

# Obama and Peña, The New Agenda

Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla\*

Demography and geography are more relevant than we tend to think. The U.S. 2012 federal elections clearly showed that the changes experienced by new citizens of the United States have had a major impact. The United States has proved to be an indispensable, global power, as Madeleine Albright described it, and that it is a nation firmly rooted in the American hemisphere, but with limited reach. All this relates to Mexico.

In a sense, this demographic transformation has already been underway for several decades, but has only recently revealed itself as a decisive factor. Perhaps many Republicans considered Barack Obama's 2008 election the result of a series of unrepeatable mistakes, including running Sarah Palin, their vice-presidential candidate. However, the 2012 results proved that these circumstances were more structural than they had previously thought, and were part of a clear trend.

In response, the Republican strategy was to form a phalanx. They brought up issues that were extreme but related to people's day lives, such as the alleged ineffectiveness of the federal authorities, in order to take back control of the debate after having clearly lost their grip on it toward the end of George W. Bush's administration. This explains the rise of the Tea Party, a populist organization mainly focused on preventing Barack Obama's reelection. Enjoying the staunch support of Fox News, which overstated the movement's actual power, this right-wing organization was a magnet for many conservatives and moderates.

This popular movement fed into the Republican Party's highly conservative discourse which, paradoxically, some perceived as sparking a fresh debate. In particular, the move-



ment adopted an inflexible anti-immigration position that was therefore anti-reform. The Tea Party put forward the somewhat fallacious argument that the fiscal deficit was caused by the majority of undocumented immigrants using welfare services without paying taxes; it also accused them of not "Americanizing" and failing to share the country's values. Obviously, no mention was made of the fact that undocumented migrants are afraid of using the services and of being deported, that their taxes are always withheld, and that only with great difficulty could they request the returns to which they are legally entitled. Migrants also pay sales tax and do not usually demand even their most basic rights.

The credo of this small but growing and influential group within the Republican Party includes, of course, favoring armament programs regardless of existing huge military expenditures. And the movement's firm and resolute opposition to

\* Researcher at CISAN.

any tax increase means that fiscal deficits bring spending cuts back into the spotlight, and social services are the most vulnerable items in the budget.

Since 1952, the electorate in the United States has been divided: there have been more Republican presidents but the Democrats have won a majority in Congress more often. However, it has become clear that neither party can win based only on the regions where they enjoy a majority: the Democrats in the Northeast and the Pacific Coast, the Republicans in the South and Midwest. The “swing states,” which do not show a marked preference for either party, have taken on huge electoral importance. Colorado, Florida, Iowa, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Baltimore were won by President Obama in 2012 (Wisconsin was the only swing state he did not take). In particular, the Hispanic vote helped sway the election in the Democrats’ favor.<sup>1</sup>

We could ask ourselves why, if presidential candidates traditionally tried to come across as centrists while making their opponents look extremist, this time both sides opted for the extremes. I think that the parties’ adoption of extreme positions was caused by two factors: 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis. Both events have polarized ideological stances.

Many white Protestants and Catholics have identified themselves with the Republican Party and have abandoned the Democratic ranks—something that has not necessarily happened among the non-Christian white population. Fifty-nine percent of white males voted for Mitt Romney.<sup>2</sup> Obama has clearly lost the support of his country’s white males: in 2008, 43 percent voted for him, while in 2012 this percentage dropped to 39 percent.<sup>3</sup> The most recent elections show that ethnicity, race, and gender are having an impact on politics in the United States. In other words, the minorities clearly voted for Obama: 93 percent of Afro-Americans, 71 percent of Hispanics, and 73 percent of Asians.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to what Republicans believed, this coalition of minorities was formed in around 2008, when 67 percent of Hispanics voted for Obama, a figure that increased by four percent in 2012. The Afro-American vote dropped slightly, from 95 to 93 percent in 2012, while the Asian vote increased sharply from 62 to 73 percent.<sup>5</sup>

In reaction to various Republican bills limiting access to legal abortion, most women (55 percent) voted for Obama,<sup>6</sup> who also received 76 percent of the gay and bisexual vote, as well as 60 percent of votes from the youngest voters between the ages of 18 and 29. The majority of over-65s voted for Romney (56 percent).<sup>7</sup>

As Robert Kaplan says, the United States is solving problems in Afghanistan and Iraq when its priority should be Mexico.

“Fixing Mexico is more important than fixing Afghanistan.”

The coalition of minorities was definitely a watershed. This change in the country’s demographics has had important electoral consequences. While we used to talk about the potential electoral impact of the Hispanic vote, it has now become a reality. Even though only 12.5 million of the 23.7 million potential voters turned out, the sum of all the minorities made the big difference.<sup>8</sup> The so-called “Rainbow Coalition,” which struck fear into the hearts of voters who once feared the Afro-American Democratic candidacy of Jesse Jackson, leading many white Democrats to shift allegiance to the Republican Party, became powerful enough to reelect President Obama.

But geography is also important, as scholars of geopolitics know very well. During his first term, Obama did not show any great interest in Mexico, essentially demonstrating a lack of understanding about the inevitability of geography. As Robert Kaplan says, the United States is solving problems in Afghanistan and Iraq when its priority should be Mexico. “Unfortunately the U.S. has been diverted from addressing its hemispheric priorities by concentrating on the Great Middle East. Fixing Mexico,” Kaplan concludes, “is more important than fixing Afghanistan.”<sup>9</sup> Kaplan argues that although geography does not completely determine destiny, it does define the limits of the possible and goes on to explain that no wall can be built that can protect the United States if there are problems in Mexico. “Kaplan’s vision of a prosperous and stable twenty-first century [U.S.] America requires that Mexico become a first world country.”<sup>10</sup> These alarmist statements are pejorative to Mexico; the journalist considers that, like the Roman Empire, the United States could fall due to the chaos that might afflict it from the south.

Nevertheless, Kaplan fails to mention that part of the origin of the empire’s riches is what is causing the chaos. To a certain extent, the United States is responsible for the problem for two reasons. First, the weapons of war that are illegally flowing into our country from the United States: the U.S. could stem this flow; or otherwise the “boomerang” effect of all the violence they produce could turn back on it. Second, the mas-

sive demand for drugs in the United States creates violence that is not going to stop at the border. This does not mean that Mexico should shirk its responsibility for protecting its borders to prevent drug trafficking and weapons channeled to international organized criminal groups. But, it is important to remember that globalization gives rise to problems that require joint solutions.

I agree with Kaplan in that, whether we like it or not, the 3 000-kilometer border marks limits on a shared destiny, but I think that, rather than a threat, Mexico presents an opportunity to the United States, and Obama would prove himself as a statesman if he perceived it. Other regions in crisis, like the European Union, would like to have a neighbor with the potential of Mexico, with its growing middle class and capacity for consumption. Shannon K. O'Neil refers to the paradox: "But while Mexico faces a serious security threat from organized criminal groups, the country continues to collect taxes, build roads, run schools, expand social welfare programs and hold free and fair elections."<sup>11</sup>

President Obama made his first visit after his reelection to Mexico, and it was his first meeting with newly elected President Peña Nieto. Although the meeting was a resounding success, it probably did not fulfill the expectations of either head of state. It did, however, generate something very important for Mexico: the discourse has changed and that in itself represents a big step forward that can only have positive repercussions.

The two leaders discussed the issue of the "shared future" to "foster" economic development and growth. The Trans-Pacific Partnership is vital as a means of reaching an agreement with countries in the Pacific region. Mexico has been a member of the Pacific Group; therefore it is fundamental that it partner with the United States in this new role in the area.

A safe and efficient border will also be possible by focusing on facilitating smoother cross-border trade and the renewed commitment to the 21st Century Border Management Initiative. This will require investment in infrastructure, facilitate the secure flow of legal commerce, enhance law enforcement along the border, and ensure a rapid joint response to natural disasters.

It was very interesting that the presidents gave priority to education. Fewer students from Mexico than from Vietnam, China, and Japan go to study in the United States. The deputy minister for foreign affairs for North America, Jorge Alcocer, said that of the 750 000 foreigners studying in the United States, only 14 000 (1.8 percent) are Mexicans. Most are un-

dergraduates.<sup>12</sup> But we should note that, while just a few years ago there were only one million students in higher education in Mexico, today there are three million, and this represents a great potential for research and innovation.<sup>13</sup>

Although hardly any U.S. citizens come to Mexico to study, we are the third most popular study destination in Latin America. Therefore, both presidents agreed to promote greater educational exchange, and they set up the Bilateral Forum on Higher Education to foster innovation and research.

The priority given to education may well have very significant effects. Students who know about another culture can act as bridges of understanding between countries, leading to improved bilateral relations. In addition, they set up a High Level Economic Dialogue (HLED) group at the cabinet level. Members will meet once a year to advance strategic economic and commercial priorities central to promoting mutual growth. The U.S.-Mexico Transboundary Hydrocarbons Accord was also signed to bolster energy security in North America. An agreement was also reached in support of our shared duty to exercise responsible stewardship of the Gulf of Mexico, for the development of oil and gas reservoirs that cross the international maritime boundary between the two countries. And finally, the USPTO (U.S. Patent and Trademarks Office)-IMPI (Mexican Institute of Industrial Property) Memorandum of Understanding on IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) Cooperation was signed.

President Obama indicated that migration reform is one of his priorities in Congress. Although we know that this reform is of interest to Mexico because of its undoubted consequences for our country, it is undeniably an important matter for domestic politics in the United States; the issue has come to the fore since the demographic weight of the Hispanic population made its presence felt in the elections. The reform can be a sign that the country's leaders are willing to push forward policies with bipartisan support; this will be popular for a population tired of politics without results. The draft S744 bill drawn up by the bipartisan Group of Eight may be a model to follow. Although 71 percent of the popu-

The Tea Party put forward  
the somewhat fallacious argument that  
the fiscal deficit was caused by the majority  
of undocumented immigrants using welfare  
services without paying taxes.

Mexico should not bet on migration,  
nor must the United States ignore the importance  
of the Mexican workers living within its borders,  
workers who have a strong work ethic.

lation “favored finding a way for people here illegally to stay in the country if they meet certain requirements,” only 33 percent supported the Senate’s bill, while 28 percent opposed it.<sup>14</sup> Only 31 percent think that illegal immigrant workers should leave the United States, while 50 percent believe that they should be allowed to keep their jobs and request U.S. citizenship;<sup>15</sup> 78 percent support a discussion of migration reform that also addresses border security.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that despite the predominantly negative propaganda in the United States, found in the writing of both Robert Kaplan and Samuel Huntington,<sup>17</sup> the existence of more Hispanics among the United States population has led to a change of opinion, with 57 percent of U.S. Americans believing that the United States is largely responsible for illegal immigration and should take a leading role in reaching an agreement with undocumented immigrants.<sup>18</sup>

This is undoubtedly a radical change in public opinion that will help the eagerly anticipated migration reform; however, the reform clearly will not be the panacea that many believe. Border security will be strengthened and more undocumented immigrants will be deported.<sup>19</sup> It will take 10 years to get a Green Card, and from 13 to 15 years (the time frames proposed by the Democrats and Republicans, respectively) to be granted citizenship. Also, immigrants will have to pay fines and taxes during that time without having access to social services; however, as terrible as this path may appear, it is preferable to living in the shadows and in fear of the authorities. In short, some kind of migration reform is better than none, and 11 million undocumented immigrants are ready to set out on the long road toward legalization.

We could repeat that demographics count, because ultimately migration will subside when both countries are in more need of young people. In the United States, one out of eight citizens is over 65. By 2030, there will be 72.1 million senior citizens.<sup>20</sup> Worldwide, if today 30 people are eligible for a pension for every 100 workers, by 2040 that number will have grown to 70.<sup>21</sup> Populations are aging in many countries. According to statistics for Mexico, in 1990 there were 16 peo-

ple over 60 for every 100 children and young people; by 2010, that number had grown to 31.<sup>22</sup> Without a doubt, one of a country’s most important resources is its population of young workers. Mexico should not bet on migration, nor must the United States ignore the importance of the Mexican workers living within its borders, workers who have a strong work ethic and are willing to work long days in harsh conditions while earning lower wages than other workers.

The agreements at least change the overall discourses; it is time for political leaders to build on these ideas to implement clear policies designed to achieve these targets which, if properly formulated, can result in promoting the world’s most important economic region.

Classical authors have focused on different aspects: Malthus on demographics and geopolitics; George F. Kennan and Mackinder on geography. However, they were reductionists who did not see the complexity of all the factors. Also, during the research process we have forgotten the relevance of demography and geography in the relationship between the countries.<sup>23</sup> I reiterate that these factors currently define U.S.-Mexican relations. The growth of the Hispanic population in the United States and the 3000-kilometer border, at a time of global crisis, together with Mexico’s economy being on a solid footing and with a growing —albeit weakly— economy, all represent an opportunity both for the United States and Mexico. ■■■

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Chicago Council on Global Affairs/Woodrow Wilson Center, Mexico Institute, “In Mexico, President Obama Expresses Optimism for Immigration Reform, but Many Americans Express Bias against Mexican Immigrants,” May, 6, 2013, [http://wilsoncenter.org/sites/Immigration\\_Survey.pdf](http://wilsoncenter.org/sites/Immigration_Survey.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-polls>.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, Pew Hispanic Center Analysis of 2012, 2008 and 2004 National Election Pool, national exit poll results.

<sup>4</sup> <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-poll>.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-polls>.

<sup>7</sup> “The Remaking of the President. Niche Campaigning, Negativity and Nitty-gritty Organisation Put Barack Obama Back in the White House,” November 10, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21565995-niche-campaign-negativity-and-nitty-gritty-organisation-put-barack-obama-back>.

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center. Latino Participation in Presidential Elections, 1988-2012.

<sup>9</sup> Quotes from Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tell Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate*, quoted in Malise

- Ruthven, "Will Geography Decide our Destiny?" *The New York Review of Books*, February 21-March 6, 2013, pp. 43-45.
- <sup>10</sup> Malise Ruthven, op. cit., p. 45.
- <sup>11</sup> Shannon K. O'Neill, Council on Foreign Relations, "Five Myths about Mexico," May 2, 2013, <http://blogs.cfr.org/oneil/2013/05/02five-myths-about-mexico/>.
- <sup>12</sup> *Reforma*, May 9, 2013, p. 10.
- <sup>13</sup> Shannon K. O'Neill, op. cit.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jim Ávila and Serena Marshall, "Most Americans Don't Know Much about Immigration Bill," *ABC News*, May 1, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/05/most-americans-dont-know-much-about-immigration-bill/>.
- <sup>15</sup> The Chicago Council on Global Affairs/Woodrow Wilson Center, Mexico Institute, op. cit.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Kaplan wonders how U.S. values can coexist side by side with the chaos in Mexico, and Samuel Huntington thinks the main threat to the United States is Mexican immigration because Mexican values are different from those in the United States.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> President Obama has deported the largest number of migrants; the figure reached 409 000 in 2012.
- <sup>20</sup> 2010 Census Data on Aging, [http://www.aoa.gov/aging\\_statistics/census.Population/census](http://www.aoa.gov/aging_statistics/census.Population/census).
- <sup>21</sup> [http://sis/files/media/csis/pubs/aging\\_index.pdf](http://sis/files/media/csis/pubs/aging_index.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/temasv2/contenido/DemyPob/epobla41.asp?s=est&c=29256>.
- <sup>23</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: London 1919-1944* (London: Penguin, 1944). George Kennan created the policy of containment against the Soviet Union launched during the Cold War.