

The Mexico Agenda

The Battle for the White House

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Jonathan Ernst/REUTERS

We are a couple of months away from the U.S. presidential election. One way of looking at the November voting is to examine two types of indicators, but they will give us different results. If we look only at the golden rule of U.S. elections, according to which its citizens vote “their pocketbooks,” given that there is eight percent unemployment and poor economic growth, we can conclude that the winner will be Republican Mitt Romney. There’s another rule that says, “He with his hand on the tiller has the advantage,” which means that the incumbent is the probable winner, leading us to think that President Barack Obama is likely to come out on top. It should be noted that both rules actually ignore certain circumstances, which is why what will happen is not that predictable. The United States is going through

one of its biggest crises since the 1929 crash, and the world is facing an overall recession or at the very least, extremely low growth.

The polls have offered changing results, and, while at times the gap between the contenders narrows, most surveys put President Obama in the lead. The August 24 CNN network poll gives him 49 percent of the votes and Romney, 47 percent. However, since the difference is only two percent, they can technically be considered tied. The conventions had their effect, though, and in the September 2 polls, Obama maintained his 49 percent and Romney dropped to 44. Undoubtedly, William Clinton’s speech had a positive effect on prospective voters.¹

It is interesting and revealing to analyze how the vote breaks down demographically. While Obama is expected to get 54 percent of women’s votes, Romney can only expect

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42 percent. This has been particularly influenced by a statement by six-term Republican Congressman and senatorial hopeful Todd Akin from Missouri, who is close to conservative Christians; in an interview, he said that women had the natural physical capacity to avoid pregnancy when being raped, in the case of “legitimate rapes.” He added that under no circumstances was he in favor of a woman’s right to abortion, a position that is far from that of the average American: 83 percent of the public agrees with the right to abortion in cases of incest, rape, or when the life of the woman is in danger, and only 15 percent think abortion should be illegal in all cases. Also, up to 35 percent of people think that it should be legal under all circumstances.

Among the Latino population, Barack Obama has a 35-percent lead on Romney. In the last elections, he received a historic 67 percent of the Latino vote. It should be remembered that President George W. Bush had obtained 44 percent of that vote, which was a very high number for the time. The very hard, conservative position of the Republicans and Romney himself has caused the Latinos who supported Bush to distance themselves from his party. At the Republican convention, Romney talked about making the lives of undocumented immigrants so difficult that they would voluntarily return to their home countries. He also talked about reinforcing and strengthening the fence along the southern U.S. border.

Undoubtedly, the Tea Party, the ultra-conservative wing of the Republican Party, has had a negative effect on the Republicans’ position. The economic crisis causes people to take extreme ideological positions, and, for the time being, the Republicans’ position has chased away Latino voters, two-thirds of whom favor Obama, although it has broadened its conservative base.

All this is happening, naturally, in the anti-immigrant atmosphere prevailing among the general public because of the economic crisis. Arizona’s SB1070 is a clear example of this, by criminalizing undocumented migration and authorizing local police to ask anyone for migratory documents if any doubt arises about their migratory status. The law authorizes the police to act based on a supposed ethnic “profile,” giving them the right to ask anyone for identification based only on his/her physical appearance, which is clearly discriminatory. President Obama took the case to the Supreme Court in an attempt to have it declared unconstitutional, because if Arizona applied this law, it would be assuming a prerogative reserved for the federal government, that of dealing with immigration. The court’s decision was divided and unclear, to the extent that it stated

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that, while that task does fall to the federal government, the local government can regulate the behavior of local authorities when it has a “reasonable” suspicion that the presence of these individuals is illegal.

While Obama did not spend his efforts and political capital on achieving immigration reform—he preferred to use them for health care reform—and his government carried out almost 400 000 deportations in 2011, he has managed to pass some compensatory measures, like the Dream Act. This legislation, which temporarily suspends deportation of people under the age of 30 without criminal records, was enthusiastically received by many Latinos, who stood in long lines to present their applications.

It is clear that Romney intends to ignore something undeniable: that to be competitive, the U.S. labor market requires young, cheap labor in certain sectors like agriculture, construction, and tourism. Barack Obama, on the other hand, has made speeches in which he clearly recognizes this link based on the needs of both Mexico and the United States, without recognizing the existence of a transnational labor market. He does not ignore the problem of having 12 million undocumented immigrants in the country, but he knows that it is neither possible nor desirable to repatriate all of them.

The problem is very complex and taking some concrete measures, albeit partial, is a good start. Another fact is that the U.S. population is aging, and it is very important, as they say, “to seek to build bipartisan consensus on a smart immigration policy that takes advantage of immigrants’ skills at both the high and low ends of the employment ladder.”²

The Republicans have accused Obama of taking these measures to increase his Latino vote and that is why there was no way they were going to support immigration reform. It is true that the decision to not deport young people is tinged with the election process, but the Republicans could already have proposed a similar intelligent measure to the same end. The vacuum of viable responses by them has facilitated that the Hispanic community commit itself more deeply for the time being to President Obama.

Even though during previous elections, analysts talked about the Latino vote only in terms of its potential, since then it has become indispensable for winning. It is now the job of Latino leaders to know how to make their political clout felt, above all in swing states like North Carolina, Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio, Iowa, Colorado, Nevada, and Virginia, whose votes at the Electoral College come to 85 of the 270 needed to be elected president.

On the other hand, we understand that developing the appropriate discourse is no easy task for the Democrats either. They can no longer talk about hope, or mobilize people the way Barack Obama did with his old liberal discourse. Therefore, the president's speech at the convention was not full of promises, but rather underlined the need to continue working hard to achieve the changes required to build a more egalitarian society and climb out of the crisis, since the majority of the population does not see improvement in their current circumstances. The two big achievements the Democrats point to are the death of Bin Laden and job creation, although not in the numbers required. They argue that the crisis created by President George W. Bush has made for a lot of work and that they are moving ahead in the right direction. However, 63 percent of the population thinks that the country is going in the wrong direction.³

It should be underlined that Republicans are more enthusiastic today about going to the polls (35 percent) than Democrats (29 percent). This contrasts with the two-thirds of Democratic voters who participated in the last elections, which undoubtedly was fundamental for giving Barack Obama the win, since, historically, Republicans vote more than Democrats.

On the other hand, the recent Republican convention did not have the desired effect. Seemingly, voters' intentions did not increase in their favor as expected, while at the previous convention, John McCain achieved a five-percent jump.

Undoubtedly, picking several Latinos as speakers, like the mayor of San Antonio, of Mexican origin, and Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's opening the Democratic convention and presiding over it were good strategies for consol-

idating the Latino vote. It should be underlined that, after the Republican convention, Obama has a five-point lead in Ohio, a state that the last 10 presidents have won. He also has the advantage in eight of the nine swing states, except North Carolina. In several of these states, unemployment is lower than the national average. To date, Obama seems to have 221 Electoral College votes against Romney's 191. This puts the latter at a clear disadvantage because it means that he would have to win all the swing states, which is unlikely.⁴

OTHER NUMBERS TO CONSIDER

In addition to Republicans' historical tendency to vote more, 48 percent of possible independent voters support Romney, while 45 percent favor Obama. Another significant number is that 50 percent of people over 50 would vote for Romney, while 45 percent would cast their ballots for Obama. Fifty-three percent of men support Romney, against the 43 percent who prefer Obama. Lastly, the Afro-American vote continues to lean fundamentally toward Obama. With all this, the polls offer us a still uncertain panorama at the time this article was written.

The issue of the gay community has been handled well by President Obama, who has expressed his support for marriage between same-sex couples. Nevertheless, he has made it very clear that the states will make the final decision on this issue. In 2010, he signed the repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" law on sexual orientation both for men and for women in the armed forces.

Obama has tried to present his health care reform as a success, although it is precisely for this reform that the Republicans criticize him and mobilize to try to get the Supreme Court to declare it unconstitutional, which they still have not managed. In their opinion, the reform makes health insurance mandatory. What the Republicans are really worried about is that two scenarios can arise from this: that businesses will have to pay workers' insurance, or that taxes will have to be raised to be able to insure everyone.

On the other hand, the auto industry bailout has been a success. However, the Republicans accuse Obama of being a socialist for intervening so much in the economy. The fact is that Vice-president Joe Biden was applauded when in his acceptance speech for the nomination for reelection he said that, if he had to ask whether America was better off now, he would respond that it is better off: "Bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive."⁵

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We have to pay attention to the economy because there are indications that it is starting to improve; if that continues, Obama will undoubtedly have better prospects, although we cannot ignore the visible clash between the Democratic and Republican Parties. In his book *The Age of Austerity: How Scarcity Will Remake American Politics*, Thomas Edsall states that the Republicans are afraid immigrants and their children are literally changing the face of the U.S. electorate, and the “black” and “brown” minorities are reaping the benefits. The response has been for the Republican Party’s counting on continuing to win by remaining a party for white people, despite the growth of the minorities.⁶

THE MEXICO-U.S. BILATERAL AGENDA

Now, we have to ask ourselves what would happen to the bilateral agenda between Mexico and the United States if one or the other candidate wins. First of all, we have to put to one side two notions: one, that we are necessarily better off with the Democrats, and two, that bilateral relations play a part in the campaign.

It is true that Democrats are less hard-line on issues that interest us like immigration, but there is no causal relationship between Democratic presidents and Mexico being better off. We cannot forget that, given big union support for the Democrats, traditionally, Democratic presidents are more protectionist than Republicans, and this closes markets to our products and services. It was precisely during the presidency of the first President Bush when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed, which required negotiating and signing parallel environmental and labor agreements to get through the ratification process in Congress. Undeniably, NAFTA helped increase trade and investment. As a result, trade between Mexico and the U.S. has more than tripled since 1994 and investment has increased six-fold, plus the creation of a dispute-resolution system that replaced the old system based on the whim of the moment.⁷

We have also faced important situations when Democrats have been in the White House, like what has been called the “error of December” in 1994, when President William Clinton used his presidential prerogative to open up a line of credit to Mexico for US\$20 billion, of which more than US\$11 billion were spent, earning more than US\$500 million for the U.S. Treasury. This sparked a lot of criticism both in the United States and in Mexico for having offered a

loan of that size, and, in the case of Mexico, for having accepted the harsh conditions. However, the fact was that our country was in crisis, and it was President Clinton who, despite Congress’s opposition, offered the bailout —guaranteed, it should be pointed out, by Mexico’s oil revenues. Clinton sent the world a clear message: the United States was not going to let Mexico sink, so he helped us get out of the crisis before anyone thought possible.

About the second belief, that Mexico is fundamental for the United States and that their relationship with us is central to their campaigns, nothing could be farther from the truth. Even though Mexico is the country that most affects Americans’ daily lives, paradoxically, it is ignored by their campaigns.⁸ If we look at other issues like the economy, we can see that Barack Obama has a much more protectionist attitude than Mitt Romney. The president’s policy is to create incentives for the big corporations to return to the U.S. and create jobs there; on the other hand, however, as already mentioned, his position on immigration is more realistic and recognizes the benefits of young, abundant labor for competitiveness, which is why he looks for better alternatives to the problem.

In general, foreign policy is not important to the candidates except when the country is at war or when other countries are in crisis. Fortunately or unfortunately, the crime and violence in Mexico does not come under that heading for them despite the fact that, for example, high-power weapons that are flooding into Mexico come from the United States. The borders are too porous to be able to think that violence and organized crime are just going to stay on our side.

With regard to arms trafficking, we can say that Obama has kept his eye on the problem. That is no easy task given that the two countries have very different laws regarding the possession of weapons. Romney’s position is consistent with the Republican Party’s and the big gun lobbies, who maintain that neither the sale nor the possession of weapons should be limited. “Over 90 percent of the arms used by the Mexican cartels —from pistols to assault weapons to military-grade

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grenade launchers — are purchased at sporting good stores and gun shows on the U.S. side of the border and then smuggled south.”⁹

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Regarding drug trafficking, which does so much damage to Mexico —that is where its importance lies—, the candidates have opted to not touch on the issue. Pressure will resume once one of the two is sworn in. What is more, I believe the trend will be to deal with “drugs” not only as a criminal matter, but also as a health issue. Hopefully, Mexico will also look at it in the same way, broadening out its view in order to have more tools to fight and come up with a more effective strategy to handle this complex issue.

With the change in administrations in Mexico, the opportunity arises for broadening out, deepening, and intensifying the anti-drug strategy with less violence and efforts put into health and education to put a dent in consumption both here and in the United States. In any case, the fundamental thing is that there be cooperation between the two countries in the field of intelligence to prevent and not only counter-attack as has happened up until now.

An important attempt at cooperation in this field has been the partial —or rather, unilateral— measure, the Mérida Initiative. It has even caused conflicts over money among the ministries involved. Although the goal of sharing the responsibility for drug trafficking and organized crime with Mexico has not been reached, this initiative has made Mexico better equipped and created certain bases for useful exchange.¹⁰

What definitely interests both countries is getting out of the crisis. Unfortunately, party interests very often prevent politicians from coming up with the most appropriate solutions. The United States has not had a statesman in office with sufficient vision to see Mexico as an opportunity. The answer is not in Europe, which is also in crisis, or in China,

which at the end of the day is the United States’ biggest competitor. Seeing how our economies can complement each other can help both the United States and Mexico resolve the situation. “Due to the geographical proximity and a key of complementarities, economic cooperation with Mexico is one of the best ways for the United States to improve its global competitiveness and defend American industry.”¹¹

While the agendas of the two countries would seem not to have anything in common, looking more closely at the problems, considering both perspectives, would make it possible to find ways of dealing with them since, whether we like it or not, they are shared, and therefore require joint solutions. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Ashley Killough, “Obama Expands Advantage over Romney,” political tocker.blogs.cnn.com, accessed September 9, 2012.

² Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., CSIS Commission on Smart Power, “A Smarter, More Secure America” (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2007), p. 54, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf.

³ See <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/>.

⁴ Antonio Caño, “Obama cobra ventaja tras las convenciones,” *El país* (Americas edition), September 11, 2012, p. 5, and *Real Clear Politics*, September 12, 2012, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/2012/09/12/team_obama_has_post-convention_glow_289882.html.

⁵ See http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57505234-503544/biden-we-are-better-off-bin-laden-is-dead-and-general-motors-is-alive/. [Editor’s Note.]

⁶ Paul Krugman and Robin Wells, “Getting Away with It,” *The New York Review of Books* vol. 59, no. 12, July 12-August 15, 2012, p. 9.

⁷ Andrew Selee, *More than Neighbors: An Overview of Mexico and U.S.-Mexico Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Mexico Institute-Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, n. d.), <http://www.statealliancepartnership.org/Resources/Mexico.More%20Than%20Neighbors3.pdf>.

⁸ Pamela K. Starr, “Mexico and United States: A Window of Opportunity?” A Pacific Council on International Policy Special Report, April 2009, <http://www.pacificcouncil.org/document.doc?id=35>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Clare Ribando Seelkey and June S. Beittel, “Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues,” CRS Report for Congress, July 6, 2009, p. 13, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/127288.pdf>.

¹¹ Christopher E. Wilson, “Economic Ties between the United States and Mexico” (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, November 2010), p. 14.