

Mexico and The U.S. Elections

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The U.S. presidential elections have two protagonists: the Democrat Barack Obama and the Republican John McCain. In Mexico, the collective unconscious pays a great deal of attention to our northern neighbor's presidential hopefuls. As the reader will remember, a few months ago a survey revealed that Mexicans preferred Hillary Clinton to Obama. In the United States, the Hispanic community also threw its support to the former First Lady. This is no minor matter: once Obama achieved enough delegate votes to ensure the presidential nomination at the Democratic Convention

August 25 to 28 at the Denver, Colorado Pepsi Center, the Hispanic communities inside the United States and abroad began expressing concern about his scanty knowledge of Latin America. He is criticized for never having traveled to the region, and people fear that, just like under the George W. Bush administration, if Obama sits in the Oval Office, Latin America will continue to be peripheral to U.S. international concerns. In contrast with John McCain, whose first international trip as the virtual Republican candidate was to Colombia and then Mexico, Obama opted for a tour of Middle Eastern and European countries, traditionally considered a priority in U.S. foreign policy.

In this regard, it is worth asking just how much Mexico should concern itself with who will occupy the U.S. presi-

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dency for the 2009-2012 term. The media do not help to come to an appropriate judgment given that they focus more on the candidates' personalities and appearance than on their political ethics. When Barack Obama arrived in France last July, the media compared his popularity with that of Paris Hilton. It would seem, then, that if someone manages to look good, or pretty or even sexy—like Paris Hilton looks to many people—then he or she has a good possibility of making it to the White House.

U.S. historian Gil Troy, who currently works at Montreal's McGill University, writes in his most recent book, *Leading from the Center: Why Moderates Make the Best Presidents*, that regardless of the political affiliation of the person in the Oval Office, he or she always tends to "move to the center" of the political spectrum because otherwise he/she would antagonize and divide the electorate, when what is required is to govern for everyone.¹ Clearly, after electoral processes as polemical as that of 2000, the electorate is increasingly divided; so, the figure that emerges victorious in 2008 will have to conciliate to be able to govern.

A glance at Obama and McCain's numbers shows that next November 4 balloting will be close. There is little room for speculation about the support that each of the two virtual candidates naturally have. In 35 of the 50 states the balloting is already practically defined, meaning that who will be the next president of the United States will be decided in the other 15.

In the United States, the president is not elected by popular vote, but by the Electoral College. This body is a kind of link or intermediary between the voter and the candidate. Thus, most people of voting age cast their ballots for electors, who then choose their preferred candidate. The Electoral College is currently made up of 538 electors. Each state has a right to the same number of electors as its representatives and senators in the U.S. Congress. The District of Columbia, seat of the federal government, is assigned the same number of electors as the smallest states in the Union.

Each of the members of the Electoral College votes twice: once for president and a second time for vice president. To win the election, a candidate must get at least 270 Electoral College votes. If none of the candidates gets this number, the decision falls to the House of Representatives. In the case of the vice president, if no one gets the required amount of votes, the decision falls to the Senate.

Today, Barack Obama has already practically assured 210 votes; that is, he only needs 60 votes more to be elected president. John McCain, on the other hand, has 165 votes and needs 105 more to occupy the White House next January.

As already suggested above, everything will practically be decided in 15 states: Florida (with 27 votes in the Electoral College); Pennsylvania (21); Ohio (20); Michigan (17); North Carolina (15); Virginia (13); Missouri (11); Colorado (9); Iowa (7); New Mexico (5); Nevada (5); New Hampshire (4); Montana (3); North Dakota (3); and South Dakota (3). Trends indicate that if the elections were held today, Florida, North Carolina, Missouri, Montana and North and South Dakota would give their 62 votes to John McCain, giving him a total of 227, but even so he would be 43 votes short of the required 270.

What do Barack Obama's numbers look like? Presumably, six states would throw their support to him: Pennsylvania, Michigan, Colorado, Iowa, New Mexico and New Hampshire. Their 63 votes would put him beyond the magic number with 273 votes total, and he would become the next president. Naturally, all these numbers are based on current trends. Suffice it to mention that in Ohio, Virginia and Nevada (with their combined 38 votes), voters are undecided. It remains to be seen what effect Ralph Nader's announcement that he would run for the fifth consecutive time since 1992 as an independent will have on Obama and McCain's situation. While it is clear that Nader has no possibility of winning the election, he can take fundamental support away from the "two big candidates"; and it was clear in the 2000 elections that in a close election, the loss of those votes can be fatal for either (it is said that Nader's candidacy cost Al Gore the 2000 election).

Another no less important issue is the backing Obama and McCain can expect from their party supporters. And it is in this area that Obama is at the disadvantage *vis-à-vis* his opponent: the Democratic Party was worn out in the primaries by Hillary Clinton's powerful campaign, which fragmented it. Now, it is necessary to work for party unity. McCain, by contrast, has 86 percent support from Republican Party followers.

It is important to analyze who votes in the United States: the campaigns are directed at them. One of the enemies to overcome is abstentionism, which is growing in low-income sectors. Not everyone of voting age votes; those who go to the polls are the ones with reasons and motives to exercise that right and who, evidently, are in more advantaged social strata. Therefore, marketing techniques channel efforts toward this group.

A rather caricaturesque analysis of the way the presidential elections unfolded four years ago, when George W. Bush was reelected, reveals the profile of who goes out to vote and who they cast their ballots for. The well-known characters of the successful television series *The Simpsons* offer an explanation for Bush's 2004 victory: Homer's neighbor, Ned Flanders, known for his devotion to the church and his extreme conservatism, even in the simplest spheres of daily life, is most certainly a Republican sympathizer, typical of the voters who gave George W. Bush his 2004 victory over Democrat John Kerry. Reviewing the profile of voters who cast their ballots for Bush, surveys found that 80 percent underlined the importance of "moral values" in their decision. On the average, these voters earned more than US\$100,000 a year and said they went to church at least once a week (like Ned). The website www.politicswatch.com holds Ned Flanders and people like him responsible for Bush's remaining in the White House for a second term. It goes even further, saying that if Homer's neighbor weren't "yellow," he would be the perfect Republican candidate for the Senate or the presidency!

Twenty-five percent of U.S. voters tell pollsters that they think 72-year-old John McCain is too old to adequately carry out the president's job. Another 45 percent think that 47-year-old Barack Obama is too young and lacking in experience to guide the nation's destiny —there is actually a 25-year difference in their ages, no small matter.

In any case, what is most important for Mexico in the process unfolding north of our border? Barack Obama and John McCain aside, there is a national project in the United States and a bi-partisan consensus about how to achieve it. Regardless of who becomes president, regardless of differences in age, experience and political profile, both Obama and McCain would work to foster U.S. national power so their country can pursue its interests most effectively throughout the world. It is true that Mexico and the United States will continue to be neighbors after the November 4 balloting, and there is a complex enough bilateral agenda to

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avoid Mexicans being marginalized from Washington's agenda of international priorities. This having been said, however, we should not expect great changes from the White House *vis-à-vis* Mexico, and we should carefully analyze what Congress looks like after the elections given that that is where the fundamental issues on the bilateral agenda will be decided. This means that if a migratory accord is agreed upon, it is the next 111th Congress that will ratify it. If the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) file were reopened to negotiate things like agricultural trade or others, Congress would have the last word. Funding for the Merida Initiative needs congressional approval. While it is true that the U.S. president has the prerogative of making decisions without Congress, the political cost is very high. This was clear in 1995 when President William Clinton decided on a US\$51 billion financial bailout package for Mexico, thus sealing forever the fate of the initiative for creating the famous Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) because U.S. legislators would not accept new trade agreements with Latin American countries incapable of maintaining minimal financial stability.

The 110th Congress, in session from January 3, 2007 to January 9, 2009, has given the go-ahead to legislation like the Energy Security and Independence Act (2007), the Food and Energy Security Act, or 2007 Farm Bill (2007) and the Protect America Act of 2007. Meanwhile, it has stalled on passing the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, the Executive Branch Reform Act (2007), the Iraq War De-escalation Act of 2007 and the Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act of 2007, among others.

The Democratic Party has a majority in the House of Representatives. In the Senate, both parties have the same number of seats (49), and there are two independent senators (although they both work with the Democrats, which is why analysts say the Democrats *de facto* control the upper house. Next November 4, there will be elections for senator in 33 out of 50 states; for all the seats in the House of Representatives and for the governorship in 11 states, plus referendums and local elections in many different states.

Of the Senate's 100 seats, 35 will be up for the vote next November, 23 today occupied by Republicans and 12 by Democrats. From the start, the Democrats have the advantage of only having to defend 12, a little more than half of what is at stake for the Republicans. As if that were not enough, five Republican senators have announced their retirement, forcing the party to look for new candidates to satisfy voter expectations. Meanwhile, none of the Democratic senators is retiring. The number of states where the Democrats are predicted to win, given that their opponents lack the minimal possibilities for overcoming voter preferences is much higher (nine, total) than the states where the Republicans will win (only four). So, the Republicans are in serious trouble, given that it looks like the Senate will again be controlled by the Democrats, who could substantially increase their number of seats.

In the lower house, the Democrats have 233 seats, versus the Republicans' 202. The House of Representatives is made up of 435 congresspersons, based on the 2000 census. Analysts think that it will be very difficult for the Republicans to upset the Democrats' current majority. One of the issues that hurt the Republicans the most in the 2006 elections was the Iraq War, which continues to be a hot item, to the extent that political analysts as conservative as Robert Novak have warned that U.S. participation there could cause trouble in Republican ranks next November 4.

For this reason, it is worthwhile reviewing which agendas tend to favor the Democrats. While it is generally thought that the Democratic Party favors liberal initiatives, in recent decades it has taken positions more to the center, as Gil Troy has said: they support a progressive social agenda, where the government plays an important role, particularly in the fight against poverty and social injustice, even when it means increasing taxes. In the past, their main support came from unions and working people, but now they also have the backing of social liberals and highly-educated middle classes with salaries over the national average.

In international politics, the Democrats generally oppose unilateralism. However, it should be pointed out that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, House and Senate Democrats voted almost unanimously to authorize the use of force against Afghanistan. There was a noticeable division of their votes on Iraq.

As is well known, the Republican Party favors low taxes, balanced budgets, greater economic freedom and small government. It opposes universal medical coverage and strict

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environmental standards. Its traditional base of support is the business community and those with mid-level to high incomes, a large part of the armed forces and the white population, above all, white married couples with children. People with high educational levels favor the Republicans and the Democrats in practically equal proportions.

In terms of international relations, the Republicans generally favor unilateralism on issues involving national security, based on the idea that the United States can and must act in the concert of nations in its own interest, without the support or the "permission" of others. They like free trade agreements, although they are divided on migration, given the clash between those who want a "friendlier" platform and those who favor a more nationalist stance. It is noteworthy that John McCain's support for last year's migratory reform proposal almost cost him his candidacy in the 2008 presidential race.

With all this in mind, a U.S. Congress dominated by the Democrats poses important challenges for the Mexican government given that emphasis on social and domestic issues like gun control, universal medical coverage, internal security and discrimination (something that will be very important if Obama is elected) will demand material and human resources that eventually would put the international agenda, above all *vis-à-vis* a region like Latin America, on the back burner. Barack Obama's first international trip as the virtual Democratic candidate was to regions that are a priority for the United States, but that, above all, made him "look good," judging by his reception in Germany and France. It should not be forgotten that this trip was part of a political campaign, which does not guarantee that, once in the White House, Obama would be a pro-active internationalist. In addition, it also does not mean that John McCain considers Latin America the priority region for U.S. foreign policy. His visit to Mexico and Colombia should be interpreted in context: anticipating a possible Obama visit to the region and, above all, trying to send "friendly" messages to the U.S. Latino population and —why not?— also to the

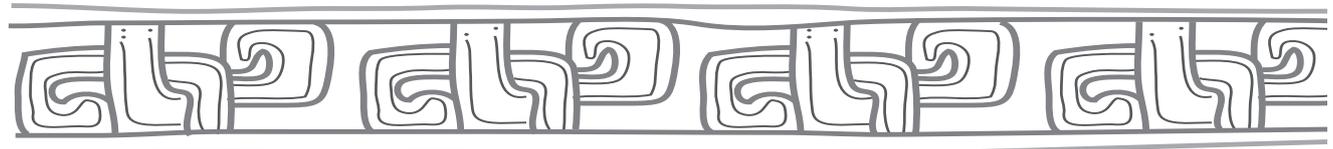
one million Americans residing in Mexico with a right to vote. On his trip to Mexico, for example, McCain met with businessmen and, despite being a Baptist —by the way, it is well known that he attends the North Phoenix Baptist Church in Arizona only sporadically— he paid his respects to Our Lady of Guadalupe at the Basílica, an activity fraught with electoral significance since McCain is extremely discrete about his religious beliefs.

In this sense, Mexico will have to develop a strategy for raising awareness among Republicans and Democrats both before and after the elections. It is no secret that the Felipe Calderón administration has very solid ties with the Republicans (in addition to their clear ideological empa-

thy) and not with the Democrats (one factor among others that favored McCain's visit and has postponed Obama's). Therefore, contacts with the Democrats will have to improve on all levels. A good starting point might be making them aware of the fact that, given globalization and the United States' interdependence with the rest of the world, and very concretely, with Mexico, its prosperity and domestic security depend on the prosperity and security of others, particularly Mexico. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Gil Troy, *Leading from the Center: Why Moderates Make the Best Presidents* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).



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