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# Is Mexico Better Off with a Donkey or an Elephant in the White House?



State Department - Photo by Freddie Everett/Wikimedia Commons

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken holds a joint press conference with Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, in Mexico City, Mexico, on October 8, 2021.

The study of U.S. foreign policy includes something called the “partisan gap.” Basically, this means that each of the political parties is associated with specific strategies and issues on the international stage; in addition, the party that occupies the White House is the one that moves the pieces around on the international chessboard. In line with this logic, the Republican Party’s foreign policy strategy is unilateralist, aggressive, and coercive. The Democratic Party, for its part, implements a multilateral, less militarist, more cooperative policy. On these issues, the Democrats are more interested in fighting climate change, and the Republicans, more concerned with putting an end to international terrorism. Foreign governments and international public opinion are not immune to this partisan gap.

In Mexico particularly, there are two misunderstandings about U.S. foreign policy. The first is the idea that it is exclusively influenced by the president in office; the second refers to the belief that the president’s party affiliation is what shapes the environment, the political attitudes, the agenda, and in general the “intermestic” relationship between Mexico and the United States during each four-year U.S. presidential term.

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north. And few societies suffer as much angst and great expectations as Mexico’s over the results of U.S. balloting. If the new resident of the White House is from the blue party, Mexican society breaths easy, and the press predicts a bonanza in bilateral relations; if, on the contrary, the red party is in office, chats on the street are flooded with pessimism and even the Mexican stock market succumbs to uncertainty.

In this context, the crucial question arises about what it is that motivates these attitudes and pre-conceptions. Is it merely the presidents’ discursive styles? Is it the profiles of the ambassadors and diplomatic delegations that Republicans and Democrats send south? Would it have to do with conflicting views expressed in party platforms about the strategic alliance with its biggest partner and closest neighbor?

When you assume that bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States take on the color of the party of the occupant of the White House, you are understanding the many facets of the bilateral relationship as mere mechanical. The truth is that it depends more on interactions subject to local, national, and global situations that can be as tranquil as a peaceful lake or as furious as the ocean during a hurricane. It can even be the case that many aspects of bilateral relations flow positively, but a single issue can tempestuously revolutionize intermestic politics of both nations.

Henry Lane Wilson is one of the best-known U.S. ambassadors and undoubtedly one of the least appreciated. The path the Mexican Revolution took is owed to his interference and conspiracies, both well documented in history books and still reverberating in the collective memory of our open veins. This shows us how we remember public figures and episodes in history. So, why do we insist on coloring bilateral relations red or blue and not depicting them in all their complexity?

Two important questions about Mexicans' political imaginary lead us to understand bilateral relations in terms of red and blue. The first involves the nature of our own party system. The second emerges from our exacerbated presidentialism.

Mexico's political parties are diametrically different kinds of entities from their U.S. American counterparts. Mexico's parties are much more centralized, rigid, and hierarchical. They have national platforms and action plans developed from the top and a process of political organization that takes place without such very close ties with the diverse, changing interests of their members.

In addition to the different organizational practices and forms of operation, the very ecosystem of the parties is different. The U.S. political system is multi-partisan, but it is structured to maintain only two dominant parties. The electoral system based on principles like "first pass the post" and "winner takes all" perpetuates the domination of only two parties and makes it difficult for new organizations to enter the public sphere. U.S. electoral history has always been dominated by two opposing parties, but they have not always been the Republican and Democratic branch parties that we know today. The modern party system was forged between the 1930s and 1968.

Mexico also has a multi-party system and diverse conditions foster the rise and fall of new party organizations. The relative ease of forming a political party, the continuing existence in the public sphere of parties with few followers,

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the candidacies for proportional representation in which the parties obtain seats in legislatures without having to get a majority of votes in electoral districts all have the effect that politicians are often more limited by their parties than they are accountable to their voters. So, in the Mexican case, political parties have more influence on agendas and the design of politics, above all if compared with the dual mandate that U.S. politicians have: on the one hand, the mandate from their parties, but also from their voters, to both of whom they owe accountability.

Another of the conditions to consider in explaining mistaken ideas about the effect of U.S. parties on bilateral Mexican-U.S. relations involves the central role of the executive in government. Mexico's caudillo tradition has solidified the idea that the president is the political leader, responsible for the big national decisions.

On the other hand, the U.S. founding fathers sketched out a unified government made up of three separate but equally important branches. Foreign policy came under the jurisdiction of the executive and the legislative branches. Then, greater U.S. involvement internationally and more dynamic activity on the world stage would lead to more transcendental decisions being made by the executive branch given their urgency or the need for discretion. However, the executive is not made up exclusively by the inhabitant of the second floor of the White House.

Numerous agencies contribute to decision-making about U.S. international activities. Some of the most iconic are the National Security Council (NSC) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the case of the executive branch, and the Congressional Research Service (CRS) on the part of the legislature. The CRS writes up reports on issues and regions on the request of members of Congress. The CIA, as is public knowledge, is the organization in charge of providing intelligence services to the government, for example, on issues such as counter-terrorism, nuclear arms, cyber-attacks, and any other kind of aggression that could be considered of interest to U.S. security. The National Security Council is very different from the other two organizations: it is a collegial body that can meet at a moment's notice and includes all the heads of agencies and departments involved in issues, nations, or international bodies that could exert pressure on national security.

Once we understand in general terms that a huge edifice of individuals and organizations influences and has a capacity to act on U.S. foreign policy, it is inadmissible

to think that the president's political party is the fundamental element needed for understanding the relationship with its strategic ally south of the border. If the collective misunderstanding cannot be explained by governmental functioning, we can look at its roots in history.

In the two centuries of Mexico-U.S. relations, we encounter both painful and glorious episodes. We can remember different demonstrations of solidarity from each side of the border to the other, but also systematic violations of the other's integrity, which have left both countries with open wounds. Entire volumes have been written to document the episodes and key players in the bilateral relationship, and therefore it is not practical to try to convey them here. So, if we consider that the modern U.S. party system dates from the 1930s, and that Mexicans tend to think that the resident of the White House's being a Democrat or a Republican is a fundamental explanation of bilateral relations, I will focus my attention on recent iconic moments in that history, mentioning to which party belonged the chief executive in that specific time. All this is to be able to present a balance sheet about which of the two U.S. parties has been more successful in building a positive relationship with Mexico.

The Mexican Farm Labor Agreement created the Bracero Program and was signed in 1942 under the administration of Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In the international context of World War II, Mexico and the United States created regional productive chains that benefitted both countries greatly. However, the program ended in 1964 under the presidency of Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson due to the severe criticisms of its violations of workers' rights. That is, both the creation and the termination of this controversial program happened under blue governments.

The second key episode in U.S. contemporary history is the negotiation and signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994. Actually, the interest in negotiating a regional free trade agreement dated from the Republican presidency of Ronald Reagan and a large part of the negotiations took place during the administration of Republican George Bush, even though it came into effect under the government of Democrat William Clinton. Thus, on balance, the presidencies behind the trade agreement, also controversial in terms of perceptions and effects, were red.

In late 1994, Mexico was fraught with one of the deepest economic crises in its history, known at home as "the

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Mistake of December," and north of the border as "the Tequila Effect," in which the peso devaluated abruptly. Support for Mexico's economy would come from the United States. Democrat Bill Clinton asked the U.S. Congress for a bail-out package, which Congress denied. However, the Department of the Treasury was able to send US\$20 billion from its Exchange Stabilization Fund. Thanks to this and US\$30 billion more in international credits brokered by the U.S., the Mexican economy stabilized.

One of the recent still unresolved problems between Mexico and the United States is drug trafficking. In 2008, the U.S. Congress approved a security assistance and cooperation program known as the Merida Initiative. It included funds, equipment, arms, and training projected for three years. This critical program was negotiated and implemented under Republican President George W. Bush.

The most recent episode in bilateral relations was the renegotiation of NAFTA, which would give rise to a new trade deal known as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). These tense negotiations and the huge uncertainty that accompanied them took place during the presidency of Republican, discursively anti-Mexican President Donald Trump.

Looking at the key historic episodes in bilateral relations explained above, it is clear that most of the action took place during Republican administrations. It is possible that the visibility of these important events, perceived ambivalently by Mexicans, as well as the fact that they happened to occur mostly under Republican presidents, are the reasons behind the forging of the negative association with Republican administrations. Democratic presidents seem to have been more effective at building positive environments, at least in their discourse, with their closest ally. However, these two dynamics do not imply that we will be better off with the blues than with the reds: our relationship has so many rough spots and is subject to so many changes that the color of the chief executive's party is not as important as is commonly believed. ■■■