

# THE U.S. ELECTIONS

## *Interpretations and Implications for Mexico*

Rafael Fernández de Castro\*



Photos: AFP

Mr. and Mrs. Clinton enjoying the victory.

This article will attempt to explain the meaning of the simultaneous reelection of both President William Clinton and a Republican Congress and analyze some of the main aspirations and the most significant challenges that President Clinton will face during his second term. It will also briefly review the implications for Mexico.

The reelection of both Clinton and a Republican Congress has been interpreted as an endorsement of the status quo: Americans are content with a Democratic president but since they do not trust him very much, they decided to reelect a Republican Congress to increase their political system's checks and balances. This interpretation, seemingly valid at first glance, is questionable for two important reasons: the enormous abstentionism and the 1994 election results.

According to the weekly *The Economist*, only 49 percent of eligible voters actually cast their ballots in the last November 5 federal elections, the lowest percentage since 1924. If the status quo was endorsed, then, it was only endorsed by a minority of the electorate.

At the same time, the 1996 electoral results contrast sharply with the results and interpretation of the 1994 elections. The Republican Party won the majority of both houses in that election in the middle of a presidential term, something that had not happened in the last 40 years. This

\* Researcher at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM).



President Clinton with the press after his win.

surprising Republican victory was interpreted in exactly the opposite way from the 1996 results: it was a clear demonstration of the electorate's dissatisfaction with the federal government. Most analysts interpreted the arrival of Gingrich and 77 Republican newcomers to the House as an anti-Washington—that is, anti-status quo—vote. Gingrich's anti-government creed, the "Contract With America," which won him the House is testimony to that rebellion against the status quo.

It is difficult to believe that this dissatisfaction rapidly disappeared from the minds of the U.S. electorate. It would seem, rather, that the voters did not consider any of the presidential contenders (Clinton, Dole or Perot) an option to their uneasiness with Washington and, resentful, they simply decided not to go to the polls. Meanwhile, the "minority" that did vote clearly cast a conservative ballot: it elected a Democratic president dressed up like a conservative and, to ensure that he would not try to change his clothes, it imposed one of the most conservative Congresses in recent decades.

The self-exclusion of an important part of the electorate

from the process may become a concern if we consider the outbreaks of violence in the United States in recent years: religious and racial fundamentalism have both spawned church burnings, collective suicides or urban neo-Nazi movements. In that same period, the world saw the sinister advent of terrorism in the heart of the United States: the bombings in Oklahoma and Atlanta.

#### PRESIDENT CLINTON'S CHALLENGES AND ASPIRATIONS

Analysts emphasized both before and after the elections that the average American decided to reelect President Clinton for two main reasons: the good shape the economy is in and Republican

contender Robert Dole's inability to establish an electoral platform and put it across to the voters. The low inflation, unemployment and interest rates during Clinton's first term had not existed since 1968. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, the most important factor was that Clinton convinced the electorate that his actions had an impact on that economic well-being. The Republican candidate, ex-Senate leader Robert Dole, was destined to failure. His only hope was that a scandal shatter Clinton's hope of reelection.

However, to a certain extent, the analysts have left out the main reason for Clinton's reelection: his political acumen. Several times in the past, as governor of Arkansas and clearly in 1994, Clinton has shown great ability to reinvent himself and recover after crushing defeats. In 1994, after the overwhelming Republican victory in the congressional elections, Gingrich took center stage in U.S. politics. This allowed him, and not the president, to impose the government's agenda. After a few weeks of consideration, Clinton returned with his new, moderately conservative profile and made some of the most popular Republican initiatives his

own: the reform of the welfare system and the reduction of the budget deficit.

The 1996 campaign was the last for one of the ablest candidates the American public has ever known. Some chroniclers of the presidential campaign observed that Clinton could not only imitate any regional accent but that, quite naturally, he was able to steal the limelight away from anyone who introduced him to the jubilant voters. Clinton has distinguished himself for his stage presence, both before a crowd and on television, and he also has the innate politician's ability to create the image of feeling good about patting people on the back. At moments of tragedy for the American people, he has shown his ability to console the victims and move the entire nation, as he did for example, with his historic speech at the funeral of the Oklahoma blast victims.

Analysts have also emphasized the fact that William Clinton is the first Democratic president reelected since the legendary Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). Clearly, he cannot aspire again to reelection. Clinton's real test will be earning himself a place in history with a legacy and popularity similar to FDR's. Many people think that Roosevelt reinvented the U.S. political system by creating the welfare state. His legacy made it possible to build a scenario of domestic political harmony which would be the context for the most prosperous period his nation ever knew.

Clinton's main challenge —perhaps of the same proportions that Roosevelt faced more than half a century ago— is to incorporate marginal sectors of the population into the U.S. political mainstream, giving both the militias and the ethnic and religious fundamentalists their place in the game of U.S. democracy. This is the only way the grave threats of violence and terrorism can be erased from the country which, paradoxically, has the largest army on Earth. Only a policy which includes —not excludes— will create the social and political framework required to begin to cure the social cancers in the United States which have become more acute at the end of the century: drug addiction, gangs and delinquency and neo-fascism.

Foreign policy has traditionally been one of the great temptations of second terms. Clinton has shown that he quickly learned to move on the international scene. After

*The reelection of both  
Clinton and a Republican Congress  
has been interpreted as an  
endorsement of the status quo.*

a torturous beginning in which he took more than a year to set up his foreign policy team, Clinton ended his first four years in office with the trust of many international leaders, among them Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo.

More than one international analyst has speculated about whether Clinton will attempt to leave an important legacy as an international statesman by trying to achieve the following goals: expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; fostering elections in Bosnia, strengthening civilian rule and thus creating the conditions for pulling U.S. troops out; opening up to China and at the same time not moving away from Japan and other Pacific Rim countries; and, lastly, creating a new form of hemispheric cooperation in the Americas based on free trade and strengthening democracies.

Clinton will have to dodge many dangers and deal with many challenges to avoid going down in history like the last two presidents who were reelected, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Nixon is associated with a greater propensity for scandal in second terms. Clearly, Clinton is a politician who has been close to scandal, and he will therefore have to take care that an ex-mistress or conflict of interests do not destroy the possibility of being remembered as a popular president. The second challenge he must face sooner or later in his new term is an economic slowdown and even the possibility of a recession. An economy like the U.S. one, which has grown for the last five years, is sure to hit a pothole in the next four. Just when and how it is managed will influence the legacy Clinton is trying to forge.

## ONCE AGAIN A UNITED REPUBLICAN CONGRESS

The one-hundred-and-fourth Congress (the 1994-1996 session) showed a series of tendencies which little favored U.S. international policy and cooperation with Mexico: it was isolationist, parochial and neo-populist. The majority of representatives in the one-hundred-and-fifth Congress won their seats in the post-Cold War period and are not very familiar with, much less interested in, their country's international commitments. Far from being interested in reforming the United Nations system, they ask themselves how to get rid of an organization that costs the U.S. taxpayer so much money.

This Congress, less and less trained for forging U.S. international policy, is today even more important for U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations for two reasons: the growing interdependence between both countries and the fact that a series of mechanisms have been put in place in which Congress intervenes directly, like the certification of Mexico's cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking, the annual report on human rights in Mexico and the evaluation of the development of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Mexican authorities have no alternative but to strengthen the nation so it is less vulnerable to the furious criticisms that sooner or later will come from the U.S. capitol from legislators like Jesse Helms (Republican from North Carolina), who will head up the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, or New Jersey's new senator, Robert Toricelli.

Clinton, for his part, has shown a clearly positive attitude toward Mexico, and he

rapidly understood the strategy of the relationship with his neighbor to the south. When Clinton was president-elect, the first head of state he met with was Carlos Salinas, in Austin, Texas. Thanks to a determined campaign, the U.S. Congress approved NAFTA in 1993; and, in early 1995, he rapidly and decisively authorized a loan unprecedented in size to ensure the stabilization of Mexico's and the rest of Latin America's financial markets.

It is a matter of concern that Mexico's prolonged economic crisis, its rocky road to democracy and the lack of political determination on the part of Mexican diplomats to continue actively participating in the U.S. decision-making process have weakened the bilateral cooperation forged during the 1989-1993 period. This point will necessarily influence our relations with the Democratic president and the Republican Congress that came out of the November 5 elections. ❧



Mr. and Mrs. Robert Dole accepting defeat.