

## **The Politics of Fiscal Federalism of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018 -2024) in Mexico**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The so long expected and desired transition of Mexico to democracy could end in a tragic return to authoritarianism, since there are political, economic and social factors that are pushing towards this outcome and obstructing the democratic development of this country. First and foremost, the lack of social and economic development of Mexico has become a major obstacle for its process of democratisation and, at the same time, has stimulated a fertile ground for demagoguery practices in this country.

On the other hand, structural problems, such as corruption, scholar backwardness and public debt not only were not reduced, but they worsened during the *sexenio* of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012 – 2018). On the contrary, lack of accountability, of transparency and of responsiveness of political authorities, as well as lack of quality inclusion in political decision-making, persist in the *sexenio* of AMLO (2018 – 2024).

In addition to this, the middle class in Mexico has not improved its standards of living, and the wealth of the nation is increasingly concentrated in specific sectors (political and financial) of Mexican society and in multinational companies, all of which could jeopardize the necessary social and economic conditions to support a democratic regime in Mexico. To the contrary, Mexican people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to patronizing and clientelistic strategies of voting behaviour.

#### **AMLO and the Transition of Mexico to Democracy**

Despite of his democratic triumph in the last federal elections, it gives the impression that, rather than sharpening the transition of Mexico to democracy, AMLO is halting this process

through his political, economic and social policies, as well as through his social communication strategies (apparently incoherent), which seem to be oriented to a consistent political goal: The perpetuation in power of MORENA party at the federal level.

In fact, the main argument of this paper is that AMLO's economic, social and political policies are aimed at building an authoritarian *populist* regime in Mexico, which could eventually frustrate the transition of this country to democracy, by means of undermining the core principles of this form of government (equality and freedom), precisely through these policies and strategies.

Moreover, it does not appear to one that Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) will respect, even within his own party, the principle of re-election of officials in the legislative power, at the national and sub-national level, to encourage their top – down accountability before their respective electorates.

Furthermore, it gives the impression that the release of new economic, political and social policies, in the 'Era' of López Obrador, could make more difficult the fair competition between political contenders, both at the national and sub – national level in Mexico.

For all these reasons, the long transition of Mexico to democracy, which arguably started in the year of 1968, could be frustrated in the present *sexenio*. Especially if we take into account that AMLO and the MORENA party have not shown interest in substantially reforming the Mexican political system to encourage better participative, accountable and deliberative practices, both at the institutional level and in the public sphere.

### **AMLO and The 'Fourth Transformation' of Mexico**

During his presidential campaign, AMLO promoted the 'Fourth Transformation' of Mexico in the public sphere, which caused wide expectation, in many Mexican people, in terms of its content, especially because AMLO represented the 'hope' of these people to achieve a Mexico free from corruption and economic crisis.

After six months of government, the content of this ‘Fourth Transformation’ of Mexico still remains vague and obscure: It has not been completely stated what this fourth transformation implies in order to achieve the complete development of Mexico.

It is difficult to be optimistic about this ‘Transformation’ notwithstanding, because the three former revolutions that Mexico has experienced all through its history (Independence, Reformation and the Mexican Revolution), despite of seeking to enhance the democratic form of government in this country, in the end, after their completion, extractive political practices remained, to such an extent, that Mexico was considered, at certain point last century, as a paradigm of the ‘Perfect Dictatorship’.

It conveys the impression that it could be the same story for this ‘Fourth Transformation’ of Mexico, since the President has not issued, so far, a specific agenda of legal reforms aimed at building more *inclusive* economic and political institutions, which would naturally encourage the democratic form of government in this country.

### **The Transformation of Social Policy in the Age of AMLO**

On the contrary, we are witnessing a substantial transformation of social policies in Mexico, which could impact seriously the democratic development of this country, because these policies arguably aim at profiting politically from vulnerable people, in order to condition their electoral behaviour, through the manipulation of their economic and social expectations.

Indeed, the appointment of the famous *Super Delegados* or *Coordinadores Estatales de Desarrollo* (State Coordinators of Development) represents the implementation of a central strategy in order to build a ‘populist’ regime in Mexico, because they will widen the clientelistic networks of AMLO and will target strategically public resources in order to impact decisively the outcome of electoral processes.

Officially speaking, the main functions of these ‘*Super Delegados*’ are to coordinate, implement and supervise the delivery of social programmes to vulnerable people across Mexico. In addition, they are also in charge of making up the list of potential beneficiaries of these programmes and of completing the relative census for their distribution.

As we can notice, these functionaries constitute the central piece of a well-planned strategy, of the federal government, in order to achieve its electoral goals: To obtain that vulnerable people, across the country, become electoral soldiers of the political regime, once they receive, in a regular basis, these social programmes.

In this way, the new rules of fiscal federalism, designed by AMLO, especially those related with the allocation and distribution of social programmes, could have a long term impact on the authoritarian nature of the Mexican political regime, because they could work as an effective tool to manipulate the electoral decision-making of many Mexican poor people across this country.

This new fiscal federalism proves that, the process of democratisation of Mexico, cannot make positive progress if taking place within a context of widespread inequality and poverty, because this context facilitates the electoral manipulation of vulnerable people, who cannot choose, for quality reasons, their political representatives.

Moreover, what is more worrying, is that this new fiscal federalism of AMLO, constitutes a smart move towards centralisation of economic and political power, which goes against the healthy process of democratisation in Mexico. It aims at controlling governors and municipal presidents alike, especially those coming from opposition parties, who will be constrained in using public resources to deliver social welfare.

On the other hand, in a context of economic crisis and of transformation of social policies, Mexican people will experience more difficulty in challenging its current political regime, since they will lack enough economic and human resources to achieve this goal, and because the main resources poor people will obtain to survive, will also come from this regime.

### **Social Policy and Electoral Processes in Mexico**

One of the most important strategic tools for governments to remain in power is the design of social policy. Indeed, social policy in Mexico is often designed to impact positively (in favour of the relative governments) on the outcome of electoral processes. However, one can

identify the spirit of this specific strategy, by analysing the goals of social policy, as well as the specific rules of distribution of social programmes.

It is important to take into account that ‘vote buying’ practices in Mexico do not usually take place during an electoral process, rather, they often take place several months before this process, through the delivery of institutionalized social programmes. On the other hand, these social programmes are usually designed to make vulnerable people dependent on government aid, rather than aimed at making them eventually competent to perform a job that may allow them to earn their own living.

This is especially true if we take into account that, the Mexican economic and social context, is not favourable for entrepreneurship and innovation.

### **AMLO’s Social Policy as Major of Mexico City (2000 – 2006)**

López Obrador’s performance as Major of Mexico City, between 2000 – 2006, could be quite revealing of his current government’s populist strategy and style of government: AMLO was the first governor of Mexico City that started delivering social programmes for vulnerable groups of society, such as the elderly and single mothers. As consequence of this carefully planned social policy, López Obrador’s popularity skyrocketed in Mexico City and all through the country.

It was always clear for AMLO that, his discourse and social policy, should be targeted to the outcast, the marginalized and the most vulnerable sectors of Mexican society, should he wanted to increase his chances of advancing his political career and become President of Mexico.

Moreover, AMLO’s populist strategies (social policies) and style of government (populist discourse) became quite appealing to Mexican people, as consequence of the corruption, opacity and extractive style of government of the PRI, and as result of the poor performance of this party in terms of economic and social development.

Indeed, in the last *sexenio* (2012 -2018), scandals of corruption of PRI governors and of the Mexican President, polarised the Mexican electorate, to such an extent, that they

increasingly become identified with AMLO's populist discourse (style of government) and social policy (populist strategy), in order to overcome the social and economic inequalities that widened during EPN's period of government.

In fact, both his populist discourse (style of government) and social policies (populist strategy) strengthen him so much nowadays that they neutralize, in the public sphere, any serious accusation of corruption of his government.

The purpose of the present research is to identify the rationale, strategy and goals, behind the design of the distributive rules of the new social programmes, implemented by AMLO, across the country, and describe the extent to which the rules of fiscal federalism will change in order to achieve the social policy and electoral goals of AMLO.

## **RELATED LITERATURE**

### **The Origins of the Concepts of Demagoguery and Populism.**

Since ancient Greek times, political philosophers, like Aristotle, have claimed that, to last, the democratic form of government requires the substantial equality and freedom of the people. Nevertheless, in accordance with this philosopher, the authentic freedom of the people is achieved through the practice of civic virtue, since political freedom was conceived, by this philosopher, as *self - mastery*.

Thus, from this classical perspective, the practice of civic virtue becomes essential to make democracy work, because it reinforces the core principles of this form of government: Political freedom, in the first place, and political equality, as consequence of enhancing this kind of freedom.

Moreover, in accordance with Aristotle and other classic philosophers, the practice of civic virtue impacts on the quality of the law-making process, since, through civic virtue, this process is guided by the *jurisprudencia* (justice and prudence) of lawmakers, and leads to the achievement of the common good and of the happiness of the community.

For this reason, Aristotle argues that the right criterion to distinguish a democratic form of government from its corrupted version (demagoguery), is the practice of *justice* in the law-making process of the respective political community. This affirmation implies that democracy becomes corrupted when its practices are not adjusted to an *upright* positive law, which, in a final analysis, could prevent people to behave capriciously and make unfair decisions that may affect the legitimate rights of minorities.

In other words, in accordance with Aristotle, demagoguery appears whenever people override the virtue of *justice* in the political decision-making process. This situation usually takes place when a demagogue runs the people's minds to make a specific decision guided by emotions (anger, fear, resentment, hatred, etc...) rather than by a practical *right* reason, which derives from the practice of the moral virtue of prudence.

Based on this conceptual framework, the present paper argues that a *populist* regime could be the contemporary expression of what Aristotle called, in his time, demagoguery, since a *populist* leader usually runs the emotions of the most vulnerable people in society to achieve his own strategic political goals.

Furthermore, *populist* leaders generally make use of the vulnerable conditions of poor people to induce them to support unwise or unfair political decisions for the community, which, once made, undermine seriously their substantial freedom and equality, thus a democratic form of government in their political community.

### **The Quality of Democracy in Mexico**

If *populism* constitutes the contemporary version of demagoguery, it thus entails the undermining of the *quality* of democracy of the respective State. Therefore, the research on *populism* is naturally linked to the study of the quality of contemporary democracies across the globe, especially, because *populism* (apparently) respects core principles of democracy, such as general elections, citizen participation in political decision-making processes or in political debate, or in the design of social policies.

On top of that, in this type of regime, people become increasingly impoverished, manipulated, constrained and limited in their political contestation, and they are induced to make certain political decisions that support the strategic goals of the respective demagogue.

For all these circumstances, many contemporary scholars work on measuring the quality of democracy in many countries, in order to define accurately the nature of political regimes across the globe. This endeavour is justified because, as John Gerring (2014) asserts, democracy is one of those research areas that should be profoundly studied from a descriptive perspective, since this approach can help us to acquire the right criteria to fairly judge the fulfilment, by a political regime, of the requisites to be considered democratic or not.

One of the most serious efforts to make this fair assessment, so far, has been made by Diamond and Morlino (2004), who proposed a comprehensive index, composed of eight dimensions, to assess the extent to which democratic principles are fulfilled by political regimes across the globe: a) Rule of law, b) electoral competition, c) citizen participation, d) horizontal accountability, e) top - down accountability, f) equality, g) freedom and h) responsiveness.

In accordance with the index proposed by Diamond and Morlino (2004), some scholars claim that Mexico has recently experienced a serious setback in the performance of some of the dimensions, used by these authors, to measure democracy.

For example, in terms of a fair electoral competition at the national or subnational levels, or in terms of horizontal accountability, at the national and state levels, of the executive, legislative and judicial powers; or in terms of the fair access of opposition parties and independent nominees to the mass media, or in terms of the responsiveness of the Mexican government to citizens' requests or demands.

Perhaps the reversal in *horizontal accountability* could be the most serious setback in the quality of Mexican democracy, because the outcome of the last federal elections in 2018 limited the capability of the Mexican Congress of duly punishing the mismanagement of public resources by the Federal Executive Power, due to the absolute majority obtained by the MORENA coalition in this Congress, which arguably obstructs the possibility of carrying out serious inquiry processes on any mismanagement.

In addition to this circumstance, the capacity of MORENA to negotiate the appointments of the Mexican President, for the federal public administration, increased, due to the partition of opposition parties, which makes more difficult to form an opposition block against MORENA.

Thus, the research question of the present paper is: Could the political, economic and social policies of AMLO, make better sense to us, if we approach them through the lenses of the construction of a ‘populist’ authoritarian regime in the long run?

The argument of this paper is that AMLO and MORENA intend to reconstruct an authoritarian *populist* regime in Mexico, through social and economic policies, in order to co opt a great part of Mexican society, by means of clientelism and patronage of the poor and the middle class; and through the expansion of economic inequalities and political asymmetries in Mexico.

### **Comparative Politics of Fiscal Federalism**

The politics of fiscal federalism has become a crucial area of research for those scholars who seek to comprehend the dynamics, relationship and distribution of power, between states’ and national governments, in federal countries. Arguably, the rules of distribution, of federal public resources to states, are designed to impact the electoral competition in these states.

So scholars have intended to identify the specific political strategies, followed by national governments, in the distribution of public resources to the states, and measure their impact on electoral outcomes at the state level in the relative countries.

Research on the politics of fiscal federalism has expanded recently worldwide, although most of it has focused on particular case studies and there has been little attempt to carry out a comparative analysis of this politics. From Russia to the USA, passing Brasil, India, Canadá, Mexico and other federal countries in the world, scholars have researched the politics behind the distribution of federal resources to the states, in such countries.

Moreover, scholars have developed insightful theories to explain in each case study the political considerations behind federal disbursements. For example, John Ishiyama

(2010) has classified these theories in three groups: the *swing theory*, the *reward theory*, and the *appeasement theory*.

Ishiyama (2010) considers that the *swing theories* can explain satisfactorily federal disbursements in competitive party systems, which may be based either on single member district or on proportional representation electoral system, whereas the *reward theories* can explain also satisfactorily federal disbursements in hegemonic party systems where the ruling party intends to deter the opposition to win elections, such as in the case of Mexico before the defeat of the post-revolutionary regime in 2000, and finally the *appeasement theories* can explain satisfactorily these disbursements in countries that experience separatist efforts of ethnic regions, such as Russia, in order to curb efficiently such efforts.

As we can notice, according to John Ishiyama, the main explanatory (or independent) variables in each type of theory vary and, in this way, the independent variables in the *swing theory* seem to be the existence of a competitive party system and the particular arrangement of the electoral system in the relative country that encourages strong party competition, since these variables explain us better the rationale behind the distribution of federal disbursements in this kind of political context.

The fact is that the swing theory has been generated by scholars who have carried out case studies of fiscal federalism in countries that experience the presence of strong party competition.

On the other hand, Dixit and Londregon (1996: 1132) carried out a comparative study of fiscal federalism across countries that possess competitive party systems and argued that if in these countries political parties are equally effective in delivering transfers to any group of society, the outcome of these transfers tend to conform to the “swing voter” theory.

Conversely, Dahlberg and Johansson (2002: 27) found in Sweden (country that possesses a central parliamentary system of government along with a pluri party system) tactical motives behind the distribution of grants from central to lower level of governments, they specially found that incumbent Swedish parties transfer money to regions where there are many swing voters.

To the contrary, David Denmark (2000: 896) found that the distribution of grants by the Australian parliamentary government was dominated by partisan and marginal seats priorities. Denmark discovered in his research the tactical apportioning of discretionary

funding by Australian parties in order to pursue electoral victories in their most marginal seats.

In other words, he proved the validity of the swing theory in order to explain the politics of federal disbursements in Australia. Finally, Anne Case (2001: 405) discovered in Albania the meaningful impact of political competition on block grants from federal to sub-federal levels of government and also that income redistribution is mainly determined by the political agendas of central decision-makers. This particular behavior suggests a swing voter strategy in the allocation of these grants by the Albanian federal government.

On the other hand, the main explanatory variables of the *reward theories* seem to be 1) the existence of a hegemonic party system and 2) the prevalence of a single member district in detriment of a proportional representation electoral system in the relative country, which encourage a context that provide incentives to hegemonic regimes to allocate resources in order to deter the entrance of the opposition into power.

The work of Beatriz Magaloni (2006) on post-revolutionary Mexico contributes substantively to the generation of this particular theory. Magaloni (2006) argues that autocratic regimes (such as post-revolutionary Mexico before the year 2000) above all look for deterring both potential opponents in the electoral arena and vote defection from electoral 'clients'.

Furthermore, Magaloni (2006) affirms that autocratic regimes constantly have recourse to all kinds of clientelistic and repressive strategies in order to deter disaffected politicians from defecting the ruling party, ranging from the rule of nonconsecutive reelection in order to offer attractive positions to an ample number of politicians and to continuously circulate elites, to committing electoral fraud in order to convince elites of the regime's might.

Furthermore, Magaloni (2006) argues that hegemonic party regimes need perceptions of invulnerability in order to prevent opposition coordination and mass wagon effects against it, this is the reason why –according to Magaloni- these regimes seek to win with huge margins of difference in order to generate a public message of invincibility, and for that purpose, they do not hesitate to use their federal disbursements from a reward approach.

For Magaloni, the essence of the reward strategy consists on that autocratic regimes usually reward their loyal supporters by delivering desired material benefits to them and

punish their defecting voters by withdrawing from them public funds. However, in order to accomplish successfully this strategy, these kinds of regimes need to effectively screen between supporters and opponents and target benefits only to those who will vote for the autocratic party, so that voter defection may be effectively deterred.

Magaloni (2006) even designed a model in order to explain and calculate the costs of votes under an autocratic regime (such as the PRI regime in Mexico until the year 2000), whose basic premises are the following ones:

a) The costs necessary to buy off political support ( $T_i$ ) increases as the ideological distance between the voter and the ruling party becomes larger, b) ( $T_i$ ) increases as the voter is less concerned about financial punishment, c) ( $T_i$ ) increases as the economic situation deteriorates, d) the more fiscal resources, subsidies and economic regulations are under the government's control, the more leeway the autocrat will have to buy off electoral support and deter voter exit, e) vote buying should primarily be directed toward the poor and more ideologically akin, f) hegemonic party autocracies will receive more support in smaller rural localities, where it is easier to acquire local knowledge about voters.

b) So according to her own model, Magolini (2006) argues that different conditions must meet so that voters eventually choose to defect from the autocratic regime. For example, economic performance of the ruling regime and ideological remoteness of the main opposition party from voters, must outweigh the expected punishment of withdrawal of financial resources from these voters by the ruling party. Even more, Magolini (2006) also outlines a model to calculate the utility of vote to oust a hegemonic party regime, through the following formula or equation:

$$U_i = B_i E[p_j] + a_i E[t_j] - y_i ID^*_{ij} - kE[v_j]$$

The explanatory (or independent) variables in this formula are:

$E[p_j]$  = Expected economic performance of party j,  $E[t_j]$  = Expected transfers from party j,  $ID^*_{ij}$  = Distance between voter i and party j in the k issues,  $E[v_j]$  = Expected level of post-electoral violence that derives from supporting party j.

The complementary terms in this formula mean the following:  $B_i$  = sociotropic evaluations,  $a_i$  = pocket book evaluations,  $y_i$  = policy voting,  $k$  = voters aversion to violence.

It seems that the conditions outlined in this formula in order to oust the PRI regime were fulfilled in Mexico in the year 2000, when Mexican voters decided to select Vicente Fox as their first President coming from an opposition party.

First of all, the economic performance of the ruling party PRI in its last *sexenio* was extremely disappointing, thus Mexican voters were not expecting worth social and economic transfers from this regime, furthermore, secondly, Vicente Fox called Mexican voters for a strategic voting in order to oust PRI, task that was proposed as the worthy purpose of that presidential election, regardless of the ideology of voters, and finally many Mexican voters considered that, given their social and economic conditions then, the threat of post-electoral violence, by choosing the opposition instead of PRI, was a risk worth suffering, since they already had lost a large part of their economic fortune because of the PRI regime due to the financial crisis of 1995-96.

Finally, the main explanatory variables of the *appeasement theory* –according to *Ishiyama (2010)* seem to be 1) the incongruence of the federal political system and 2) the existence of separatist efforts of ethnic regions within the relative country, since the presence of these factors compel national governments to carry out an appeasement policy in such regions in order to keep their countries united.

For example, Daniel Treisman (1996) argues that in Russia net transfers from the center government to the regions depended on “three bargaining power variables: a) regional discontent, b) an early declaration of sovereignty and c) the incidence of strikes in the previous year”. As we can notice, these three variables are closely related to a general appeasement policy.

Furthermore, Vladímir Popov (2001) discovered also that in Russia the fiscal balance tended to be favorable in a particular region of the country (state) according to the votes cast for pro central government policies, situation that could reflect the priority of the Russian federal government to unite their country through substantively rewarding positive behavior in that direction.

Finally, Kristin M. Bakke and Erick Wibbels (2006:1), who discovered an appeasement pattern of federal disbursements in Indonesia, argued that in the context of diversity, disparity and civil conflict, policy makers tended to turn to some form of federalism

or decentralized governance as a means for managing conflict between the central government and sub national groups.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

To test and prove the main argument of this paper, it will focus on studying the consequences of specific measures of social policy: a) The appointment of delegates to supervise the distribution of social programmes at the state level and b) the direct delivery of money to specific vulnerable people, instead of supporting social organisations dedicated to the support of this people. This research strategy is intended to uncover the electoral rationale behind these measures.

For this purpose, the present paper will carry out the comparative study of descriptive data on social programmes, by year from 2017 to 2019, and their impact on electoral outcomes at the state level, from 2017 to 2019, and will perform a projection of electoral outcomes in accordance with the forecasted investment in social programmes and the new rules of distribution of social programmes.

In other words, the present paper will study the expected electoral impact, of the distribution of the new social programmes of the MORENA's regime, across the country, for the following state and federal electoral processes of Mexico.

(In progress)

## **FINDINGS**

(In progress, expected to be finished by August 31<sup>st</sup> 2019)

## **DISCUSSION**

(In progress, expected to be finished by August 31<sup>st</sup> 2019)

## **CONCLUSION**

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