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## FEATURED Q&A

# What Accounts for AMLO's Popularity Among Mexicans?



Mexicans give President Andrés Manuel López Obrador low marks on his handling of the economy, and the country has been among the world's hardest-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, he has high overall approval ratings. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

**Q** Recent polls published in Mexican newspapers *Reforma* and *El Financiero* show President Andrés Manuel López Obrador with relatively high approval ratings of 61 percent and 64 percent, respectively. Yet, Mexicans give López Obrador much lower approval ratings, 30 percent and below, on his management of the economy and on security issues. Additionally, López Obrador's policies have long faced criticism from business groups, and the country has suffered the world's fourth-highest reported total of Covid-19 deaths. Why does López Obrador have such high overall approval ratings? Is his popularity likely to remain high despite Mexico's economic woes and its experience with the pandemic? How much political capital do his approval ratings give him, and what will he do with it?

**A** Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Political Science and LAPOP Lab Director at Vanderbilt University: "High presidential approval ratings provide power to accomplish agendas. Some might be tempted to credit President López Obrador's extensive set of social programs for his popularity. But pollster Alejandro Moreno has noted there is scant difference in approval ratings between social program beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries. Political leadership studies point to another factor: the charismatic bond. Charismatic bonds form when individuals confront severe challenges and, rather than succumbing to dismay, pin their hopes on a leader they exalt. López Obrador entered the presidency promising to fix acute economic, security and governance problems. The pandemic added another crisis. Political scientist Caitlin Andrews-Lee identifies

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Argentina's Lower House Approves Bill to Legalize Abortion

The lower chamber of Argentina's Congress approved a measure to legalize abortion, a win for President Alberto Fernández's government. The legislation now moves to the Senate.

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### BUSINESS

## Founder of Brazil's Banco Safra Dies at 82

Lebanese-Brazilian billionaire Joseph Safra, Brazil's richest person, died Thursday in São Paulo at age 82.

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### POLITICAL

## Cuba Plans to Unify Monetary System on Jan. 1

On New Year's Day, Cuba's peso will be fixed at 24 to the U.S. dollar, and the convertible peso will be dropped, President Miguel Díaz-Canel said in a nationally broadcast address.

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Díaz-Canel // File Photo: Cuban Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Argentina's Lower House Approves Bill to Legalize Abortion

In a marathon session that lasted more than 20 hours, lawmakers in Argentina's lower house on Thursday approved a bill that would legalize abortion, in a win for President Alberto Fernández's government, Clarín reported. With 131 votes in favor, 117 against and six abstentions, legislators approved the proposal, which would allow for voluntary abortions to be carried out up to the 14th week of pregnancy. Pro-choice demonstrators celebrated the news outside Argentina's congress building in Buenos Aires, many of them wearing green face masks, the color that symbolizes their movement, the Associated Press reported. Near the parliament building, opponents wore light blue and carried Argentina's flag, in protest of the bill. The government-sponsored legislation must now go to the Senate, where a vote is scheduled for Dec. 29. Fernández, who took office almost exactly a year ago, made legalizing abortion a cornerstone of his campaign. "[A] key issue of Fernández's first year in office revolves around the claim for legalizing abortion," Carolina Zaccato, a researcher at the Argentine Council for International Relations, told the Advisor in a Q&A published Thursday. "Indeed, his campaign promised to reinstall this demand on its platform, following the Senate's rejection of this measure in August 2018."

## Cuba Places About a Dozen Artists on House Arrest

Authorities in Cuba have placed about a dozen artists and activists on house arrest following a protest two weeks ago in which several hundred people staged a sit-in to demand greater freedom of expression, Reuters reported Thursday, citing dissidents and NetBlocks, an Internet freedom observatory. Cuba also spo-

radically blocked access to social media. The protest on Nov. 27 was staged outside Cuba's culture ministry and came amid a deep economic crisis in the communist island nation. The night of the protest, Cuban officials spoke with a group of protesters. However, the next day, the government began sustained rhetorical attacks against the demonstrators, accusing them of working with the United States to destabilize Cuba's government, the wire service reported. Members of the artists' collective, known as the San Isidro Movement, have used the Internet to film and broadcast encounters with police and also organize via social media, The New York Times reported. "What is happening in Cuba is unprecedented," José Miguel Vivanco, the director of the Americas program at Human Rights Watch, told the newspaper. "It's an awakening."

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Cuba Plans to Unify Monetary System on New Year's Day

Cuba will drop its convertible peso, unifying its dual currency system, on New Year's Day, President Miguel Díaz-Canel announced Thursday in a nationwide radio and television broadcast, the Associated Press reported. While the convertible peso is worth about one U.S. dollar, the peso will be fixed at an official exchange rate of 24 to the dollar. Unifying the currencies will allow Cuba "to go ahead with the transformation that we need to update our economic and social model," Díaz-Canel said in the speech, accompanied by former President Raúl Castro, Bloomberg News reported. In addition to dropping the convertible peso, Cuba's government is planning reforms that are to include modification of some subsidies and prices, Bloomberg News reported. Cuba's economy has been suffering amid a slump in tourism since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Díaz-Canel first announced plans to unify the currencies in October, saying more details would be provided later. The reforms

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Mexico's Senate Approves López Obrador's Limits on U.S. Agents

Mexico's Senate has approved President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's proposal to restrict the number of U.S. agents in Mexico and also limit their activities, the Associated Press reported Thursday. The bill, which will now go to the lower house, would remove U.S. agents' diplomatic immunity and requires all foreign agents to share all information gathered with Mexican authorities. Mike Vigil, the former chief of international operations at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, has warned of leaks that could compromise agents and informants as a result of the bill, the AP reported.

## Colombia's Central Bank Elects Villar as Chief

Colombia's central bank has elected Leonardo Villar as its next chief, Bloomberg News reported Thursday. Villar, 61, had been serving as the country's top representative at the International Monetary Fund in Washington. He was part of the team who helped design Colombia's response to the financial crisis and housing market crash in the late 1990s, according to the report. Villar is set to take over as central bank governor in January.

## Chile's Codelco Reaches Agreement With Union at Radomiro Tomic Mine

Chile's Codelco said Thursday that it had reached a contract deal with a union representing workers at its Radomiro Tomic mine, Reuters reported. The early agreement, which is to be in force for 36 months, does not affect regular salaries, but it does include bonuses amounting to approximately \$4,800 per worker. The deal "establishes variable incentives, which will be effective with the fulfillment of productivity and cost and contribution of resources to the state," the company said.

will devalue the peso for the first time since 1959. Pavel Vidal, a former analyst in the Cuban central bank's monetary policy division, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published Nov. 2 that the reform "stands out ... for its comprehensiveness." He added, "The devaluation of the national currency seeks to stimulate exports, the substitution of imports, the creation of new domestic value chains and the gradual closure of inefficient state companies."

## BUSINESS NEWS

# Billionaire Founder of Brazil's Banco Safra Dies at 82

Lebanese-Brazilian billionaire Joseph Safra, who founded Banco Safra and who was Brazil's richest person, died Thursday in São Paulo at age 82, The Wall Street Journal reported. Safra, who had an estimated net worth of \$23.2 billion, died of natural causes at Albert Einstein Hospital, the newspaper reported, citing Banco Safra. Safra and his brothers, Edmond and Moise, had built Banco Safra, the Safra National Bank of New York and the J. Safra Sarasin Bank in Switzerland. "He was a great banker, a true entrepreneur who built the Safra Group in the world, achieving success for his seriousness and business vision," Banco Safra said in a statement. "He was a great leader and very respected inside and outside the organization." Safra and his brothers founded the organization that later became the Safra Group in 1967 with the acquisition of a bank that was later named Banco Safra. The brothers made other acquisitions and opened new operations, growing the empire. Their holdings grew to include a brokerage, an asset-management unit and a mobile phone company that later failed. Banco Safra's statement announcing Safra's death referred to "Seu José," as his friends called him, as an "affable and perspicacious man who dedicated his life to his family, friends, business and social causes," the Financial Times reported.

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several factors that fuel crisis-formed charismatic bonds: outsized promises, theatrical displays and rhetoric that caters to people who have long felt they were dealt a terrible hand from a rigged deck of cards. López Obrador displays all these traits. His election brought about what another pollster, Pablo Páras, deems 'election euphoria': following López Obrador's election in 2018, surveys showed a surge in positive evaluations of the economy, security and more. My own research shows that charismatic bonds buoy such assessments and that, further, even as these opinions turn more sober, charisma protects the exalted leader. To admit the president is failing would rob individuals of the hope, purpose and efficacy they have found in his leadership. Charismatic leaders are often seen as protected by a Teflon-like shield. Social science research backs this up and explains why President López Obrador's approval ratings remain elevated despite all the country's woes."

**A** **Roberta Lajous, executive coordinator of CELAC and former Mexican ambassador to Spain:** "President Andrés Manuel López Obrador knows how to talk to the majority of Mexicans, as polls clearly show. Since his election in 2018, no other politician has been able to capture the national attention. As for the future, we do not know what a post-Covid world will be like for Mexico. It is not clear what is coming next: new work habits, consumer patterns and technology will accelerate change. Nevertheless, the tendency seems to go in the direction of the consolidation of large trade regions and greater government coordination or so-called smart 'industrial policy' to compete in world markets and avoid the risk of interrupted global supply chains of production. In spite of the uncertainty, Mexico has a historical opportunity to host near-shoring industries in North America. The appointment of Tatiana Clouthier as economy minister is a pragmatic approach that will benefit Mexico. Nev-

ertheless, it takes three to tango. Canada, Mexico and the United States have to make more efficient a continental market of nearly 500 million consumers and produce goods and services more competitive in the world stage. Governments will have to coordinate 'intelligent' borders and other regulations to make it happen. Will Biden take the lead? López Obrador and Trudeau are already committed to the USMCA trade agreement. The new administration in Washington will have to engage in aligning incentives to have a more productive region."

**A** **Andrés Rozental, member of the Advisor board, president of Rozental & Asociados in Mexico City and senior policy advisor at Chatham House:** "One of the mysteries surrounding recent polling on López Obrador's popularity is the considerable gap between his personal approval ratings and those of his government in addressing the critical issues of the pandemic, the economy and

“One explanation is that those Mexicans who voted for AMLO in 2018 still want to give him the benefit of the doubt...”

— Andrés Rozental

public safety. While AMLO continues to enjoy support not unlike that of his predecessors at the two-year mark of their administrations, there is growing popular dissatisfaction with the way his government is handling the health crisis, rising homicide rates and the plummeting economy. One explanation is that those Mexicans who voted for AMLO in 2018 still want to give him the benefit of the doubt and believe his constant rhetoric regarding the fight against corruption and the mess that previous 'neoliberal' leaders left the country in. Others support his very public

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social handouts to disadvantaged parts of the population, erroneously believing that he has innovated in directing financial resources to the aged, the poor and the unemployed youth. As long as Mexico lacks a credible, united opposition to the current populist government, there won't be much of an alternative to AMLO or his Morena movement going into the 2021 midterm congressional and state elections. Many still don't believe that, after the midpoint of his six-year term, President López Obrador plans to call for a permanent reversal of the reforms enacted during the Peña Nieto government, or that he wants a constitutional convention to rewrite Mexico's 1917 constitution more to his ideological liking, both of which he has promised to do."

**A** **Gabriela Jiménez, director of institutional relations at Grupo Marhnos in Mexico City:** "One should remember that people who voted for President López Obrador were tired of the 'system,' they were tired of corruption, and they wanted a change. Now they have a president who is loyal to his word and does what he promised during his campaign (for example, canceling the new airport). He keeps the same rhetoric and narrative every morning at his daily press conference. He talks to his people, and he knows exactly what they need to hear. Mexican presidents used to be like gods—unreachable. Now they have a president with very low-profile security, who travels on commercial airlines and is very close to his public. All of these symbols give him a high approval rating. For a while, it will remain high because his public today has very little—or almost nothing—to gain or lose with these variations in the economy or the pandemic. They have already suffered for a long time. The reason for López Obrador's popularity is based on different para-

digms. AMLO is his own political capital. The president of Mexico has enormous power, which allows him to do what he wants. He will use it to continue with his projects and some political reforms."

**A** **James Bosworth, author of the Latin America Risk Report:** "López Obrador has spent his first two years in government successfully running against the legacy of his two predecessors. Former President Enrique Peña Nieto has been caricatured (with some merit) as someone who ran a government that was corrupt, incompetent and out of touch with the concerns of the Mexican population. AMLO, for all his failings, appears to most citizens to be very engaged in the day-to-day issues that affect the general population. A majority of Mexicans trust that AMLO is honest. The president's anti-corruption rhetoric matches the anger that many Mexican citizens feel about the corruption in their country. While AMLO's austerity has definitely worsened the country's recession this year, various cash transfer programs supported by his government have helped him retain support among his base. In spite of two years in power and controlling most of the levers of government, AMLO continues to portray himself as an outsider who is fighting the elite and special interests in the country, including anyone who dares to criticize him. That populist message still resonates. AMLO's divided opposition has been unable to find a message that helps voters understand that the president is in charge and should be accountable for the failings on security, the pandemic and the economy."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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