

John Kerry's Perspective on Mexico

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Bryan Snyder/Reuters

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Experts have dubbed the November 2 U.S. elections as the closest in years, and different national opinion polls seem to confirm that judgment.

Most of the poll results released between June and September confirm the president's drop in popularity and

give the advantage to the Democratic candidate. Between July 6 and August 12, 56 national polls were taken (Zogby, Rasmussen, *The Economist*, Gallup, Pew), 49 of which predicted a win by John Kerry, six a win by President Bush, and one a tie. Despite most of these studies suggesting that Democrat Kerry will be the next president, the results have put the two candidates only between one and three points apart, which

strictly statistically speaking, can be considered a tie. This shows just how close the race is.

Unless something transcendental happens to the U.S. economy or on the Iraq front or in the fight against Al Qaeda in coming weeks, this tie will probably persist up to election day. In that framework, a careful review of each candidate's electoral strategies, the definition of their target publics, the calcu-

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lations of electoral engineering and campaign promises will play a central role in the outcome of the race.

At the time of this writing, three debates are planned for the presidential candidates and one for the vice-presidential hopefuls. These debates could have an influence on the tie and even decide the race in favor of one of the contenders. What is on the immediate horizon is very close competition in which either candidate has practically the same possibility of moving to the front. Thus, intelligent proposals, clear oratory and speeches, as well as the ability to deal with the skirmishes of the debate will be a determining factor in convincing still undecided voters.

JOHN KERRY, PRESIDENT

Bush's relationship with Mexico has been documented during the four years of his administration. However, an exercise supposing that John Kerry will be the next president of the United States is not without interest. His victory would have a significant impact on foreign policy toward Mexico, thus making it necessary to gauge the position he takes vis-à-vis Mexico in the next four years. Before looking at the perception of Mexico in Kerry's electoral campaign, we should admit that U.S. presidential candidates plan their strategies according to the concerns of the people who are going to elect them. In that vein, Americans pay attention first of all to domestic issues like the economy, employment, social security or crime, and only after that look at international issues.

In this specific case, as the world's only superpower, U.S. foreign policy

concerns are mainly centered on Europe, Russia, Canada, Japan and China, and now the situation in Iraq and the fight against terrorism. Only after that does it zero in on Third World countries like Latin America. From that point of view, we can understand the secondary status that Mexico has in presidential elections. Nevertheless, specialists like Madeleine Albright say that Mexico should get special attention because of the large number of domestic and international issues that link our two countries.

KERRY'S DISCOURSE ON MEXICO

In general, Democratic presidential candidates' domestic policies center on the

antee of a more indulgent relationship with Mexico in which the issue of security will always be present.

John Kerry has spoken relatively little about the position he will take with regard to his neighbor to the south; in fact, some observers say he has been ambiguous. Something noticeable since the beginning of his bid for the presidency in February of this year was that Senator Kerry said nothing in his speeches about Mexico. This is even more important because Kerry was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for several terms. Though he made no reference in his speeches to Mexico, he did mention in general terms his position on Latin America, international trade, migration and border security measures.

During the first months of the campaign, until his June 26 speech to Latino leaders, Kerry made no reference in his speeches to Mexico. Some observers say he has been ambiguous about his neighbor to the south.

defense of minorities, civil rights, employment, the fight against poverty and equal opportunities. In foreign policy, in addition to dealing with traditional U.S. concerns, they give relatively greater importance to regions like Latin America. Thus, traditionally, Democrats have been seen by Latin Americans in a better light than their Republican counterparts. Perhaps for that reason, in theory, one would expect more openness and approachability on the part of a Democratic administration for dealing with foreign policy matters with Mexico. Possibly this is why an August 4 Reforma Group survey says that 55 percent of Mexicans prefer John Kerry to George W. Bush.¹ Of course, the Democratic tradition is no guar-

It was not until June 26 and then during the National Democratic Convention that Kerry began to speak more directly about Latin America, and specifically about Mexico. He emphasized that if he became president, he would establish more intense, closer relations with Latin America, inspired in John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, with the aim of creating a new Community of the Americas.² This would include the creation of an investment and social development fund for the region to promote democracy, fight against poverty and invest in education, health and economic development. This would make for a shift in U.S. foreign policy for the region, because the Bush administration's policy has

been almost exclusively based on promoting free trade, military aid, the war on drugs and decreasing foreign aid.

About international trade, Kerry has said that he will review current U.S. trade agreements with other countries, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in order to strengthen them and turn them into more useful instruments for the United States. It is doubtful that Kerry will propose greater trade integration with Canada or Mexico. On the other hand, he has also come out for a reform of current U.S. immigration legislation, to include a program for illegal residents, a position that coincides with the one Mexico has promoted over the last four years. Kerry's intention would be to favor family reunification by legal-

the United States, Canada and Mexico. As the electoral campaign proceeds, statements about Mexico are expected to be more precise, above all with regard to security, the border, trade and international cooperation, which are a current part of the bilateral agenda.

In the last stretch of the campaign, Mexico is expected to be reassessed as an ally in the fight against international terrorism and an important trade partner for the development of the U.S. economy. At the same time, comments are expected about the two countries' growing interdependence, the progressive institutionalization of their relations and the demographic and social importance of the Mexican population in the United States, which is now the largest minority in the country.

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izing immigrants. The Democratic Party's presidential electoral platform states that tax-paying undocumented immigrants without criminal records should have the road open to a well-earned full participation in the United States.

With regard to border security, Kerry has expressed his opposition to the militarization of the border with Mexico, but he has been emphatic in supporting the "intelligent borders" program that aims to facilitate the movement of goods and individuals along the border in a framework of strong, reliable security measures. In that context, he has come out for forming a "U.S. security perimeter" to coordinate migration, customs and travel policies among

Perhaps this is why John Kerry and his electoral strategies have attempted to pay special attention to the Latino vote, as an important factor in the final outcome of the elections. Voters in states like New Mexico, Arizona, Florida and Nevada represent 47 electoral votes, and it should be remembered that four years ago, candidate Bush won the presidency with Florida's 27 electoral votes. This is why Kerry has focused on winning the Hispanic vote and has tried to get closer to Mexico.

The candidates are still even in the polls and the debates are still to come. Kerry has a greater possibility of winning than President Bush, from his comfortable position as the oppo-

sition. The Democratic candidate will focus on criticizing the current administration's policies and programs and pointing out its mistakes. The problems in the economy, the situation in Iraq, the 9/11 Commission report suggestions and, in general, everything related to terrorism will be used to the detriment of the president to impress the electorate. The resident of the White House has to defend the "reasons of state" and national security that motivated him to make decisions about Iraq, whose effects are evident in the U.S. economy. It remains to be seen whether the president will be able to convince voters that his administration should continue. Kerry has a real chance of winning.

If that happens, it should be remembered that the electoral platform presented at the National Democratic Convention in late July stated, "Mexico has made steady progress toward building a mature democracy, and we will make relations with Mexico a priority in order to best address economic, environmental and social issues of concern." We Mexicans hope that Kerry's position will not be ambiguous and translates into better forms of understanding, with the prospect of inaugurating a more mature, pro-active and productive relationship with the United States from which both countries can benefit. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ "Crece el apoyo a John Kerry en México," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 4 August 2004.

² Democratic Platform for America, "Strong at Home, Respected in the World," Democratic National Convention, 26-29 July 2004; John Kerry's speech to the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO), 26 June 2004; and *The Miami Herald*, 30 June 2004.