your take on what has happened in the past two years. Are those three issues that voters are voting on indeed the issues that dominate in the first three years of the Lopez Obrador administrations? What are some of the key most important developments that have taken place so far?

MS. STARR: Thank you, Vanda. Actually, what I want to do is talk about this in sort of a -- with broad brush strokes, as opposed to looking at the specifics of individual policies, although I will talk a lot about individual policies as well.

I want to expand more on what's at stake at the June 6th election because both Vanda and Lorena have talked a little bit about that. But I want to emphasize a little bit more that when we are looking at the national level election, what's going on in the legislature, and not so much what's going on obviously in the municipalities where, as we know, it's much more local factors that come into play.

But particularly when we're talking about the legislature, I think what's at stake is nothing

less than the future of Mexico. Voters are choosing really between two competing visions of Mexico and its future between Lopez Obrador's Fourth Transformation and to a certain extent a return to the policies that preceded it.

Part of the reason for this division is so profound in Mexico is the fact that Lopez Obrador's government has had some real policy successes during its first two-and-half years in office, as well as extremely significant shortcomings.

So the opponents of Lopez Obrador's tend to look at his successes which makes it hard to understand why half of the Mexican population tend to have Lopez Obrador electoral preferences. They're leaning toward either MORENA, Verde, or the Labor party. Meanwhile, Lopez Obrador's supporters tend to underestimate the importance of his shortcomings. And, as a result, they tend to interpret opposition to some of his policies as complete intransigents, as a complete unwillingness to accept any change at all in Mexico.

So let me look at these policy successes and shortcomings and so we can see how these two attitudes about Lopez Obrador have really hardened in Mexico over the last two-and-a-half years.

In terms of his successes, Lopez Obrador is the first president in living memory to emphasize the wants and needs as a majority of Mexicans who live in some form of poverty. We have to admit that this is quite different from what came before him.

Governments traditionally focused more on the wants and needs of the political and economic elite assuming that this would benefit the rest of Mexico as well. So this included some very important policies that embody these promises to put the poor first.

It's included a universal pension for senior citizens, benefits for the disabled, a whole series of social welfare programs designed to directly address the needs of disadvantaged segments of society, and a 60% increase in the minimum wage.

There have also been other important successes. These include increased tax collection on large corporations, who owed back taxes; secret ballots for union elections, which is something that's brand new to the Mexican union landscape, although implementation on this has been a bit slow and uneven.

There are other successes that supporters of Lopez Obrador will point to, but let me just leave it at that in the interest of time. But there are also some very important shortcomings in terms of the policies that Lopez Obrador has implemented.

First, and potentially most important for Lopez Obrador, in terms of what he has promised his supporters, is there has been a huge increase in poverty. In part, this is without a doubt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We see similar numbers throughout Latin America.

But it's also reinforced by two policy decisions on the part of Lopez Obrador. First, he decided to have a very, very limited response to the COVID pandemic, a very limited fiscal response.

And as a result of that about a million companies went into bankruptcy, and about 2.5 million jobs were lost. And some of those jobs have returned, but estimates are that it will take years for Mexico to recover fully from this crisis and a decade for poverty to return to its 2018 levels.

Second, this poor performance in fighting poverty also reflects the dual purpose of Lopez Obrador's social welfare programs. They not only provide assistance to neglected segments of society, but at the same time they're designed to generate a permanent base of support for Lopez Obrador and his Fourth Transformation suite of policies.

And, as a result, many of the programs are poorly designed in terms of fighting poverty. They are negatively affected by clientelism, and according to the Federal Audit Agency there also appears to be corruption in a number of them.

Another negative outcome of Lopez Obrador's Fourth Transformation policies has been a significant drop in investor confidence in Mexico due to a lack of respect for private property rights and contractual rights. This will inevitably reduce future investment in Mexico, both foreign and domestic investors, and therefore limit future growth.

Equally troubling are Lopez Obrador's attacks on key independent institutions of democracy including, but limited to, the National Electoral Institute and the judiciary. Here the aim seems to be to eliminate obstacles to Lopez Obrador's ability to freely implement his Fourth Transformation policies.

This has translated into aggressive efforts to eliminate the independence of the Electoral

Institute and the judiciary, particularly, the Supreme Court, it seems he is clearly focused on now. And in the process, he is undermining their role in protecting both democratic practices and democratic governance.

Lopez Obrador has also expanded the role of the military in society after having repeatedly promised in the past that he would do just the opposite. They're in civilian construction now constructing, in particular, an airport and some rail lines, but they're also operating ports.

They now run the customs agency and they replaced the civilian police force as the lead agency fighting organized crime and violence. And, in part, for that reason, there has also been an increase in crime and violence and insecurity in Mexico.

So there is lots of room for both supporters of Lopez Obrador to point to legitimate advances that have benefitted their interests and for his opponents to point to legitimate failings that have indeed harmed their interests and potentially the long-term growth trajectory and democratic trajectory of Mexico which means the election boils down to, at the national level, do you support or oppose Lopez Obrador?

And that's the way Lopez Obrador is reading it. As Lorena correctly noted, this is about his ability to change the constitution and to thereby be able to more effectively implement his Fourth Transformation of Mexico.

It will be a referendum on the Fourth Transformation, it will be interpreted ion that way, and the fact it's reenforced by an opposition campaign that is offering nothing new to voters. They're not offering a competing vision of Mexico, of Mexico's future, but instead, and as a result, implicitly promising to return Mexico to the pre-Lopez Obrador state of affairs.

So given these sharp divisions in the Mexican electorate, it's very unlikely the June 6th election alone will be able to resolve this dispute about the future of Mexico. The dispute will continue in the post-election period in the days, weeks, and potentially months after the election, in the form of widespread challenges to the election results, and after that in a continuing battle between Lopez Obrador and the opposition to promote or constrain Lopez Obrador's Fourth Transformation policies.

So I'll just leave it at that.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you all so very much, Professor Starr, for the stellar opening and enormously useful, comprehensive, and nuanced review of the two years that was taken the current elections.

And what I heard in your comments was, to some extent, answers to what many of us were asking when President Lopez Obrador was elected, namely, would he turn out the pragmatist mayor of Mexico City, or would he turn out the radical politician that campaigned on significantly changing the system.

And what we have been seeing is far more leaning toward the radical transformation rather than feeling constrained by some of the pragmatist policies that some were assuming he would bring from his experience as the mayor.

Ambassador Sarukhan, let me come to you and ask you to help us look forward under two scenarios. So, assuming that President Lopez Obrador and MORENA will not be able to maintain the hold on power that they have currently, that they will lose the absolute majority in the lower chamber, as Lorena outlined in her comments and like did not retain enough support in local congresses, and he is not able to conduct the change of the constitution that he was hoping for.

What kind of priorities and policies are we likely to see and how that's going to play? And, perhaps, you can also entertain the other scenario that miraculously everything will still put into place in the last remaining days and he will be able to retain enough political power to make those changes. Please over to you.

MR. SARUKHAN: Thank you, Vanda, and it's a great pleasure to be with dear colleagues and friends discussing a critical moment in Mexico's contemporary history and a defining moment for Mexican democracy and for the Mexico-U.S. relationship going forward which I will also talk about generally, at least, in my opening remarks.

Look, I fully agree with Pam when she says that this is a referendum on the fourth confirmation and on MORENA and on (inaudible). But what's I think very telling is that it has become a referendum not because of the ability of the opposition which I fully agree is completely uncoordinated, lack sufficient of an alternate vision of the country going forward with concrete policies, with compelling

politicians.

It's become a referendum because Lopez Obrador has turned it into a referendum himself by inserting himself continuously in the electoral process and using his daily press briefers as sort of the milestones of the narrative regarding the elections.

And this, in part, explains why, you know, the question that so many analysts and the media and think tanks outside of Mexico, and even inside of Mexico are asking, you know, this Teflon coating that the president appears to have, despite the fact that if you look at the president's personal approval numbers, but then you look at how people are responding and reacting to specific aspects of public policy, as Lorena said, whether it's COVID, public insecurity, the economy and jobs, there is a big gap between the approval numbers the president has and the approval of his specific policies.

And so the big question going forward into the mid-terms with whether that gap, that difference does exist. What helped at least in some of the local and state races propelled opposition candidates ahead of their MORENA competitors, and it seems to be happening in certain places.

But, at the end of the day, the resilience of President Lopez Obrador's numbers is still grounded on what, you know, explains his landslide victory in 2018, which is -- and you have studied this a lot, Vanda, and Tomi Soeing (phonetic) was there.

In many countries around the world, societies, in some societies, people say the corruption happens under the table, in some of the countries citizens believe corruption happens above the table.

Well, in 2018, Mexicans believed the corruption in Mexico included the table and that in many ways explains why there was this sort of fundamental rejection of the (inaudible) ending and why despite the failings, the clear failings of the most (inaudible) administration on a number of fronts most saliently, public security, the handling of the pandemic, and the economic and social stimuli to mitigate the effects of a pandemic.

Why despite all of this you are not going to see a full-fledged collapse of MORENA'S numbers in the mid-terms. Yes, I fully concur with Lorena. I think that they will lose seats and that the battle will be in the narrative of the opposition and the president as to what the results mean and imply.

The other thing that I think is clear is that regardless of what happens on June 6th, the president is going to double-down, whether he can explain what happened as a victory and a ratification of the premises of the Fourth Transformation, or whether the opposition can push forward the narrative that voters have punished the president and MORENA.

I fear that the president is going to double down. You are not going to see more enlightened policies. You are not going to see a U-turn, like, manufacture. The gentleman is not returning and I don't think you are going to see him sort of recalibrate a lot of the positions that are creating concerns both in Mexico and beyond, particularly, if you look at the potential violations of Mexico's USMCA commitments, that will be a very, very complex omen going forward.

Because the president is going to do two things. He's going to start thinking of how he bulletproofs his legacy. And, therefore, as Lorena said, you're going to see the lame duck dynamic kick in, I think, pretty early this time around. The jockeying between who in MORENA can become the anointed heir to Lopez Obrador.

And, unfortunately, at least if we use these mid-terms as a watermark when opposition which still hasn't figured out what to do, which has still not recovered from the walloping it took in the 2018 mid-term election. So I do think that one of things that you are going to see, Vanda, is a doubling down on many of the policies of the president.

And I said it from the get-go in the 2018 election, I know that especially in a city like this, in Washington, and in the U.S., there was a lot of concern, valid concern about the direction of the economic policies of the president.

But at the end of the day, I always thought that the most complex and concerning issue regarding an Lopez Obrador presidency was going to be the whittling away of the checks and balances that has taken two, three decades to painstakingly build in Mexico.

It's imperfect. But certainly if you look at the architecture from Mexico's democracy today and compare it to where it was three decades ago, two decades ago, Mexico has advanced and there have been significant strides.

And the signs that we have seen with the independence of the three branches of

government, the breakdown in very important aspects of the federal pact in Mexico, the checks and balances, the role of NGOs, all of this is extremely concerning. And I think that this is where going forward you will see some of the most trying and complex policies being enacted by the president.

Let me very quickly before we head into obviously Tony's remarks and then the general conversation amongst ourselves, let me put the issue of the U.S.-Mexico relationship on the mat. I remember, I think Pam and I were in another webinar like this somewhere else and we were discussing what the Biden victory meant for U.S.-Mexico relations.

And I said, you mean to the tango, or salsa, or saunter, whatever you want to do in Mexico. And the question was not only, how would the U.S. administration engage with Mexico, but whether Lopez Obrador was willing to take advantage of the Biden administration and the opportunities that that provided both countries to relaunch and reset the bilateral relationship.

Every sign is telling us that the President Lopez Obrador is itching for a fight with the U.S., and if not a fight, to be able to use the U.S., as he has used the media, and NGOs, and opposition figures in Mexico, as a way to create the us versus them narrative.

You have seen them most clearly with the president lambasting the U.S. and the USAID for doing something, which by the way explains why he is president today, funding and supporting NGOs on the ground in Mexico, watchdogs on corruption, on transparency, on traditional reform, on human rights, that in many ways explain why he won in 2018.

And this is troubling because we're a few days, a week-and-a-half away from Vice President Kamala Harris going down to Mexico. And the big question that I have is whether the U.S. isn't falling into a sort of Erdogan track in its relationship with Mexico. You have heard about the setting this trap regarding a status quo, global power, and rising power and what that does to international relations.

I'm using this figure of the Erdogan track because remember what happened when you had massive numbers of Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees coming into the European Union either across the Mediterranean or across Turkey's land borders.

The European Union worked with Turkey to try and have Turkey stop those migrants from coming into the European Union, but sort of the written quid pro quo was that the European Union

would turn a blind eye from the erosion of Turkish democracy and the checks and balances in Turkey.

I many ways by having the Biden administration decide that ensuring Mexican collaboration on stopping the flow of Central American transmigration from Mexico, they put everything else, at least temporarily I hope, on the backburner because they need to ensure Mexican collaboration so that when GOP does not use migration and the border as a narrative to politically assault the damage going into next year's mid-terms but then all of the other issues with the timid exception of the USMCA issues which, as a result of the Free Trade Commission last week, have now started to start percolating upwards.

It seems that the Biden administration isn't focusing on this erosion of democracy and of independent checks and balances of Mexico. And, therefore, the big question is, is the Biden administration, despite the fact that they're engaging with a very prickly nationalist counterpart in Mexico and they don't want to trigger that, whether down the road the U.S. wouldn't need to recalibrate how it's engaging Mexico and Mexican society on these issues of erosion of checks and balances and a strong liberal democracy which is needed in Mexico. And I'll stop there.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Oh, perfect. Thank you so much, Ambassador Sarukhan, also enormously informative and insightful comments and perfect transition to Ambassador Wayne. Let me hear, I'll pose to you the Arturo question. Is the Biden administration likely to recalibrate its relationship in Mexico after the mid-terms? And are we likely going to see a large amount of action?

We have seen quiet engagement at best on issues of security, for example, despite the enormous rupture in the U.S.-Mexico bilateral security cooperation than we have been experiencing in the last few months, but receiving that in the long buildup.

Also Ambassador Sarukhan spoke of a critical moment in the course of Mexican democracy. Professor Starr spoke about referendum on Mexico's future. Tony, in your view, Ambassador Wayne, is U.S. foreign policy sufficiently aware of the profound nature of these elections? And to the extent that it is, does it have any capacity to shape it, and should it have any capacity, or should it have any role in shaping that? So over to you please.

PARTICIPANT: Tony, you're muted.

MR. WAYNE: Thank you, Vanda, and thanks Lorena, Pamela, and Arturo, for your excellent points. I want to start off, however, saying a little something about the Mexican elections. And I'll get to your points, Vanda.

I think it's really important just to underscore from what we have heard that in the last several weeks, Ramos really laid it all out. There is a clear choice for voters.

Anybody who has been listening to his morning press conferences and reading the articles and watching the newscast, I mean he has come out with a whole display of his agenda. He is quite clear, he is going to put a new Central Bank governor in, who has heart. He's extended the Supreme Court Chief Justice for two years. He has not only criticized all of these various people, but he has promised to weaken the national electoral institutions if he goes forward, as well as taking the others and putting them into various ministries in parts of the government.

On energy independence, he has just become clearer and clearer, as he has been in the last couple of days with the announcement of buying the rest of this refinery in Texas, all portraying and the two previous laws which are now suspended by the Court, as really moving Mexico toward energy independence.

He has used the UIF, the Financial Intelligence Unit, and the Attorney General's Office to go after political opponents in pretty bold and aggressive ways. And, as Arturo mentioned, he has criticized the United States for supporting two NGOs, who have a long and respected record of standing up for what they're supposed to do, looking at corruption critically, defending journalists.

So it's pretty clear out there for anybody who has been listening to the news this is a -- he has made it into, to second what Arturo said, into a vote on his agenda. I also agree with what Arturo said that he is going to keep pressing forward with his agenda no matter how the election comes out. But the election will of course determine the degree to which he has super momentum behind that, as it goes forward.

So what does the United States have to do in this situation? They have to walk this line and which is a very careful line between the deep tradition of suspicion in Mexico in defense of its sovereignty, vis-à-vis the big neighbor to the north, and the important issues that the United States has

with this very important neighbor, the largest, you know, export -- or one of the two largest export partners that the United States has, and a tremendously important partner for all of the things across the border, good and bad, and how does it manage that?

I think Arturo is correct that they have placed a highest priority in the short-term on getting control of the migration situation and they do need Mexico's help for doing that. On the other hand, they have started raising their concerns on the economic front, not just at this last meeting among the Ministers, but in previous statements coming out of both USDR and Congress and the State Department about labor rights, about the energy sector, and respect for investors there.

There have been a number of groups in the United States, for example, in the agricultural sector being very frank about things they think Mexico is not doing well. I think they're going to continue to look at that.

And then on the security front, they did actually just have security consultations 10 days ago, the first in a long time. Now, as Vanda said, that's a really challenging area, and really there has been no progress to speak of. There has been continued cooperation, up until about a year ago, it declined, or at the end of last year, it declined significantly.

But there has not been any real improvements in that security cooperation in these recent years, so there is a lot to do there. And, yes, this is going to take a careful calibration. As we know by all of us living in Washington, we know the Biden administration has a tremendously full agenda and they only have a partially full staff.

They don't have a lot of people confirmed. They're doing a lot. They are working hard on this part of the world. I think they will get there, and I think that includes being concerned about democracy. This is after all one of the themes that Vice President Biden, now President Biden, made clear was really important to him, and he does know Mexico well.

He knows its strengths and its weaknesses better than, as Arturo has argued in other fora where we have been together, he knows it better than any other American president and that is the case.

So he'll be looking for a way forward, but I think you're exactly right and we're exactly right in thinking that this is going to be a really delicate path in going ahead because you don't want to

play into the hand of those people who would like to reach under the bed and pull out that old bogie man image of the United States of imposing things on Mexico.

I think there are enough stakeholders in Mexico and the United States who understand this relationship, to help the government develop a more sophisticated effort to work on these issue, but it's going to take a lot of careful diplomacy and it is going to demand a lot of attention.

Part of that we can also see I think, if we can get it going between the two countries, is recreating the institutions for dialogue that existed previously to help deal with some of these challenges.

We used to have a high level economic dialogue that went beyond trade and looked at the other issues that were troubling the relationship. And Lopez Obrador agreed with Biden to reestablish that, that can be helpful.

I think it is positive that they did have a bilateral dialogue on security within the last 10 days. That isn't going to fix everything. But if you start talking about things, you're can start exploring solutions. There is going to be a lot more that needs to be done.

Handling migration effectively is going to take a lot of practical cooperation, not just U.S.-Mexico, but with partners to the south. So this will be hard slogging, but I think it is possible to manage this going forward. And I think at some point it is going to take the United States needing to be very frank when it has a disagreement.

And, as we have seen in a couple of relationships around the world, the Biden administration has been willing to do that, to speak frankly and still work with people to find ways forward. So, let me stop there, and let's get to some of the questions and answers.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Great, thank you so much, Ambassador Wayne. Calibration and careful tap dance, to use the follow up Arturo's dancing metaphor, seems to be the need, the direction in the U.S.-Mexican relationship for the remaining three years, and potentially much longer than just that amount of time, and yet the gravity of the issues at stakes only seems to have been rising in the relationship.

Let me put two questions on the table right now. Lorena, let me start with you and ask you about violence in the elections. Mexican elections are often violent. The prior relations we saw,

hundred plus political candidates, at all levels of running for offices being assassinated.

Sometimes this is linked to criminal groups that are seeking to shape elections. We are seeing this certainly profoundly in the Tierra Calientes, but there is often also a long history in Mexico of assassination of political opponents by their rivals. It's not necessarily linked or exclusively linked to critical -- to a criminal group.

So one question for you, what are we seeing, in terms of patterns of violence, both intimidation and voter access?

And another question to put right now on the table and then I'll come back to questions for Tony and Arturo. Pamela, for you, you, you spoke about the weakness of the traditional parties, PRI, PAN, and PRD, and really in their ability to put something new on the table for voters.

Are we at a point in the Mexican history where Mexico will follow the pattern of many countries in Latin America of seeing essentially the demise of political parties, and instead elections take place around particular politicians that create temporary political vehicles, but where the (inaudible) parties that has long been characteristic of Mexican relations is going away?

And related to that, what will it take for parties, like, PAN, PRI, PRD, to start listening to voters and put forth a handshake that let's simply, let's not go back to what it used to be like.

So let me start with those two questions, and then I'll go to questions for Arturo and Tony.

MS. BECERRA: Thank you, Vanda. Yes, definitely violence is one of the main issues, not only in elections but for us pollsters to measure the vote intention, it's a great challenge. For instance, in a specific area of de Raca Niente in Michoacán, we cannot even go in to ask respondents. And we have seen elections being turned around from something that you can, you know, project as a potential winner just by the activity of criminal organizations in those areas, right.

We have seen that there is a projected winner, a consensus and a projected winner, and that day the activity of the organized crime can actually turn the election around. And this is something that we have to contemplate in several states, obviously, Michoacán, Guerrero, Sinaloa, Durango, and a certain part of Sonora, right, so we have to factor that into our measurements.

We also see this on election day. Unfortunately, it has become a practice of some

parties to motivate, let's say, a criminal activity on the day of election in order to dissuade voters in sections that are not verbal to them from coming out to vote.

So it's just basically, you know, provoking the abstention in those elections. And we have seen that it's more of -- it's a common practice in certain areas, more rural areas, but we have seen that happen too.

Unfortunately, the part about violence towards candidates has really not been under control. We have seen more than 30 candidates assassinated in this process, up today, and this is a terrible news and this really just -- it has an effect on voters in terms of punishing the incumbent, but it also has an effect of not turning out to vote that day.

So I don't think it's going to have the effect at the nationwide level, but we are going to see it in specific areas of this country and specific areas of some states.

MR. SARUKHAN: Can I just very quickly interfere on this, Vanda?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Sure, please.

MR. SARUKHAN: Just to underscore that these 32 candidates that Lorena mentions are 32 of 58 politicians who have been murdered since the election formally kicked off in September of last year. And it's going to become, after the 2018 election, the second most violent election, in terms of deaths of candidates and politicians in Mexico's history. So that's something that we have to keep our eye on.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thanks. It's to you on political parties.

MS. STARR: Sure, that's the \$64,000 question, Vanda. (Laughter) I could actually say it's the \$64 million question. It's a tough one. Because we're seeing, I would argue, contradictory trends in Mexico.

You're seeing the trend where these traditional opposition parties, or the traditional parties of Mexico, not even opposition parties, the PAN, the PRI, and the PRD, have all been unable to deal with the drumming they took in 2018, and to find a way to communicate and talk with voters, and part of this is because Mexican politicians have never really communicated with voters, they have never had to.

The Mexican political system was always one in which your next position in politics was determined by your party, not by your constituents. There is also very much an attitude in Mexico still in the Mexican political elite that the voters just aren't sophisticated enough to know what's right for them, so there isn't a need to listen to voters.

That's not unique to just the old traditional parties. It's true of most of the politicians in MORENA and the small parties as well in Mexico. So that tendency to pay attention to constituents, to listen to them, is not something that's well-established in Mexico either because of cultural reasons or because of how to get ahead in politics.

So that would suggest that these parties could potentially wither away and we would have a situation in which maybe parties don't matter in Mexico. But what we're seeing at the same time is that when individuals want to have an influence in politics their first step is to try to form a party because parties receive all kinds of funding from the Electoral Institute and that gives enormous monetary incentive to form parties.

And at the same time, you have the Citizens Movement Party, which is insistent upon trying to create a third option, not pro-Lopez Obrador, anti-Lopez Obrador, but a third way in Mexico.

And, finally, we don't have charismatic personalities in Mexico, at this point, that I see that could get, draw up the voters fantasy. So that's going to be difficult to do. And, finally, Lopez Obrador is aggressively trying to undermine parties that don't support him, but aggressively trying to help parties that do support him.

So it's not about eliminating parties from his perspective, it's eliminating those who oppose him, so sort of a complex milieu that makes it difficult to determine what is the future of political parties in Mexico, but one in which politicians have never really listened to voters and they still don't really have a great incentive to listen to voters.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you. That's actually a perfect transition to the question that I have for Ambassador Sarukhan. But before I state it, I just want to let our participants who are watching the webinar know that what I am doing is rolling in questions that have already been submitted or that are coming in live.

So if you have more questions, please submit them through either twitter or the links stated in the announcement and I'll continue folding them into the conversation, as I have started doing already.

So, Arturo, Lorena, in the beginning, spoke about that this is the first time that Mexican politicians can be reelected, a major new experience, and the change in the system was that hopefully was motivated by the belief or by the hope that politicians would then start being reelected and elected on the basis of their performance, as opposed to their party affiliation, that they would become more responsive to voters.

So the questions to you is, you know, what are the prospects for that? The possibility of reelection has been long seen as the 80 mechanism of strengthening accountability. How do you see that playing out?

And, Tony, let me put on also questions for you. So, you know, in the United States, we have gone through really traumatic four years under President Trump, whose agenda was to weaken institution, destroy institutions, and use some of the whittling of the checks and balances that Arturo spoke about, do so in the United States.

And you have worked on issues of corruption, checks and balances, power, division in many countries, in Argentina, in Afghanistan, in other places where you posted in all of those policies -- on the U.S. policy toward those countries, you had very significant influence.

What do you see right now in Mexico as some of key levers for the remaining three years of the Lopez Obrador administration to take on corruption, to take on impunity, eve as President Lopez Obrador is perhaps targeting some forms of corruption, highly politically motivated, as you spoke about, and letting all kinds of impunity proceed?

Arturo, let me start with you.

MR. SARUKHAN: And this fits perfectly with what Pam was saying is one of the reasons that explains the lack of responsiveness of Mexican political parties to citizens or constituents.

This is precisely up until now there was no reelection, so there was no incentive for a member of Congress, Senate, or lower house to be responsive to his or her constituents because he was

in, or she was in, and then, you know, she couldn't face or he couldn't face reelection.

And so the conveyor belt between citizens, the stakeholder conveyor belt between citizens and elected officials did not exist, the reform precisely sought to trigger that.

The question is, going forward, if at the same time you're weakening Mexican institutions and you're weakening checks and balances, you're eliminating another one of the key pieces that ensures that both political parties stopped being party crashees and really start responding to the demands of the voters.

And this, again, takes me to what is my core concern which is the weakening of Mexico's institutional framework. Because if the president persists in doing this, yes, his power is going to be augmented as a result of that and the centralization of power in the executive, but that also means that he can't rely on institutions to generate growth, to mitigate the pandemic, to resolve social conflicts, to tackle public insecurity, to take advantage of Mexico's use of strategic assets, or even facilitate the transition which she hopes will be from one MORENA candidate to another MORENA candidate in 2024.

And so this, again, it takes us back to the core question of, what does this weakening of Mexico's democratic architecture mean? And it could have potential major effect, precisely, in terms of ensuring that via reelection those members of Congress, those mayors, those governors, those elected officials become much more responsive and sort of rebuild or, in the case of Mexico, build a true conveyor belt between the aspirations, and hopes, and agendas of Mexican society and their representatives in Congress or in statehouses, or in municipal governments.

And, again, let me use an example of how all of this is playing out, in terms of the U.S.-Mexico relationship. Because if you look at three things that have been happening recently, these things are the direct result of government that has cannibalized and destroyed Mexico's institutions and Mexican bureaucracy in Mexican agencies, immigration, and the imperious need for the U.S. to have Mexico supported.

In many ways, what's happening, regardless of the dynamics in Central America, is that the president has cannibalized the budgets of Mexico's immigration and refugee agencies; that they can't do all they're supposed to do if the numbers of agents, if the budgets for those two agencies has been

whittled away.

The president, yesterday, or the day before, was asking the U.S. not to downgrade Mexico aviation security. Well, one of the reasons that's happening is because the bureaucracy and the agencies that were supposed to be supervising air security in Mexico have been weakened.

The recent U.S. ban on the exports of shrimp from the Gulf of Cortez to the United States are a direct result of the inability to enforce regulations to ensure that there isn't bycatch of sea turtles in the Gulf of Cortez.

And so, as you can tell where I'm going, is that the weakening of Mexican institutions, the cannibalization of the Mexican state of the Mexican state's capacities is truly having a detrimental effect on governance in public policy in Mexico, in the same way that it could be counterproductive to what was behind the idea of finally enshrining reelection of public -- with the exception of the president -- of public officials in Mexico.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much. And I must say that I am delighted that you brought in the issue of shrimp and seafood and far more potentially traumatic embargoes on Mexican fisheries, more broadly, heading down from the United States.

MR. SARUKHAN: Yeah.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: There is a whole set of reviews is underway, emblematic of some of the environmental policies, problematic environmental policies that Lopez Obrador has taken, but critically the capacity to enforce rule of law.

And I would even say that what's, you know, really characterized the Lopez Obrador administration is not merely struggle with the capacity, but arguably a lack of willingness to take on politically controversial or significant security issues.

So any time major traumatic reason a security incidents has happened whether this was attacks against significant government officials or (in Spanish), angry poachers of the trauma burning down ships of camarón, the response, the directive from the president is don't react, just don't oppose -- which is an excellent transition to you, Tony, and your reflections please on, how can Mexico escape the culture in impunity?

How can rule of law be promoted in the context that we are in Mexico today, and are there lessons from other places where you have served?

MR. WAYNE: Thank you very much, Vanda. So, of course, there are many people who are much more expert than I in fighting corruption. But I have concluded after serving in a number of places where corruption has been a problem that you, first, you really do need a coalition of people in the local society who want that corruption to change and are willing to struggle for that.

And that's why having civil society organizations and NGOs is so important, as part of the solution. And that's why doing away with them, or criticizing them, or making them into tame little, cute little organizations is not the way to go, even if they criticize governments wherever they are.

And then, beyond that, you need business organizations and others willing to struggle for rule of law; and then you do need action by government. But part of the challenge has been that you need to get this balance right. It is good to have leaders who are willing to push forward anti-corruption agendas and actually press to have cases brought and examined and have convictions against corrupt individuals, but it needs to be done through institutions.

If you rely on a savior leader to do these kind of things, it just is not going, probably not going to work and probably not going to last. If we just look around the world and look historically, it's where through the sort of the difficult maneuvering within domestic politics in various places where structure have been built and survived they have had the best systems.

And so that's where I agree fully with Arturo here, and my worry is that by tearing down systems that were already in place and checks and balances, you are just going to make it harder for Mexico to move forward in a democratic fashion. And, you know, I don't want to pretend that those institutions were all perfect.

They weren't perfect, but people were working really hard to get them to be better. I mean I believe it's on the anti-corruption area, there was a massive reform passed during the previous presidency that was never implemented fully under that presidency and then never implemented under this presidency moving ahead.

And so it really does take a balancing between the recognition of the importing of

institutions, whether they be in a government or in the civil society going forward, and a leader that can champion reform while recognizing that you do have to have these processes, structures, and mechanisms that help that reform go forward and be sustained.

And I think that is one of the big issues before Mexico broadly right now. And I understand that that's not something that all Mexicans will see and grasp, as they look at this situation. But coming from experiences elsewhere in the world and thinking about that, I do see this, the months ahead and the years ahead for Mexico in that lens.

There has been a tremendous amount of progress this century in Mexico in strengthening and building democracy. And, yes, that does need to expand to include the poorer people in Mexico in a more effective way. But I'm worried that this is going to be really challenging going forward and that will make it challenging for the U.S.-Mexico relationship in the longer period of time.

And it's not, you know, fully admitting the problems and challenges that we have in the United States having just grappled with and still grappling with a lot of these same issues, but it will be much better if we're each I think struggling to move in a more democratic direction.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you, Tony. I'm glad that you brought up the non-implementation of the anti-corruption agenda from the Nieto administration and its non-implementation so far, now I was going to raise that.

I have written in my own writings in thinking about corruption that what is critical is powerful coalition of power that wants to implement anti-corruption agenda. But what then needs to happen is that the stool of political convenience becomes translated into institutional habit. And what we are, in fact, seeing in Mexico is efforts to weaken the buildup of even small amount of the institutional habit.

Lorena, let me come back to you and pose two questions to you, and I'll also overlap a little bit with Pamela's. You know, I go back to the theme that this election is really significant. This is mid-terms, people perhaps abroad are not so focused on the elections in Mexico and doesn't see *prima facie* as exciting as presidential election, and yet we have over and over that these elections are really about critical issues in Mexico, critical moment; it's about future of Mexico.

To what extent, is my first question, to what extent are Mexican voters aware of that? So, yes, you know, they are voting Obrador's transformation, yes or no? This is an extended vote about policies that President Lopez Obrador has put forth. But is there real awareness of the traumatic long-term impact?

That's my question number one for you. The second question which is also the same question that I want to pose to Pamela is, what are we seeing in the governors races? What are the exciting trends there of key states to pay attention to?

And, Pamela, to you, at the level of the governors races, can we see the emergence of new exciting political -- exciting politicians, or perhaps political opposition from the governors races from the state level?

MS. BECERRA: Okay, thank you. Well, we have to think about the Mexican electorate as sort of a collage of different voters, right. So different voters focus on different things and this is clearly the nature of Mexico because it's such a heterogenous country.

What we have seen though is that there is an opposition forming against Lopez Obrador at the national level. It seems to be stronger in some states. And right now when you see national surveys around 30% of the population would say that they consider themselves anti-Lopez Obrador, right.

So these are voters that are more attentive to defeating MORENA. They are more attentive to maybe exercising a utility vote, you know, even if it's not the candidate of their preference to vote for the candidate that can defeat MORENA. And this opposition has doubled over and over since Lopez Obrador start, right.

When he started his term this was around 12 to 15% of the voters. Now we can estimate it's around 28 to 30% of the voters. So those are the population, those are the voters that are seeing this election as critical. And they are very attentive to the elections of the lower house because they think that this going to be definitive for the future of our country.

Because if Lopez Obrador becomes strengthened from this election in their view, then in 2024 we're going to have continuity from MORENA and they see it as regression in the country, and they see it as the complete dismantlement of checks and balances of independent institutions, et cetera, right.

But we do have 40% of voters that are still strong Lopez Obrador supporters and most of these are older voters. They are mostly in the south and southeast of the country. A lot of these receive social benefits from Lopez Obrador. But, and this is important, only 25 to 30% of the voters say they are MORENA supports, right.

So this the gap between Lopez Obrador and MORENA. And those 15% of the voters in the difference between MORENA and Lopez Obrador are anywhere from PAN to PRI to Movimiento Ciudadano, or the Citizens Movement which is, as Pamela said, is trying to present itself as a third way.

And Movimiento Ciudadano is attracting all of these voters who are just illusioned with democracy, in general, with the previous party system, and particularly, with states and local governments that's made all of these promises of change and honesty and ended up being dysfunctional and corrupt, right.

So we only see, like, 30% of the electorate see this as a definitive election. In terms of the state elections, I think when we started this electoral process, many of the pollsters were giving 14 out of the 15 states to MORENA, right, only getting better was the one that they were saying that was not going there.

We weren't polling at that time. Now that we have started polling, we are seeing very important changes in the states. For instance, Nuevo Leone, which is a very important state, MORENA, who started out with a leading candidate, dropped to fourth place.

Campeche, for instance, that was supposed to be a state where MORENA could win is now, of course, a possibility for Movimiento Ciudadano with a candidate with an Expriinista (phonetic). We are seeing Sinaloa and Sonora are competitive. We are seeing Chihuahua, that was a state that should have gone to the PAN that might go to MORENA, precisely because the governor, the PAN governor is operating against the PAN candidate.

We are seeing Michoacán and Guerrero, where the two MORENA candidates that were leading in the polls were removed by the Electoral Institute for not complying with law. So we are seeing all of these important trends. And that's why I was underscoring that the local factors at play and how much that people pay attention, the voters pay attention to these local dynamics.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you. Pam, please.

MS. STARR: Let me follow in on that. Because I think that what Lorena, the point she is making, and I think somewhat inadvertently when she is talking about the changes in positions of candidates and the internal party disputes about candidates is sort of what I am seeing at the gubernatorial level, and even at the national level, is there aren't a lot of exciting politicians, there are a handful. And the handful that seem to be they could be an exciting option for the future potential candidate there -- how can I put this?

Those that are in the opposition are the targets of Lopez Obrador. He is doing everything he can to try to weaken them. He is focused on Enrique Alfaro in Jalisco, who has been a fairly successful governor despite the security situation for Movimiento Ciudadano.

He has gone after the governor of Tamaulipas because he has taken the lead in opposition movement of particularly Panista governors, but opposition governors, as I believe it was, Tony, who mentioned using the power of the state to try to undermine him and indeed to arrest him and throw him in jail.

So it's very hard to be able to, for politicians, for particularly the opposition to come out of the states. And within MORENA, it's going to be whoever Lopez Obrador anoints. So, yes, you have got a very strong governor in Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico city, who could, is exciting. She's an interesting future politician, but she's also you have Marcelo Ebrard, the foreign minister, who is a potential candidate. You have other want-to-be's within MORENA.

But, at the end of the day, the MORENA candidate is going to be the person who is anointed by Lopez Obrador. Those circumstances make it very hard for exciting candidates to come out of the states, and I frankly don't see that as the path for a potential future president of Mexico unless it happens to be Claudia Sheinbaum.

MS. BECERRA: I'm sorry, Vanda, if I can just add up to that. I have just a different point of view of that because we are seeing that a lot of the local figures are becoming very important frontrunner for opposition parties, like, for instance, Molicia Vela (phonetic) in Yucatan, you see (speaking Spanish), for instance.

So you do see a lot of local figures that are so strong in their states and that they have performed well and that they have managed to fend off MORENA that you can see some of these candidates become exciting candidates, okay, maybe not the best proposals but exciting candidates.

So Manuel Garcia Orlon, which is why he is moving up in the polls. And I think that there is where we are going to find the opposition candidates or the opposition frontrunner for 2024.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you both for that exchange and those very valuable insights, Pamela and Lorena. We are five minutes to closing. Let me ask the last question to our two ambassadors, Ambassador Sarukhan and Ambassador Wayne.

You managed to use Mexican relationship, but in your work as ambassador, and subsequently you have also been very engaged in the broader relationship outside of the formal diplomatic channels, the track to the role of the business community, perhaps, state-to-state relations, communities that have families on both sides of the border.

What do you see as possibilities for some progress in key issues whether we are talking about corruption, the rule of law, easing some of the challenges pending, the agenda of the bilateral relationship for the next three years, for example, or perhaps really end of the Biden administration?

If I can ask both of you to take about two minutes on, arguably, a much more complex question.

MR. SARUKHAN: That question would merit a one hour discussion here, but I'll try to be as cryptic and brief as possible. I think one of the most fundamental things that needs to happen is that we need to tune out Washington, D.C. and Mexico City.

I am not saying that the federal governments are irrelevant. It sounds weird from a guy who spent 23 years of his life as a career diplomat and career ambassador, but increasingly I think it's the mayors and the governors of the United States and Mexico that need to play the leading role in creating transformative engagement.

Because, first of all, because that's where -- again, going back to this idea of why the conveyor belt between society and politicians and (inaudible) parties is broken in Mexico that the closer you go to the ground, as Lorena said, you can look at the role that some mayors are playing in Mexico,

certainly a lot of them in the United States.

If you can connect cities -- and I am not just talking about those cities on the border because when you start talking about mayors and governors everyone automatically tends to think of, oh, the border states.

No, this has to be much deeper, it has to be driven by those states and those cities in the United States that may be far away from the border but that play a key role, whether it's in trade relationships and economic relations in supply chains, in diaspora communities, and I see the roles made of some governors as a driving force of the rethinking, not only of the institutional framework, but the dynamics of the U.S.-Mexico bilateral relationship.

And I think there are mayors and governors on both sides of the border, again, not only on the boarder, but understand this, the problem is, how do you create the framework for them to start engaging and to understand that diplomacy is no longer the sole purview or the monopoly of the federal governments of Washington, D.C. and Mexico City.

MR. WAYNE: Yeah, so just building on what Arturo had to say, I think -- I agree fully with what he said, the question is, the framework. And I don't think the framework is going to happen unless we, at least, get the agreement of the national governments to have this forward-looking discussion take place with all of the many stakeholders that there are in the public sector at subnational levels and in the private sector and really allow that to happen.

And it needs to be a future-oriented dialogue and thinking if you look at USMCA, for example, there is all sorts of material in there to open up the future of where the economies go, how they become more competitive, if you let the stakeholders take them there.

Similarly, on, you know, migration, we all know that the real solution here is really in the long-term and that means thinking big picture, thinking five, 10 years down the line and start working in that direction.

And, similarly, in security,. Vanda, you and I wrote four years ago, with some others, about the need really to reinvent the Emerita Cooperation. That still needs to happen, and it has not happened up until now and that is touching all of these cities and states that Arturo talks about.

Think of all of the human suffering on both sides of the border because of this drug trade that's going on and all of the violence that comes out of it is just horrible. So we need to find a way to get these dialogues going, even as the governments are going to be wrestling with managing these relations and, you know, which will be challenging.

But, besides that, you can have these kind of dialogues looking at what should we be doing, or one and two, and five years down the road, and why not get that going? And part of that could also be if we can get this North American leaders meeting set again and start thinking bigger about North America that might help to get the U.S. and Mexico out of the gest U.S. and Mexico look in the short-term.

So there are a number of things we can do, and I hope we can move forward to do that with help from people on both sides of the border and from our Canadian neighbors.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you, Tony. Those are excellent concluding remarks. You know, my own concern about Mexico is one of seeing the weakening of rule of law, the progressive weakening of rule of law, and the destruction of institutions.

But I also have similar concern about seller of the agenda to expand the inclusiveness of the economic and political system in Mexico. And the issues that this expansion of the political and economic inclusiveness, the need to take much better care of Mexican poor is a vital agenda that Lopez Obrador put on the table that every Mexican politician and citizen should be concerned about, although it's very unfortunate, in my view, the way he has chosen to attempt to advance many of those policies that have been very problematic.

And one of my fears is that his anti-institutional agenda will succeed, but the (inaudible) action that will actually fail and that will also sour other political actors, partisan politicians to take on the agenda, even as (inaudible) would suggest something that we have seen in the security space where the failings of policies have led towards everything and just allowing critical, really, intolerable levels of violence that no society, no country should be willing to put up with and should constantly be paying attention to how to get at them.

So thank you very much, Ambassador Wayne; thank you, Ambassador Sarukhan, Professor Starr, and Dr. Becerra, for your extraordinarily insightful, comprehensive remarks. This has

been a terrific conversation from my perspective. As always, I learned a tremendous amount from you.

Thank you very much to our audience for tuning in today and participating. And I look forward to further conversation with -- on the new break of the initiative on non-state armed actors and other Brookings work.

MR. WAYNE: Thank you, Vanda.

MR. SARUKAHAN: Thank you.

MS. STARR: Thank you.

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