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Mexican Election Interference

Key Points

- The Mexican government has become increasingly hostile toward the sovereignty of the United States.
- Republican efforts to end illegal immigration across the U.S.–Mexico border have led to provocative rhetoric from Mexico directed toward U.S. politicians, especially those who advocate for robust action to curtail cartel drug trafficking.
- This rhetoric has also taken the form of direct and indirect threats to influence U.S. elections, often with the intention of suppressing voter turnout in support of the Republican party and its candidates.
- Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and former Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard actively engage in rhetoric seeming intent to subvert the will of American voters.

Executive Summary

The Mexican government has become increasingly hostile toward the sovereignty of the United States, repeatedly threatening to influence the American electoral process. U.S. efforts to address the humanitarian crisis at the border and protect the American people have provoked discussions about securing the U.S.–Mexico border and prompted legislation that would designate Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs; [S.1048, 2023](#)).

Politicians who advocate for decisive action at the southern border often face criticism. However, U.S. lawmakers who specifically target Mexican drug cartels have received more than just criticism. In fact, Mexican officials recently threatened to launch an “information campaign” against Republicans in the U.S. in order to mobilize Mexicans and Hispanics not to vote for them unless they change their rhetoric toward Mexico ([Shaw, 2023a](#)).

Policymakers receiving criticism from Mexican government officials include Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX), Rep. Mike Waltz (R-FL), Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC), and Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA). Each of these lawmakers aroused the ire of Mexican government officials for proposing policies targeted at securing the border, bringing violent criminal cartels to justice, and stopping the importation of the deadly narcotic fentanyl.

This paper examines the inflammatory rhetoric of the Mexican government and demonstrates that this rhetoric has become normative in its discussions of the United States. Additionally, this paper examines the extent to which Mexican officials’ language edges toward influencing U.S. elections and demonstrates the Mexican government’s willingness to wield political influence over Mexican and Hispanic populations in the United States.

Introduction

Mexican political campaign events are commonplace in the United States ([Martinez, 2023](#)). Rhetoric at these events has traditionally stayed focused on Mexican issues and Mexican candidacies, but under the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), Mexican political rhetoric has moved into new territory, including specific threats to influence the outcome of *American*—not Mexican—elections.

President López Obrador uses his office to undermine the sovereignty of the American government and, by extension, the will of American voters.

AMLO was elected as the head of government of Mexico City in 2000 and has served as president of Mexico since 2018. When he began pursuing the presidency for the third time in 2017, he frequently criticized American politicians—on U.S. soil—for their border security policies. As part of his campaign efforts, López Obrador traveled to several different American cities to rally Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals to his cause ([Borunda, 2017](#)). During one stop on his trip, AMLO gave an interview to Bloomberg TV ([Schatzker, 2017](#)) in New York City and provided commentary on the border policies of then-President Donald Trump:

“If Donald Trump continues with his hate campaign against Mexican migrants ... we will go to the United Nations and we will report the United States government for violation of human rights and racial discrimination.” ([4:06](#))

This remark, in the context of recent events, reveals AMLO’s determination to challenge the sovereignty of the United States. The following examples provide evidence that President López Obrador uses his office to undermine the sovereignty of the American government and, by extension, the will of American voters.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador

As of October 25, 2023, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol had encountered 2,475,669 migrants at the U.S. southern border in fiscal year 2023, surpassing the all-time record FY 2022 total of 2,378,944 ([U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d.](#)). In response to these statistics, U.S. lawmakers have focused on ways to dismantle Mexican drug cartels, the primary source of migrant smuggling, and curb the rise in fentanyl trafficking.

In January 2023, Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) and Rep. Mike Waltz (R-FL) introduced a joint resolution to authorize the use of military force against drug cartels ([H.J.Res. 18,](#)

[2023; Keene, 2023](#)). They proposed this measure based on evidence that cartels such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco are well equipped and operate with a high level of organization and military-like tactics, which they reasoned would require a proportional response from the U.S. government to the threat they posed ([Office of Congressman Dan Crenshaw, 2023](#)). Additionally, in March 2023, Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) and Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) introduced a bill to designate nine major Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations ([Office of Senator John Kennedy, 2023](#)).

Soon after these legislative actions, President López Obrador said he would start an “information campaign” to dissuade Mexican Americans, and all Hispanics in the U.S., from voting for Republicans:

*“Starting today, we are going to start an information campaign for Mexicans who live and work in the United States and for all Hispanics to inform them of what we are doing in Mexico and how this initiative by the Republicans, in addition to being irresponsible, is an offense against the people of Mexico, a lack of respect for our independence, our sovereignty, and if they do not change their attitude and think that they are going to use Mexico for their propaganda, electoral, and political purposes, we are going to call for them not to vote for that party, because it is interventionist, inhumane, hypocritical, and corrupt.”*¹ ([López Obrador, 2023a, para. 23](#))

This statement by the Mexican president is a clear illustration of Mexico’s inclination toward influencing U.S. elections. At the time of writing this paper, the president has neither retracted his statement nor have any Mexican officials provided clarification.

While focusing on the national stage, President López Obrador has also commented on the actions of governors in the United States. When a state’s chief executive proposes stricter immigration controls or more aggressive measures against drug cartels, the Mexican president often responds by threatening to negatively influence the outcome of that official’s future elections.

Governor Ron DeSantis and AMLO

When Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president of the United States, he stated that he would implement aggressive anti-cartel and anti-illegal migrant policies, just as he had

¹ All quotes from President López Obrador’s daily press conferences are translated via Google Translate and reviewed for accuracy.

done as governor, according to Reuters ([Reuters, 2023](#)). Following these comments, AMLO used his office as president of Mexico to communicate to Hispanic voters in Florida his perspective on their governor:

“I also take this opportunity to tell Mr. DeSantis, who revealed ... that all his politicking ... regarding migrants was because he wants to be the candidate of the Republican Party. ... I hope that the Hispanics of Florida wake up and do not give him a vote, that they do not vote for those who persecute migrants, those who do not respect migrants, because the migrant, as it is said in the Bible, deserves respect.” ([López Obrador, 2023b, para. 221](#))

Several months later, when the Republican primary campaign had started in earnest, President López Obrador again criticized the immigration policies of Gov. Ron DeSantis. During his daily press conference, he provided greater detail in his criticisms of Florida:

“We are against the immigration reform of DeSantis, the governor of Florida, who is against migrants. Not a vote for DeSantis. He who does not love his country does not love his mother. Not a vote for those who look down on migrants. We cannot remain silent. If the United States is a great nation, it has been because of migrants. And he is for the wall and for the mistreatment of migrants, he aspires to be a presidential candidate for the Republican party. I hope that the citizens of the United States, of the Republican Party, know what is really happening, it is because of the migrants, and it is the migrants that carry out the works that are needed in the United States, the infrastructure that they need, to be carried out. It is the workforce that makes the United States great and only for political and electoral purposes, to want to look good by deceiving that migrants are the ones causing misfortune in the United States, all of which is false.” ([López Obrador, 2023c, para. 319](#))

Governor Greg Abbott and AMLO

President López Obrador’s “information campaign” has not solely focused on Florida. The actions of Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas have also been criticized by the Mexican president. In the absence of a federal response to the humanitarian crisis at the southern border, Gov. Abbott launched Operation Lone Star in 2021 ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2021](#)). The state of Texas initiated the operation to combat increased illegal border crossings and fentanyl trafficking—using state resources, the Texas National Guard, and the Texas Department of Public Safety.

“Starting today, we are going to start an information campaign for Mexicans who live and work in the United States and for all Hispanics to inform them. ... We are going to call for them not to vote for that party, because it is interventionist, inhumane, hypocritical, and corrupt.”

—Mexican President López Obrador

In June 2023, still under Operation Lone Star, Gov. Abbott directed that a floating marine buoy barrier be placed along a 1000-foot stretch of the Rio Grande ([Gonzalez & Coronado, 2023](#); [Office of the Texas Governor, 2023](#)). The placement of the buoy barrier was viewed by the Mexican government as a violation of their national sovereignty ([López Obrador, 2023c](#); [Averbuch, 2023](#)).

During one of his daily press conferences, President López Obrador responded to the buoys:

“Well, look, we don’t have to do much, just tell our countrymen not to vote for the governor of Texas, nor for the legislators of the Republican Party who support these measures, which, even in passing, are very vulgar advertising actions, they do it to try to deceive the American people, the Texans ... Pure story, pure lie.” ([López Obrador, 2023d, para. 176](#))

Foreign Secretary Ebrard

Former Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, a recent presidential contender vying to replace AMLO in the upcoming 2024 presidential election ([Graham, 2023](#)), has a track record of making antagonistic comments about the United States. He often emphasizes the need to defend Mexico’s sovereignty against American interventionism, while engaging in behavior that advances the Mexican state’s agenda of election influence.

A few days before a press conference in which President López Obrador criticized Gov. Ron DeSantis, former Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard was in Tampa, Florida, for an event with farm workers affected by a new immigration bill signed into law by the governor. During this trip,

“Well, look, we don’t have to do much, just tell our countrymen not to vote for the governor of Texas, nor for the legislators of the Republican Party who support these measures.”

—Mexican President López Obrador

he announced he would be returning to Miami, Florida, in June to meet with government officials to speak against recent legislation being passed in the state of Florida ([Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2023, para. 1](#)).

The trip he announced, which never took place due to Ebrard resigning from office to pursue his party’s nomination for the Mexican presidency ([Graham, 2023](#)), is yet another example of the Mexican government’s negative disposition toward the United States and the work of its government to undermine American sovereignty exercised through the legislative process.

Ebrard and DeSantis

During his trip to Tampa ([Housman, 2023](#)), Ebrard spoke to a large crowd of Mexican nationals, Mexican Americans, and Hispanics, to make the case on American soil that Republicans, specifically Gov. Ron DeSantis, holds racist views, and that the “anti-immigrant” policies (such as E-Verify) of the party meant that Mexican Americans should not vote for the GOP. Explaining his intentions for the June 2023 trip, Ebrard is quoted as saying:

“If you allow the first domino to fall, then the 24 states that the Republicans govern will follow and it will be the theme of the campaign. ... I cannot intervene in the internal process of the United States, but I am going to speak with American citizens. The basis of Mr. DeSantis’s [policies] is racism, it is antagonistic to the Constitution of the United States, it is antagonistic to the Declaration of Independence itself.” ([Ruiz, 2023](#))

Although Ebrard said that he did not intend to intervene in the electoral processes of the United States, his rhetoric and the rhetoric of the Mexican president demonstrate that the Mexican government intends to directly lobby American voters. Given the “information campaign” that AMLO announced a few months before Ebrard’s visit to the United States, it would appear to a neutral observer that their efforts were coordinated.

Conclusion

The rhetoric and actions of Mexican government officials demonstrate their disregard for United States sovereignty and their desire to influence the outcome of American elections. The Mexican government has shown, at minimum, a *rhetorical* willingness to interfere in U.S. elections. Policymakers should be mindful of this threat, and emphasize to Mexican counterparts that *any* foreign interference in American elections is unacceptable. ★

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Before coming to the Foundation, Greyson was an intern with the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee under the leadership of then-Ranking Member Rep. Kevin Brady. Before that, he served the citizens of southeast Texas as an intern with former State Representative James White. All these experiences have solidified his dedication to public service and deepened his passion for politics and policy.

In his free time, Greyson likes to spend time with friends, enjoy the outdoors, and (politely) argue about politics, theology, and philosophy.

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