

July 1st: Should Americans be Concerned about Mexico's Presidential Elections and Its Candidates?

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With elections fast approaching in Mexico, and Mexicans still deciding on their preferred candidate, a question has been raised concerning United States views of the presidential candidates and how these might affect U.S. interests and the future of U.S.-Mexican relations.

Not surprisingly, there is no official governmental view of the Mexican elections and its presidential candidates. It may seem like President Trump represents an official and, at times, hostile view but he has said nothing about the elections or candidates via twitter or elsewhere. Traditionally the United States has maintained a public discourse that it can and will work with all candidates and political parties. Its primary interest in Mexico, as in all countries, is that the elections are credible, widely accepted by the citizens of that country, and contribute to the country's stability.

In the following paragraphs, we will summarize some of the differing views and perceptions among the United States public about Mexico generally, regarding specific electoral issues of particular interest to the United States public, and highlight the limited knowledge about the presidential candidates in the United States. It is important to underscore that we are unaware of any polling that would give a sense of American views of specific Mexican candidates. Our goal here is to offer a flavor of general public attitudes about Mexico and the candidates as they are expressed in the popular media and by significant political actors in the United States. In no case are we seeking to express our own views on these issues.

U.S. Public Opinion remains positive about Mexico despite negative rhetoric

President Trump's oft repeated views of Mexicans, immigrants, transnational criminal organizations, and the urgency of a border wall between both countries have been justifiably upsetting to most Mexicans. Given the President's periodic outbursts against Mexico, one could also expect that U.S. public attitudes about Mexico might turn decidedly negative as well. When asked in June 2016 about where the future of the U.S.-Mexico relationship would go, 63% said it would get worse if Donald Trump were elected president.² Yet despite Mr. Trump's election and critical tweets, public attitudes about Mexico remain generally positive within the United States. According to an analysis conducted by the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute, roughly 64% of Americans retained a favorable view of Mexico in 2017³ a percentage comparable to the 61% favorability found in the latest GALLUP poll from February, 2018.⁴

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² *American Attitudes on Mexico*. National Survey Results. Vianovo (June 2016). 8.

³ Christopher Wilson, Pablo Parás, Enrique Enríquez. *A Critical Juncture: Public Opinion in U.S.-Mexico Relations*. The Wilson Center Mexico Institute, Walsh School of Foreign Service (November 2017).

⁴ Megan Brenan. *Countries with most and least favorable image in U.S.* GALLUP (February 2018).
<http://news.gallup.com/poll/228293/americans-canada-north-korea-least.aspx>

Unsurprisingly, American attitudes about Mexico vary by regions, age, and political leanings yet remain generally positive. For example, the Pew Research Center found that 57% of people in the United States living within 200 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border have favorable views of Mexico. Interestingly, favorability increases to 66% among those living more than 200 miles from the border. Additionally, Vianovo polling data found that 80% of Americans who say they travel frequently to Mexico see it as a “Good neighbor,” while 53% of those who have never visited Mexico say it is the “Source of Problems.”⁵

Polling data from 2016 that separates Americans by age group found that young Americans ages 18-29 are more likely to have a favorable view of Mexico: 27% favorability compared with just 14% among Americans 65 and older, suggesting a positive trajectory for the future of the relationship. The survey also found that Americans are starkly divided along party lines in their views of Mexico: there is a 65% unfavorability rating of Mexico among Americans who identified themselves as “very conservative,” while just 16% view Mexico unfavorably when they identify as “very liberal.”⁶

For those who care deeply about maintaining a positive relationship between Mexico and the United States, the polling about U.S. public attitudes seems to hold some promise. Despite the challenges of the current political climate, there would appear to be a strong reservoir of positive attitudes towards Mexico that suggest a resiliency in the relationship that may transcend the current moment and lead to greater understanding and collaboration in the future.

What are the issues Americans care most about in Mexico?

Ultimately, Mexicans will decide the election based on the issues about which they feel most strongly. But, which issues are Americans concerned about as well? There are many, of course, based on geographic proximity and complex historic and demographic factors. Included among these are environmental concerns such as water management and pollution. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, we will focus on four: economic concerns especially those related to the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement; migration and border security; transnational criminal organizations; and energy.

President Trump’s campaign and first year in office have centered on three issues of great importance to Americans and ultimately Mexicans. These concerns reflect growing economic anxiety among American workers in the historic industrial sectors, as well as within the growing low skills service sector. It reflects decades of declining employment and wages among the unionized manufacturing sector in the United States, and the more recent crisis posed by the “great recession” of 2007 and 2008 that hit the fragile middle and working classes extremely hard.

Candidate and now President Trump effectively harnessed these anxieties and helped focus their ire on long-simmering discontent with global trade deals, especially with China and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He promised to strike a better deal for American workers that put their interests above those of global capital. In particular, he promised to renegotiate NAFTA a deal he described as “terrible” deal for the American worker, calling it “the worst deal anybody in history

⁵ *Mexico’s brand in the U.S. National Survey Results. Vianovo (June 2016). 29.*

⁶ *Mexico’s brand in the U.S. National Survey Results. Vianovo (June 2016). 5.*

has ever made” and the driver of “disaster and devastation” from which states like Ohio and Pennsylvania have “never recovered.”⁷

Americans are generally divided into two camps on the impact of NAFTA: those who have benefited significantly from the partnership and economic prosperity brought by NAFTA, many who live in the four border states - Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.⁸ According to data from Pew Research Center, the majority (56%) of Americans fall into this camp, saying NAFTA is good for the U.S. The other camp consists of those who believe NAFTA has contributed to economic insecurity and huge job losses. Not surprisingly, many belonging to the latter camp are Trump supporters, with 58% of conservatives saying NAFTA is bad for the U.S. while 74% of liberals say it is good.⁹

While NAFTA has contributed to job losses in some areas of the country, new jobs have been created in other areas. Furthermore, evidence suggests that far more American jobs have been lost due to automation and rapid technological change, expanded trade with other countries such as China, and unrelated domestic developments in both the U.S. and Mexico. Supporters of NAFTA estimate around 14 million jobs in the U.S. rely on trade with Canada and Mexico,¹⁰ around 4.9 million Americans would be out of work if trade between the U.S. and Mexico halted. Researchers from Ball State University found that 87% of manufacturing job losses in the period from 2000 to 2010 resulted from productivity increases, while just 13% were linked to trade.¹¹

Regardless of one’s perspective on NAFTA, it is clear much is at stake in its renegotiation. Those that support the basic NAFTA framework and champion its benefits have a sense of urgency about concluding the renegotiation before the July 1st election. This reflects an undercurrent of concern about Trump’s own intention but also uncertainty about policies current front-runner Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) might pursue. Some of this uncertainty is based in AMLO’s past statements characterizing NAFTA as a bad deal for Mexico,¹² but also reflects general U.S. anxiety around AMLO’s reputation with nearly every article written in the U.S. about his candidacy describing him as

⁷ Loren Cook Compan. *Remarks by President Trump on Tax Reform*. Springfield, Missouri (August 2017). Transcript. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-tax-reform-springfield-mo/>; *Trump calls NAFTA ‘one of the worst deals anybody in history has ever entered into.’* The Washington Post (August 2017). https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-calls-nafta-one-of-the-worst-deals-anybody-in-history-has-ever-entered-into/2017/08/29/ad994864-8827-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb_video.html?utm_term=.8d2dd7bfbc64; Donald Trump. Twitter (July 2016). <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/756864330054893568>, (March 2016) <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/708647560399949825>

⁸ Christopher Wilson. *A NAFTA Update for the Border Region*. Forbes (August 2017). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/themexicoinstitute/2017/08/17/a-nafta-update-for-the-border-region/2/#7097a724193f>

⁹ Alec Tyson. *Americans generally positive about NAFTA, but most Republicans say it benefits Mexico more than U.S.* Pew Research Center (November 2017). <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/13/americans-generally-positive-about-nafta-but-most-republicans-say-it-benefits-mexico-more-than-u-s/>; It should be noted that traditionally Republicans have been proponents of free trade agreements, while Democrats have been against them due to labor rights and environmental concerns. Current polling suggests that these attitudes have flipped.

¹⁰ James McBride, Mohammed Aly Sergie. *NAFTA’s Economic Impact*. Council on Foreign Relations (October 2017). <https://www.cfr.org/background/naftas-economic-impact>

¹¹ Christopher Wilson, Duncan Wood. *Understanding U.S.-Mexico Economic Ties*. The Mexico Institute. Forbes (September 2016). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/themexicoinstitute/2016/09/26/mexico-institute-launches-project-examining-u-s-mexico-economic-ties/#64e182377683>

¹² J. Weston Phippen. *Mexico’s Populist Savior May Be Too Good to Be True*. The Atlantic (November 2017). <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/mexico-lopez-obrador-nafta-trade-trump/544295/>

a “leftist,” “populist,” or “nationalist” and some calling him the “Bernie Sanders of Mexico,” the “Trump of Mexico” and others comparing him to former Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chávez because of his populist views.¹³

Less well known or understood in the United States are recent clarifications from AMLO’s top advisors and announced future cabinet members maintaining his commitment to the economic success of Mexico and to successfully renegotiating NAFTA. Speaking at the Wilson Center last week, Graciela Márquez, AMLO’s pick to be economy minister if he is elected, said AMLO’s team is prepared to implement NAFTA if a decision is reached before the election, and if renegotiations are not concluded before July 1, AMLO is prepared to continue the negotiation process. Márquez also stated that AMLO’s economic platform embraces the idea that Mexico needs to remain open to global economic forces, including NAFTA. “It’s very important for us to provide certainty to investors,” she said. Regardless of what his team is saying, prolonged uncertainty over NAFTA and the added misconceptions about his platform are affecting business decisions on both sides of the border.¹⁴

Issues of additional concern to Americans center on migration, especially irregular migration and border security. During his campaign and presidency, Mr. Trump has highlighted what he perceives to be the links between security and undocumented migration. His recent tweets concerning “caravans” of illegal migrants headed to the U.S. border highlights these fears among many Americans. The focus on gangs such as MS-13 and often citing their viciousness and specific cases of violence in the United States, further underscores these links in the minds of many Americans.

Traditionally, of course, migration and security have been viewed and treated separately in the United States. After all, the United States is primarily a country of immigrants, and in the case of African Americans forced migration resulting from the slave trade. Most Americans can trace their origins to other countries and continents, so links between migration and insecurity have become mainstream political ideology relatively recently – primarily since the September 11th terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that far from being anti-immigrant, the majority of Americans both support letting DACA recipients stay (87% - Washington Post¹⁵, 70% - CBS¹⁶), and oppose building or expanding a border wall (around 6 in 10 Americans - Quinnipiac, Pew, ABC News, Washington Post, CNN, CBS¹⁷).

There are concerns in the United States about whether Mexico is “doing enough” to stop the flow of irregular migrants through its territories and to control its southern border with Guatemala. The President’s tweets about the “caravan” of migrants, primarily from Honduras, touched a chord among

¹³ *Bernie Sanders of Mexico’ Leads Country’s Latest 2018 Presidential Poll*. Fox News Insider. (February 2018). <http://insider.foxnews.com/2018/02/19/mexican-presidential-election-poll-led-manuel-lopez-obrador-bernie-sanders> ; Sabrina Rodriguez. *Mexico’s Trumpian populist could mean trouble for Donald Trump*. Politico (January 2018). <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/07/mexico-trump-populism-209089> ; José Cárdenas. *President Trump, Be Wary of a Mexican Backlash*. National Review (January 2017). <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/01/mexico-andre-manuel-lopez-obrador-trump/>

¹⁴ *Trade and Development in Mexico: A Conversation with Graciela Márquez Colín*. The Wilson Center, The Mexico Institute. (April 2018). <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/trade-and-development-mexico-conversation-graciela-marquez-colin>

¹⁵ *Immigration / Border Security*. CBS News Poll (March 2018). <http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm>

¹⁶ Anthony Salvanto, Jennifer De Pinto, Kabir Khanna, and Fred Backus. *Nation Tracker: Americans weigh in on Trump immigration remarks, first year in office*. CBS News (January 2018). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nation-tracker-americans-weigh-in-on-trump-immigration-remarks-first-year-in-office/>

¹⁷ *Immigration / Border Security*. CBS News Poll (March 2018). <http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm>

the public, but the majority of Americans have positive attitudes towards legal migrants and two-thirds say the benefits of legal immigration outweigh the risks.¹⁸

When it comes to security, 70% of Americans believe it is important to maintain a focus on security issues such as border security and drug trafficking.¹⁹ Drugs entering the U.S. by way of our border with Mexico is a real concern. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to conflate Mexico with drugs, and view our own domestic opioid epidemic as the fault of our southern neighbor. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 63,632 Americans killed due to drug overdoses in 2016, with 66% of these involving a prescription or illicit opioids.²⁰ While the DEA maintains that the majority of heroin (an opioid) consumed in the United States comes from Mexico, it is also the case that the majority of opioids are regulated pharmaceuticals like oxycodone or fentanyl that either are manufactured in the United States or originate in China. Americans have voiced concerns about the issue of drugs entering the U.S. through Latin America, but there is a growing awareness that U.S. domestic production and strong U.S. demand are also responsible for the current crisis.

President Trump has implicitly acknowledged this reality declaring the abuse of opioids in the U.S. a public health emergency and announcing a nationwide education campaign to raise awareness on the dangers of opioid misuse, as well as supporting research to identify alternative therapies and expand treatment options for addicts.²¹ Nevertheless, the U.S. also seeks effective and broad cooperation with Mexico in combating transnational organized crime, and there is concern that the July 1st election may lead to either a suspension or a redirection of this cooperation.

Finally, an issue of particular concern to the U.S. energy sector has to do with the future of Mexico's energy reforms. Energy giants such as ExxonMobil, oil service providers, and investors big and small have an important stake in the election outcome, and some have expressed worry about the future of their energy investment projects depending on the election results. The 2014 opening of Mexico's energy sector to foreign investments in oil, electricity, and renewable energy projects attracted major interest among the United States energy sector.

As a result, there is concern in the U.S. that current front-runner, AMLO, will try to re-nationalize the energy sector. These concerns are largely based on comments he made in March when he suggested that, if elected, he would try to convince Peña Nieto to cancel upcoming energy auctions expected for July and September.²² Some Americans worry this will affect Mexico's economic growth and job creation in the future.

¹⁸ *The American Identity: Points of Pride, Conflicting Views, and a Distinct Culture*. The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. (University of Chicago, 2016) <http://apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/points-of-pride-conflicting-views-and-a-distinct-culture.aspx>

¹⁹ *Mexico's brand in the U.S.* National Survey Results. Vianovo (June 2016). 18.

²⁰ *U.S. drug overdose deaths continue to rise; increase fueled by synthetic opioids*. CDC Newsroom. CDC (March 2018) <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0329-drug-overdose-deaths.html> ; Overall drug overdose death rates increased by 21.5% from 2015 to 2016.

²¹ Maya Rhodan. *President Trump Revealed His Plan to Deal With the Opioid Crisis. Here's What Experts Think*. Time (October 2017). <http://time.com/4998975/opioid-crisis-donald-trump-public-health-emergency/>

²² *AMLO: State Control of Mexico's Energy Industry if Elected*. Telesur (march 2018). <https://www.telesur.net/english/news/AMLO-State-Control-of-Mexicos-Energy-Industry-if-Elected-20180318-0016.html>

Conversely, in April AMLO's pick to serve as Secretaria de Gobernación if elected, Olga Sánchez Cordero, clarified López Obrador's position stating that he would review existing contracts to look for signs of corruption, but will not scrap the energy reform.²³ Furthermore, to end the 2014 reform would require support from two-thirds of the Mexican Congress, which he appears unlikely to achieve at this point.

Beyond general concerns raised in the United States about AMLO's views on trade, energy reform, and security, there is little record of American concerns about the remaining candidates. Those who have a personal interest in Mexico, such as investors or U.S. citizens with Mexican family connections, and those who follow Mexico closely for business or professional reasons, may have differing views based on their own political leanings; but overall, there is general ignorance or indifference in the United States about the election in Mexico. Americans are notoriously unschooled in their own civics, and tend to know even less about world affairs, so it should be no surprise that most Americans could not identify the date of Mexico's presidential election or identify the candidates. Despite increasing economic and security links between the two countries, it is fair to say that most Americans know very little about their southern neighbor and favorite tourist destination.

Conclusions

It is tempting to say that Americans should have no opinion about Mexico's election and political life. In a strict legal sense, this is true. The free exercise of the vote is a cornerstone of democracy and should not be subject to pressures from abroad. However, there is little doubt that the outcomes on July 1st may have significant implications for the United States, and thus it is normal for Americans to be curious if not concerned. In a similar fashion, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States was a source of great interest to the Mexican public. The implications for families in both countries, the economic wellbeing, and security of Mexico depends in part on what happens in the U.S. election. The same is true for Americans.

While there are voices of concern and alarm in the United States about Mexico, it is important to remember that there is no consensus in the United States about Mexico's presidential elections, its candidates, and how U.S. interests may be affected by the election outcome. U.S. perceptions of Mexico and its electoral process depend in part on physical proximity to the border, Americans' experience traveling to Mexico, and the extent to which Americans link their own economic hardships to irregular migration and free trade deals.

No matter which candidate moves into Los Pinos after the election, the majority of Americans have favorable views of Mexico. Whether Mexico's next president is the "Bernie Sanders of Mexico," the young hopeful, the ruling party candidate, or one of the two independent candidates, the winner will be faced with the enormous responsibility of governing Mexico and managing its relationship with the United States. Those of us in the United States who believe our country is stronger when it maintains a collaborative and respectful relationship with Mexico look forward to working with whomever the Mexican people choose.

²³ *Mexico's election front-runner won't end energy reform – advisor*. Reuters (April 2018). https://www.rigzone.com/news/wire/mexicos_election_fronrunner_wont_end_energy_reform_adviser-05-apr-2018-154139-article/