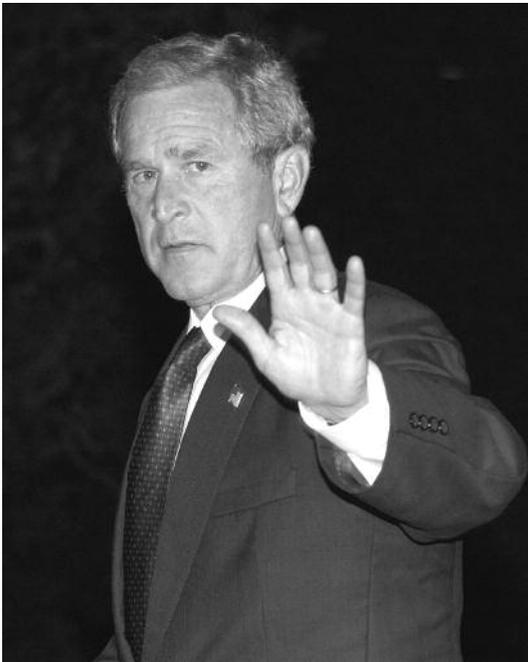
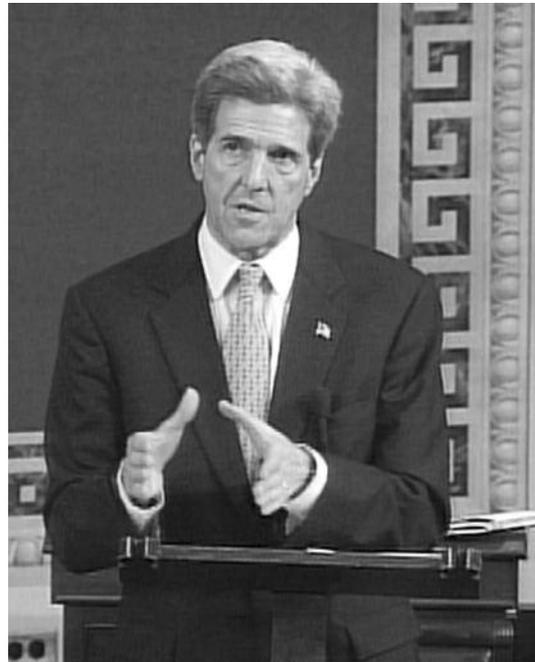


The U.S. Presidential Elections After 9/11

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Mannie García/Reuters



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Massachusetts Democratic Senator John Kerry and Republican President Bush are honing their weapons to meet the challenge of an election that some specialists think might be even closer than in 2000. In that year, Bush secured the White House in a difficult and *sui generis* election: he won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote. This had not happened in the United States since Republican Benjamin Harrison won

in 1888 with 95,000 fewer votes than his Democratic opponent, Grover Cleveland. This year, Bush could be the first president who having lost the popular vote in his first election was reelected for a second term. The other three incumbent presidents who lost the popular vote the first time around did not serve second terms: John Quincy Adams lost to Andrew Jackson in 1828; Rutherford Hayes decided not to run again in 1880 after his first term; and Grover Cleveland finally beat Benjamin Harrison at the polls in 1892. George W. Bush aspires to continue in office at a time of great political polarization in the United States, sharpened by the uncertain out-

come of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan in the framework of the so-called “war against terrorism.”

Conservatives and a large part of the public who have successfully been sold the idea that Washington is the only force on earth capable of defeating the “terrible terrorist threat” —one out of four Americans feel they are targets of a possible attack— are enthusiastic about a possible reelection. Other parts of the population —many not precisely Kerry or Democratic supporters, but opponents of Bush— feel tricked by the president who they think led them into to a vengeful, senseless war. Internationally, his administration’s intervention-

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ist, unilateral policy has created discontent and suspicion even among important Western powers like France and Germany. In any case, no matter how much it wanted to, a Kerry administration would not be able to reverse all the policies implemented during Bush's term. Recently, the president even presented a bill to gradually withdraw U.S. troops from European bases in places like Germany and Spain, an idea Kerry did not share. For countries closely linked to the United States like Mexico, a second Bush term would not seem to change much more than a new Democratic administration would. The preponderance of the security issue is not likely to disappear in the short term, with or without Kerry in the White House. Therefore, the Mexico-U.S. bilateral agenda will continue to be subordinated to the anti-terrorist paranoia.

How much does the "war against terrorism" continue to influence the U.S. electorate? In light of the two main candidates' electoral rhetoric, what can Mexico expect for the basic issues on its bilateral agenda with Washington?

STRETCHING THE VEIL OF FEAR

The events of the morning of 9/11 were a weighty argument for the Bush administration to initiate a more aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East and against regimes it considered hostile to the United States, freedom and democracy. The terrorist attacks also presented Bush with an opportunity to show his leadership abilities in difficult times and to gain the support of the majority of the public, which he had not won at the ballot box a few months before. According to an *ABC-Washington Post* poll, Bush had a 55-percent

approval rating in early September 2001. Just days after the destruction of the Twin Towers, on October 9, his popularity had soared to 92 percent.

In the following three years, the Bush administration, more successfully some times than others, has managed to extend the paranoid veil of the terrorist threat not only to its advantage in its aggressive foreign policy strategy, but also to center the public's attention on issues that its party has traditionally dominated in the national debate. For example, before the 2002 mid-term elections the White House was agile enough to manipulate the legislation on the Department of Internal Security, distracting attention from the priorities the country was facing, like the corporate scandals involving Republican officials such as Vice President Dick Cheney or the crisis in education and social security. This opportunistic handling of nationalist rhetoric, together with the Democrats' inability to respond imaginatively, made for a Republican victory, giving them control over the presidency and both houses of Congress for the first time since Eisenhower. Also, the Democrats opted to support President Bush in his dearly sought-after operation to bring down Saddam Hussein, a decision approved by, among others, Senator John Kerry himself.

On April 9, 2003, Bush achieved what his father could not 12 years before: he concluded the invasion of Iraq and ousted Saddam Hussein from his palaces. Today the president has the chance to consummate another of his father's unfulfilled objectives: reelection.

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So, what does the son have that the father did not? In 1992, the year George H. W. Bush was defeated, the U.S. economy grew 3.3 percent. In 2003, the most recent year for which we have complete data, U.S. economic growth was 3.1 percent. Therefore, economic boom is not the answer, even though, according to the early September 2004 *ABC-Washington Post* poll, 47 percent of the population approves Bush's handling of the economy. The answer to the riddle may lie in the sphere of security and international policy. In the current campaign, these issues have taken on special importance, to the president's advantage. The same survey said that 57 percent of Americans approve of Bush's work to fight terrorism. A Pew Research Center poll taken just before the Republican National Convention on September 2 revealed that 41 percent of those surveyed said the war, foreign policy and terrorism were the most important problems the nation was facing, while only 26 percent put a priority on the economy.¹ Numbers like these had not been seen since the war in Vietnam, and they are not good news for Kerry, who has been accused of being unstable and a johnny-come-lately on these issues.

THE LAST MINUTE ALSO HAS 60 SECONDS

Despite the enormous weight of the fight against terrorism among electoral debate issues, Bush's reelection is not completely assured. It is true that Kerry's

spurt in the polls after being highlighted at the Democratic National Convention —he gained an average five-point advantage over the president— was not as strong as the one Bush experienced after the Republican Convention, when he topped his opponent by up to 11 points. However, Kerry still may overcome the disadvantage (in the first half of September, Gallup-USA Today polls gave the victory to Bush, 55 percent to 42 percent, while the ABC-Washington Post survey cited the president's advantage as 50 percent vs. 44 percent) or break the technical tie (the Pew Research Center published the figure of 46 percent for a survey done between September 11 and 14).² Kerry's last chance will come during the three face-to-face debates between the two.³

During the first debate, Bush was hesitant and had a hard time presenting convincing arguments to defend himself from Kerry's attacks on his foreign policy, which is why most post-debate polls gave the Democrat the win. The October 8 face-off, with its town-meeting format, centered on security and the occupation of Iraq. Bush seemed more decisive and challenging, but had a practically identical discourse. According to the polls, it was a tie, but many U.S. analysts gave the victory to Kerry again. According to the October 11 ABC/Washington Post survey, Bush still has the lead over Kerry, 51 percent to 45 percent.

Kerry could take advantage of the coming Arizona State University debate, which is closer to polling day, to convince the public on domestic issues, in which he apparently has the advantage, as long as he does not fall into the trap of centering the discussion on Middle East policy, which could favor Bush.

The security issue is likely
to remain at center stage, with or without
Kerry in the White House.

In an article published in *The Washington Times*, William Niskanen, director of the CATO Institute, a conservative Washington-based think-tank, argued that the debate in this race is not dealing with the issues that are important to the nation.⁴ Niskanen thinks it will be very difficult for Bush to keep his promise to reduce the fiscal deficit by half between 2005 and 2009 because of the still unconsidered high costs of reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan and recent hikes in the budgets for agriculture, defense, education, energy, internal security, Medicare, aerospace research and transportation. At the same time, Niskanen criticizes Kerry for not yet presenting a serious plan to clean up public finances. On the contrary, an estimate by the U.S. National Taxpayers Union Foundation shows that the Democratic hopeful's main economic proposals would increase public spending by U.S.\$226 billion in 2005 alone.⁵

Finally, a major factor for determining the election's outcome is voters' increased partisan polarization. Recent studies show a significant reduction in the number of independent voters, with Democrats and Republicans dividing the majority in equal parts. Therefore, the candidates are concentrating on the small number of undecided voters, especially in states like Iowa, Arizona, New Mexico and Florida, where a small number of votes may change the results. All of this is happening in the context of scant electoral participation. In general, about 50 percent of registered voters do not go to the

polls in presidential elections (49 percent in 1996 and 50.7 percent in 2000).

Electoral polarization in the U.S. is clear when examined region by region. In the 1930s, the Democrats controlled the South, but that changed when, after World War II, President Harry S. Truman came out for Afro-Americans' civil rights in 1948. Since then, a gradual but constant change has come about, with southern voters expressing greater preference for the Republican Party. In the last presidential election, for instance, Bush took all the southern states. The Republicans also dominate the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states. The Democrats, for their part, control the Northeast, the East and both coasts. In past presidential elections, the Democrats won 93 percent of the East's electoral votes, while George W. Bush swept the South with 100 percent. Everything seems to indicate that these regional differences are still growing.

MEXICO AND THE MIGRATORY ACCORD

Fortunately, since the 9/11 "Black Tuesday," the United States has not suffered from terrorist attacks of a similar magnitude. However, U.S. allies have suffered terrible tragedies, like the March 11, 2004 bombings in Madrid, the attacks on Western targets in Bali and Djakarta, or the recent slaughter of children in Russia, and small daily Hells like the constant wave of kidnappings in Iraq since the fall of

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Saddam Hussein. In addition, U.S. concern for strengthening anti-terrorist security has been exported to almost every corner of the Earth, with the corresponding economic consequences of the investment of large sums in research, development and implementation of new security technologies and strategies.

Mexico could not escape this. According to Robert Pastor, former member of the U.S. National Security Council, "There is no country in the world that has suffered more from the eclipse of September 11 and the laser focus of the Bush administration on bin Laden than Mexico."⁶ In the first place, the Mexican government's elation at being called the United States' most important friend among the world's nations by George Bush lasted only a couple of weeks. The U.S. president had made that statement during President Fox's visit to Washington just a week before the terrorist attacks. By September 20, during his unofficial "declaration of war against terrorism" speech to Congress, the title of "best friend" reverted to the traditional ally, Great Britain. Also, fundamental issues for the bilateral agenda like drug trafficking, trade and migration soon took second place to security. The White House left no room for doubt: it was at war and everything had to revolve around that.

Unquestionably, one of the victims of 9/11 was the illusory migratory accord between Mexico and the United States, so sought-after from the beginning of Vicente Fox's presi-

dency. Actually, even before the attacks, Washington did not show the slightest intention of creating a broad, far-reaching migratory pact. It was also predictable that such an ambitious, large-scale accord would never be approved due to vested interests in the United States. Nonetheless, the early stages of the 2004 presidential campaign gave a false sign for hope around the issue. Both contenders for the White House made statements about migration, but they both pointed more to satisfying their clientele and strengthening their voter base than to solving the problem.

On January 7, 2004, President Bush announced a new guest-worker program focused on regularizing the migratory status of millions of undocumented workers. He was seeking to please businessmen and ultra-conservative sectors of the Republican Party who do not want to legalize or give amnesty to undocumented workers. The president continually denied that his proposal was an amnesty like the Simpson-Rodino Act, presented during the Reagan administration. According to the Center for Immigration Studies, at least 55 percent of Americans would like to see fewer new immigrants.⁷ This time, the president's proposal would give a temporary, three-year visa to people who prove they have a job offer in the United States and pay their application fee. The original proposal stipulates that the visa could be renewed once, but that at the end of that period, the worker would have to return to his/her place of origin where, accord-

ing to Bush, he/she should find sufficiently satisfactory living conditions so as to not want to return to the United States. Bush promised to work with the governments of sending countries so that they could offer well-being and prosperity to their citizens.

More than a few people have interpreted President Bush's proposal as fundamentally an electoral ploy. And this is true, but imprecise. If Bush's aim were only to get more votes from the Hispanic minority, he would already be well on his way to failing. Raúl Yzaguirre, the president of National Council of La Raza, the country's largest Latino organization, stated that "Hispanic Americans are deeply disappointed with the president's announcement...on immigration policy, [because it] appears to offer the business community full access to the immigrant workers it needs while providing very little to the workers themselves."⁸ Yzaguirre's words show Hispanic organizations' opposition to a guest-worker agreement. They support, in contrast, amnesty. Another example of the fact that the president's campaign staff sees no electoral advantage in putting this accord at the center of the debate is its virtual disappearance from Bush's speeches in the last eight months: the proposal has not even been mentioned a dozen times. Wayne Johnson, Republican campaign consultant in Sacramento, California, says, "Immigration is the kind of issue you deal with when you're not dealing with election rhetoric."⁹ The strategy of taking immigration out of the limelight in the Republican platform —although it is present and it was referred to at the convention— is an attempt to avoid serious friction with the party's extreme right, which sees Bush's proposal as

an amnesty in disguise. The Republicans are divided on some central social issues.

For his part, Kerry has said very little about relations with Mexico. Actually, the three most important events linking the Democratic candidate to our country are his June appearance before the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO); his sister, Diana Kerry's visit to Mexico City last July; and his participation in the September 15 Congressional Hispanic Caucus gala.

On June 25, before NALEO, one of the country's most important Latino political organizations, John Kerry promised to foster measures like reducing remittance costs, creating a poverty-fighting fund, building a U.S. security perimeter to avert terrorist attacks in the region and coordinating customs and migratory affairs with Mexico. Kerry has also expressed his intention to favor the legalization of undocumented immigrants. In that vein, he has promised that in his first 100 days in office, he will send Congress an ambitious migration reform bill. "Good people who are living here, working hard and paying taxes should have a path to equal citizenship in the American community," he said.¹⁰ His statements were well received by Latino Democratic sympathizers and by U.S. unions, part of the Democratic Party's traditional clientele. These groups do want an amnesty, but oppose a guest-worker program. The Republicans, for their part, called the proposal pure bombast.

Diana Kerry, who heads up Americans Overseas for Kerry-Edwards (AOK), visited Mexico City as part of her campaign to register potential U.S. voters abroad. Approximately 1.1 mil-

lion Americans live in Mexico and, in a close election, their participation could be key.

Lastly, during the Congressional Hispanic Caucus event, part of Hispanic Identity Month, John Kerry called the Latino vote a critical factor in voting the Republicans out of office in the coming elections. He criticized the Bush administration for constantly breaking its promises to the Latino community around issues like immigration, business loans and bilingual education.

CONCLUSION

Just days before the first presidential election since the 9/11 attacks, the outcome is still uncertain. Undoubtedly, the central issues have changed focus from domestic matters to foreign policy and security. The president seems to be taking advantage of the inertia of his display of leadership and determination since the terrorist attacks. However, John Kerry could also take advantage of the ideological polarization caused by the White House's aggressive foreign policy and the difficult situation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The "war against terrorism" has already marked this generation, not only in the United States, but throughout the world. For the moment, there seems to be no turning back in this fight against faceless fear, and we must be aware of that. Regardless of Kerry's promises to work with and depend on the United Nations for solving the world's main conflicts, the possible exit of the Republicans from the White House will not guarantee an end to U.S. interventionism and unilateralism. Equally, the continuation of George W. Bush in the presidency until January

2009 will not make for the slaughter of the world's innocent peoples.

It will not make much difference to Mexico who resides in the White House for the next four years, not because their projects do not have different focuses, but because bilateral relations are solidly structured through channels that make them advance more or less smoothly. Our country has tried to take advantage of the new situation which emphasizes security issues to advance with the U.S. government on matters such as border control and has even tried to link a possible migratory accord to U.S. anti-terrorist policies and strategies. Also, a large part of the Mexico-U.S. agenda does not go through the executive, but through the legislature, which is why it will be very important for our country to see what the new U.S. Congress looks like. Nothing is carved in stone, but, as we finish this article, everything seems to indicate that George W. Bush is closing strong. **MM**

NOTES

¹ <http://people-press.org/>

² *Ibid.*

³ This article was finished in mid-October. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ William Niskanen, "What Candidates Aren't Discussing," *The Washington Times*, 13 September 2004.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Tim Weiner and Ginger Thompson, "Mexico Lower on Bush's List Since Sept. 11," *The New York Times*, 29 December 2001.

⁷ Center for Immigration Studies, www.cis.org

⁸ Laura Bonilla, "Bush Immigration Overhaul Plan Gets Poor Reviews from Immigrant Groups," *Agence France Presse*, 8 January 2004.

⁹ Joseph Curl, "Bush's 'Guest-Worker' Proposal on a Back Burner," *The Washington Times*, 1 September 2004.

¹⁰ http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/speeches/spc_2004_0626.html