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Speaker: Alan Knight, University of Oxford, U.K.
Chair: Professor William A. Booth, Adjunct Professor of Latin American Studies, University of Oxford, St. Catherine's College, Faculty Member

The Return of Populism? Mexican Politics Today (and Yesterday)
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Following elections in July, Mexican politics have generated great interest, notably for their possible return to populism. Alan Knight, Emeritus Professor of Latin American History at Oxford University, contributed to this discussion by examining the election and placing its relevance in a historical context. With these two precedents and an overarching theme of populism, Knight commented on the future of Mexico.

In July 2018, Mexico elected Andrés Manuel López Obrador or AMLO, as president. The former Mexico City mayor from Tabasco, AMLO is characterized as hot-tempered and espousing demagoguery at his large campaign rallies. His party, the National Regeneration Movement, or MORENA, alludes to the Virgin of Guadalupe and exemplifies his moralistic platform to combat violence and corruption. Violence is severe and rising in Mexico, embodied by the massacre of 43 students in Ayotzinapa. Furthermore, the outgoing president Peña Nieto is shrouded in suspicion from his wife's questionable acquisition of a 4-million-dollar house. These two factors became emblematic of the former government's incompetence and presented the opportunity for AMLO to rise to power. Receiving over 55% of the vote, AMLO's sweeping success has given him an incontestable mandate rooted in populism.

Though AMLO's election is very much a product of present-day Mexican politics, it is important to anchor this analysis in historical context. In outlining three generations of political ideas, Knight traces the development of Mexican politics from the 1910 Revolution to present day. Because AMLO himself often invokes revolutionary rhetoric from the first generation of Mexican politics, this is an important connection to make. The calls for political and social change over a century ago are reminiscent of AMLO's present day calls for 'clearing the swamp.' The second generation is characterized by the authoritarian domination of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled with 'routinized populism' for 77 of the last 89 years. Thanks in large part to the 'economic miracle' of sustained growth, the PRI remained in power despite great inequality until economic downturn in 2000. This economic decline shepherded in the third generation of Mexican politics, characterized by neoliberal free market policies and the negotiation of NAFTA. The last 6 years of Peña Nieto's presidency, another PRI politician, proved greatly disappointing which explains the poor showing of PRI in July's elections, earning a mere 16% of the vote. This effectively situated AMLO to become the first Leftist president in Mexico since Lazaro Cárdenas.

Given AMLO's success and the context that explains his rise, the question becomes - what does this mean for the future of Mexico? President elect AMLO will swear into office December 1, 2018 with a popular and incontestable mandate. Though Knight refuses to make predictions, there are certain assumptions that can be concluded about AMLO's presidency. Firstly, it is unlikely that AMLO will impose dramatic changes to Mexico's foreign policy. Highlighting NAFTA and US-Mexican relations, Knight does not see great derision on the horizon. With a focus on domestic politics, AMLO has already held a referendum to abandon the construction of a new airport in Mexico City. This is problematic given that the airport is already a third of the way complete and large amounts of money have been invested. Similarly, AMLO has put a hold on oil exploration by foreign companies, upsetting the private sector. On the topic of crime, AMLO has called for the build-up of the Mexican army, a rare move by a Leftist president. Most importantly, AMLO plans to fund these projects not by raising taxes but by eliminating corruption as a means to generate government revenue. Because AMLO has not yet taken office, predictions about his term are imperfect, but it is clear he will face severe challenges. What remains to be seen is if AMLO will follow in the tradition of Maduro in Venezuela – a populist demagogue - or the more pragmatic Lula in Brazil (though currently imprisoned). If his tenure as the Mayor of Mexico City is any indication, he will govern responsibly. Summed best by Mario Cuomo: politicians "campaign in poetry but have to govern in prose." Whether AMLO will govern sensibly after his poetic campaign, the world will have to wait and see.