

# Political Violence in Mexico's 2024 Elections

## I. Past and Future

March 2024



Photo Courtesy of: My-Images Micha / Shutterstock



Wilson  
Center



Mexico  
Institute

# Political Violence in Mexico's 2024 Elections

## Past and Future

By María Calderón

### Executive Summary

As Mexico approaches its largest and most significant elections in its recent history, it also faces a concerning and often overlooked phenomenon that will influence the outcome of the elections: political violence. This complex problem impacts the very foundations of Mexican democracy.

From 2018 to March 2024, [1709 murders, assassinations, attacks, and threats have been registered in Mexico against people working in politics and government.](#)

Political violence goes well beyond criminal organizations and cartel dynamics; it results from high levels of impunity, rearrangements between criminal groups, and a lack of rule of law and protection for politicians and political candidates. With the small willingness of the federal government to handle the issue and a divided National Electoral Institute (INE) and Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary (TEPJF), a careful assessment of how to address the problem is necessary.

With [experts arguing](#) that [the 2024 elections will be the most violent Mexico has ever seen](#), more attention needs to be given to this topic. Too much is at stake in Mexico, starting with Mexican lives. Normalizing political violence is in no one's interest. Politicians, government officials, law enforcement, civil society, and the international community must pay attention.

According to data from the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), [Mexico is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a local politician.](#) Of the reported incidents in 2022, 62% were intentional [attacks against government officials](#), with some ending in death by way of shootings or beatings. The rest of the attacks were categorized as non-direct, which included riots and internet attacks. This level of violence places Mexico above the global average of intentional attacks against government officials.

Political [violence](#) includes violence with a [political purpose](#) or motivation that creates conflict over political competition and government legitimacy by removing or cowering political dissent. Governments and political parties use it to remain in power or harm their adversaries, while [criminal groups](#) use it to intimidate their opponents or garner support for their allied politicians. The logic and nature of political violence depend on the perpetrator and its objectives.

Killing a political candidate or an elected or acting public official is just the tip of the iceberg. Political violence, which stretches beyond [electoral cycles](#), is composed of a wide range of acts, including kidnappings, attacks, and injuries with firearms, personal and family member assaults, intimidation, threats, interception of private communications, and cyberbullying, among others.

## I. Political Violence in Mexico

A recent and [dramatic surge in political violence in Mexico](#) is challenging common understandings of criminal groups, drawing attention to the political disputes and power dynamics that have been contributing to broader violent trends in Mexico. This premise begs the question: Is political violence a consequence of general violence in Mexico? Or, on the contrary, should these types of violence be considered as separate from one another?

When it comes to understanding the nature of political violence in Mexico, one must first acknowledge the ever-evolving criminal dynamics of the last few decades, especially those relating to drug cartels. During the previous two decades, there has been a significant fragmentation of Mexican cartels that began with President Felipe Calderón's war on drugs (2006-2012). Consequently, the diversification of crime and the violent clashes of cartels have caused the disruption and formation of [political allegiances](#).

The struggle to lower Mexico's chronically high levels of violence is too often cast as a struggle between state authorities and [criminal groups](#). Currently, Mexico has [more than 70 active armed groups](#), some of which control large swaths of territory. Yet what enables these groups to prosper is often their ability to strike deals with state officials, which affords them impunity and the possibility of harnessing state power for illicit means. It is worth highlighting the significant detriment that impunity causes to the system. Even if there is no deal between criminals and the state, making a case and getting a conviction is quite challenging. Electoral violence also includes politicians and campaigners using [non-partisan criminal group forces](#) to threaten or attack their political opponents or settle disputes. This phenomenon has rarely been prosecuted.

[Studies](#) from Scielo and the International Crisis Group show that the [killings of candidates are closely related to the activities of criminal groups](#). Therefore, the greater the presence of criminal organizations in an area, the greater the probability that politically motivated murders will occur. Criminal organizations mainly attack and threaten politicians who ["are politically and militarily unprotected by the central authorities."](#) Not surprisingly, candidates are more likely to be killed in an area with the presence of criminal activities than in an area with electoral competition.

However, the absence of a comprehensive legal definition and framework for this type of violence in Mexico makes it difficult to address the growing problem. The legal void goes hand in hand with the [country's dramatically high impunity rate](#). This demonstrates how

political violence in Mexico is primarily the product of incentives to compete among criminal organizations and a [weak rule of law and legal framework](#).

As state and municipal elections have been gradually adjusted to match federal elections, there has been more visibility on [local political violence](#). The breeding of organizations that have become highly violent and flexible impacted the geographic location of [politically motivated assassinations](#).

The distribution of political violence is not uniform throughout the country; most of it is clustered in the Southern and Central Western regions of Mexico. In some states, such as Michoacán, Guanajuato, Guerrero, and Veracruz, there is a direct correlation between this type of violence and the violence connected to criminal organizations. However, this correlation is not seen across the whole country since states like Oaxaca and Chiapas, while reporting some of the highest levels of political violence, have relatively lower events linked to organized crime. One explanation is that certain criminal groups in some [regions of Mexico](#) wield so much power that coercion is no longer necessary.

The state of Baja California portrays the opposite case. Criminal groups have engaged in territorial disputes to control illegal markets, resulting in one of the highest levels of political violence in the country. However, data on [political violence is not correlated with the level of general violence](#) experienced in the state. Another case showing a similar pattern is the state of Nuevo Leon, where regardless of the high incidence of criminal groups, lower cases of political violence are registered, even during electoral periods.

The diverse patterns in the relationship between criminality and political violence show how the phenomenon of political violence in Mexico is heterogeneous and local.

Due to the underlying [mechanisms of crime](#), attributing political violence in Mexico to a specific group and identifying a single perpetrator is challenging. However, [organized crime is widely recognized as perpetrating a significant share of the political violence](#) occurring throughout the country.

## II. Political Violence in Mexico's Recent Elections

Mexico has seen a [rapid surge in political violence](#) in the last four election cycles. Although the level of violence seems to [fluctuate according to each electoral cycle](#), on average, violence is higher in an election year.

Threats faced by political actors are [under-reported](#) despite several initiatives to improve protection mechanisms. Thus, the violence and psychological pressure exerted on candidates and government officials is more significant than the data shows.

Since 2000 and up to 2022, 1,271 [politicians have been murdered throughout Mexico](#), including 144 aspiring candidates, pre-candidates, and nominees for elected positions. Of

these, 81% sought municipal posts (mayorships, councils, and unions), 14% competed for federal congress and governorships, and the remaining 6% for a national deputy position.

Since 2004, the [systematic targeting of local officials](#) has increased steadily. Former local politicians are almost twice as likely to be killed as incumbent ones to keep them silent or retaliate against those with cartel connections. The smaller the municipality, the more danger posed to local mayors: 53% of the killings occurred in towns with less than 20,000 residents.

From 2008 to 2015, 107 [violent acts against electoral authorities and campaigning candidates](#) were registered, with the [2015 electoral year](#) alone accounting for 70 attacks that resulted in 19 killings throughout nine states. Three violent acts were mainly registered: ballot box robbery (67), kidnapping (10), and assassination of candidates (30). Surprisingly, the 2015 midterm Election Day was generally peaceful, despite violence in Oaxaca and Guerrero that prevented the installation of 185 [polling places](#) and the suspension of voting in 444 ballot boxes.

Between 2018 and 2022, 1,000 events that exclusively targeted local officials were reported, which showed that such a period was [the most violent](#) since the monitoring of Mexico's political violence started in 2000. In 2018, reports showed 774 criminal acts against politicians and candidates, with 152 fatalities, of which 48 were aspiring or selected candidates. History repeated itself and intensified three years later in the 2021 elections. With [1,066 attacks on politicians](#) (an increase of 38% compared to 2018), which included 102 victims of intentional homicide, 36 of them aspiring or selected candidates, [local candidates were disproportionately affected](#). When comparing these figures with all other Mexican elections since 2000, the 2021 electoral cycle experienced the second-highest number of politically linked killings ever, only falling behind the 2018 electoral process.

Regarding election day, the 2018 elections registered a [spike in violent attacks, particularly those targeting electoral staff and polling stations](#). Following the pattern, the 2021 Election Day recorded the highest number of violence targeted at electoral officials, where armed men and mobs stormed polling stations while robbing and destroying ballot boxes. A scandalous scene was witnessed in the northern city of Tijuana, where several human heads were thrown into voting stations.

Surprisingly, in 2018, a single act of violence against a political campaign or government authority correlated to a [1% drop in turnout in municipal elections and 2% in federal elections](#). Additionally, criminal violence dramatically reduces citizens' willingness to accept an invitation to serve as poll volunteers on election day. Mexico's electoral system relies on around 1 million citizens convened and trained to manage booths and count votes in national elections. Elections are often decided with narrow margins, and the cumulative effect of repeated attacks throughout the country can be disastrous.

Political violence in Mexico occurs not only during electoral cycles. Officials, especially local ones, continue to be [targeted even after elections](#). Although political violence dropped after

the 2018 and 2021 electoral years, events were reported during 2019 and 2022. Criminal and political rivalries persist even after regional and local rearrangements.

The 2021 elections were a testament to the pervasiveness of political violence and insecurity in the country, which was followed by [condemnation from both domestic and international human rights organizations](#). Mexico's National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH) called out the threat to citizens' democratic rights and urged the federal government to investigate assaults against candidates. Two days after the election, a group of human rights experts from the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS) condemned the attacks and demanded that authorities ensure future elections would occur under safer conditions.

### III. 2024 Outlook and Challenges in Political Violence

The June [2024 elections are likely to exacerbate tensions](#) and heighten the risks of violence. Local officials and candidates are especially at risk, and competition to secure electoral seats might worsen the threat. With 20,367 positions up for election (19,379 local), more than 50,000 candidates will be running for various positions. Additionally, since local presidencies and municipal offices will be elected in 30 out of 32 states, the federal government should prioritize local protection. Underestimating local political violence could prove a tragic mistake.

[Experts](#) such as Armando Vargas, from Integralia's Political Risk Unit, and Dr. Sandra Ley, assistant professor at the Political Studies Division at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE), argue [that the 2024 elections will have the most politically motivated assassinations and aggressions](#). According to studies from Integralia Consultores and Data Cívica (Votar entre Balas), [victims of electoral political violence increased by 235.7% from 2018 to 2023](#). Reports show that [in 2023, one year before Election Day, 574 victims of political violence had already been registered](#). Alarming, in the first five weeks of 2024, 21 events were recorded, associated with 32 victims; 10 of them were killed. So far, [until March 8th 2024, there have been at least 48 murders](#) of political candidates in the current electoral process.

Although President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) has publicly stated that he will ensure no impunity in any case of political violence and candidate protection if required, reality proves otherwise. The vast majority of politically charged murders have not been prosecuted, and impunity remains the order of the day. In March 2024, when [confronted by the Office in Mexico of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR) to protect candidates in the electoral context, López Obrador answered that the claims were completely biased and designed to attack him and give Mexico a bad reputation.

The INE, Mexico's autonomous body that oversees the organization and regulation of elections, has generally been focused on political violence experienced by women, which has produced a gap in the response, study, and analysis of political violence as a whole. Although it is essential to make a distinction that INE is not responsible for guaranteeing the security

of the participants in the elections, as it relies on the public security forces, it does play a coordinating and leadership role.<sup>1</sup>

In January 2024, the INE unanimously approved the [Fund to Support Electoral Observation](#) to strengthen citizen confidence and participation in the democratic and political life of the country. With this fund, INE seeks to provide technical and financial assistance to Mexican civil society organizations and academic institutions interested in carrying out electoral observation activities and strengthening the credibility and legitimacy of elections. Some of the topics for observation are election organization, democratic culture, gender equality and inclusion, accountability, transparency, coordination of the National Electoral System, and strategies for disinformation, among others. No mention of political violence whatsoever.

With the resources for the electoral fund, [Mexico will receive the Organization of American States \(OAS\)](#), —who will send the largest delegation ever sent in the history of elections in Mexico—, a mission from Inter-American Union of Electoral Organizations (UNIORE) and a group of women from international electoral bodies that promote a gender perspective.

On the other hand, in December 2023, the federal government, the attorney general's office (FGR), and INE installed the [Inter-Institutional Security Committee to protect the 2023-2024 electoral process](#) to identify and combat risk factors to assure a democratic governance environment.

As one of the results of such efforts, in February 2024, the [INE presented the protection plan that the State security cabinet will provide to candidates](#) for the nine governorships, the Chamber of Deputies, and the Senate. There are three criteria (high, medium, and low) for ensuring security for candidates. Additionally, a risk analysis prepared by the National Guard will be considered, analyzing the incidence of crime per state and personal threats received and/or reported. For Senate and Chamber of Deputies candidates, security will only be provided to those determined to face high risk and who have previously received and reported threats. Fewer government security units will be offered for the medium and low threat levels. As of March 6, 2024, 23 candidates have already requested protection under the plan.

In March 2024, the INE assured that [the security plan had been intensified in all states](#) to maintain a peaceful environment in the electoral process, but with differentiated measures in four states (San Luis Potosí, Puebla, Chihuahua, and Durango), where there is more direct coordination between the electoral district boards and the security elements.

Members of the opposition parties (PRI-PAN-PRD) viewed the protection plan as a good first step to protect candidates at risk but insufficient since more law enforcement presence is needed in the streets, especially on Election Day. In addition, they criticized the failure to

---

<sup>1</sup> Mexico's 2024 Budget Plan includes a [substantive cut of more than 5 billion pesos \(294 million USD\) to INE's budget](#), 13.2% lower than what INE requested. INE must, therefore, plan and implement internal restructuring and spending cuts to successfully oversee the federal, state, and municipal 2024 elections. Similarly, [the Electoral Tribunal \(TEPJF\) budget was reduced substantially by 20%](#), equivalent to 768 million pesos (45 million USD).

prevent the kidnapping of opposition party polling station representatives, as occurred in the 2018 election. Finally, the plan does not cover other crucial electoral moments, such as the nomination of candidates, intimidation of officials before Electoral Day, stealing of voting material, and threats against losing candidates for them not to challenge the results.

Furthermore, local candidates have been set aside, who are the most vulnerable to attacks and mostly lack the necessary protections. Critics believe that the measures proposed by the INE are insufficient and lack a deep understanding of the dynamics of organized crime in the electoral context. Armando Vargas from Integralia Consultores [identified two major flaws](#): one technical and the other conceptual. "From a technical perspective, the risk levels will be defined based on the fluctuation of crime incidence, which is an extremely misleading indicator, not only because of the problems of under-recording and inconsistency that it has but because, even if it is very solid and reliable, it doesn't necessarily reflect the dynamics of organized crime. The second problem, which is one of conception, is even more serious (...) the underlying problem is not political violence, but the intervention of crime in the elections."

Others also argue that [the government has been indifferent and unwilling to confront and take responsibility](#) for the deterioration of the political climate and the rule of law, which has directly led to the undermining of civil and political rights. "[One of the central concerns is the lack of capacity on the part of both federal and electoral authorities and political parties to address the issue.](#) To date, electoral authorities, political parties, security institutions, and judicial courts do not have the capacity to avoid this problem. (The incidence of organized crime) has been a consequence of political and institutional abandonment decades ago (...) which will be corrected in the long term if actions begin now."

What is at stake is the safety of 20,367 candidates, 1.5 million citizens summoned as poll staff on Election Day, and voters who live in dangerous areas of Mexico or states where the government has lost control or access (currently, the electoral roll is made up of around 100 million Mexicans). For Mexico to have a successful and just election, it must guarantee the safety and freedom of citizens to exercise their political rights.





Unless Mexico takes its commitment to confront political violence seriously and puts in place mechanisms to prevent, investigate, and sanction attacks on candidates and other politically active persons, political violence will continue to be used as a tool to bend and impact elections, dealing yet [one more blow to Mexican democracy](#).





Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

## The Wilson Center

 [wilsoncenter.org](https://wilsoncenter.org)  
 [woodrowwilsoncenter](https://www.facebook.com/woodrowwilsoncenter)  
 [@thewilsoncenter](https://twitter.com/thewilsoncenter)  
 202.691.4000

## The Mexico Institute

 [wilsoncenter.org/mexico-institute](https://wilsoncenter.org/mexico-institute)  
 [facebook.com/mexicoinstitute](https://www.facebook.com/mexicoinstitute)  
 [@mexicoinstitute](https://twitter.com/mexicoinstitute)  
 [@mexicoinstitute](https://www.instagram.com/mexicoinstitute)  
 [wilson-center-mexico-institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/wilson-center-mexico-institute)

© 2024, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars