

The More Things Stay the Same: A Mexican Perspective on the 2008 US Election

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Moving Forward, or Just Spinning Wheels?

The 2008 US presidential election has attracted international attention, but it has been particularly interesting for the U.S.'s southern neighbour. Mexico is interested in election results in the hopes that a new President will introduce policy changes that will benefit the Mexican people. This may be nothing more than wishful thinking, however. While it is true that the President has the power to change U.S. policy, it is actually rather absurd to think in terms of which candidate is better for Mexico. Even if a candidate seems to have a "favorable" position on one issue that affects Mexican life, such as immigration, this does not mean this candidate will have a similarly desirable position on another, like drug trafficking or multilateral policy. In addition, courting Latino voters of Mexican origin is not the same as holding an election in Mexico; and candidates' campaign promises do not always result in changes to public policy.

Twice in the past, during the 1982 and 1995 financial crises, both Republican President Ronald Reagan, and Democratic President William Clinton, responded in similar ways when Mexico's financial problems threatened to seriously affect U.S. interests. However, public policy is not only determined by the head of state, and presidential actions during those times of crisis provoked profound disagreements about Central American policy under President Regan and about the militarization of the border under President Clinton. This shows that, despite the outcome of any election, the bilateral

relationship that exists between Mexico and the United States has its own dynamic due to the millions of trade and financial transactions and daily social, cultural and even criminal contacts that make up a complex network that is independent of the individual or party who sits in the White House.

The 2008 Campaign Climate

Heading into the 2008 election, the U.S. government has some important global issues to deal with, including the slow-down of the world economy, the ups and downs in the oil market, and the security threat of different political “red lights” that are flashing from Kosovo to Iran. These issues are likely to come up in election platforms as alternatives to the Iraq war, proposals for economic revitalization and new questions of national security and immigration. In addition to the questions of immigration and national security, both the economic slow-down and the performance of the oil market are crucial for Mexico’s immediate future and continuing bilateral relations.

For U.S. voters, the 2008 campaigns have a series of unprecedented characteristics. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are not the usual presidential candidates. Their presence as democratic hopefuls in this election is part of a process which seems to herald a new era of social and political activism in response to eight years of the Bush administration.

But despite this appearance of change, a new President may not be enough to put an end to the political consequences of the Bush administration. With the changes that have occurred since September 11, such as the approval of the Patriot Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. political system has gone through a transformation so great that fundamental aspects its own Constitution are brought into question. These

institutional changes tend to perpetuate themselves. The changes President Truman made during the Cold War were never reversed, The institutions and laws that President Bush fostered may also long outlast his presidency.

Reasons for Change

These transformations —above all the security measures and the war on terror that have guided U.S. policy since 2001— are the ones that most affect foreign policy toward Mexico. In a situation like this, seemingly, only the economic, financial and bilateral trade agenda enjoys relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* the filter of security policy. This despite the fact that the issues of migration and drug trafficking, as well as a series of other issues, have been dealt with bilaterally for years by two neighboring countries that have always, despite a few tensions, lived together in peace.

In this context, the challenges for the future are formidable and are linked to both countries' domestic policies as they face processes of profound social and political division. In Mexico, these divisions manifested themselves during and after the 2006 elections in the lack of an agreement on energy, agricultural, labor, fiscal policies, the reform of the state, and growing social violence. In the United States, President Bush's low approval ratings, the Democratic victory in the mid-term elections, and the close race between Senator Barak Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton clearly show that a large sector of U.S. society is sick and tired of the current state of affairs.

The Presidential Hopefuls

For the Republican Party, Senator McCain's virtual presidential nomination may give him the time he needs to staunch the blood from his wounds and prepare himself for the general election in November. However, the

fact that the Republicans need their more conservative ridings to get the vote out in November means that migration and, therefore, policy toward Mexico cannot be discussed reasonably inside the party.

Inside the Democratic camp, the candidates are competing for the African American vote, women's votes, the Latino vote and the vote of young people of all ethnicities. For the democrats, the best strategy is one which can attract voters from all groups since any constituency that does not feel sufficiently represented could stay at home in November, which could cost either of the two hopefuls the presidency.

The More things Change...

It is reasonable to think that U.S. – Mexico relations could be better in 2009 simply because any change could make a new beginning possible. A Democratic administration might seek to change the tone of the relationship, but the complexity of the bilateral agenda will likely not permit a radical shift. Even if Senator Obama, who seems to favour inclusive immigration policies, won the elections, he would still have to deal with a Congress that could slow down or dilute his proposals. Senator Clinton might give more weight to relations with Mexico, but it remains to be seen how she would prioritize bilateral issues and the amount of political capital she would be willing to spend on any one of them. Senator McCain would face constraints imposed by the more conservative sectors of his party on migratory issues and by a possible Democratic majority in Congress on other issues.

The 2008 U.S. electoral process may open up the possibility of renegotiating the tone of relations between the two countries' chief executives and perhaps of reviewing a few isolated issues. However, the general dynamic

of a relationship as complex as this will not change substantively no matter who wins in November.