

THE 1996 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Implications for Mexico

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Never has the outcome of a presidential election in the United States had so much potential to affect Mexico. Infrequently does a foreign country receive as much attention in the national political debate in the United States in a presidential election year as Mexico has so far in the 1996 elections. In fact, the president inaugurated in January of 1997, be it William Clinton, the Republican candidate or someone else, as well as the composition of the new congress, could well determine not only the tone of the relationship with Mexico but also the fate of NAFTA, the future treatment of matters such as Mexican immigrants living in the United States and other questions associated with economic integration (e.g., international transport, the import and export of many products and services, etc.). Since the commercial relationship that Mexico sustains with the United States is its most important, even without NAFTA, obviously the stakes are high.

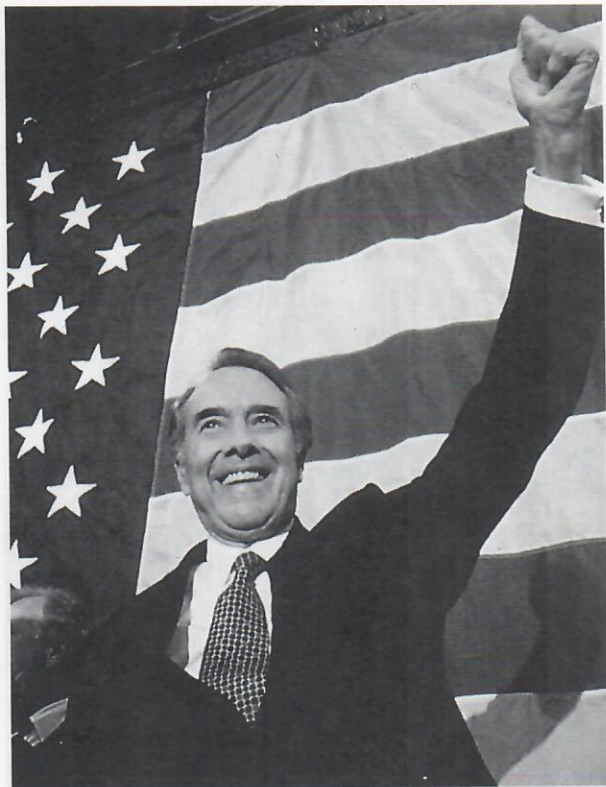
Although many areas of the bilateral relationship and NAFTA could be affected, we will confine our analysis to two points of particular interest.

First, the criticism that has arisen in the United States about the allegedly deleterious effects of NAFTA in that country has worried and perplexed many in Mexico. Many industries throughout the United States clearly benefitted from sales and business in Mexico during the first year of the implementation of NAFTA because the Mexican market really opened. Indeed,

many individual American states have opened offices in Mexico City in the hope and expectation of developing long-term reciprocal commercial relationships with Mexico. Even the mercantile landscape of Mexico has diversified dramatically with the opening of Wal-Marts, K-Marts, Price Clubs, Dunkin' Donuts and even a Marie Callender Restaurant, to the delight of Mexican consumers.

However, the dialogues that have emerged in the United States from the populist conservative arena,

AFP - J.D. Ake



The Republican candidate campaigning.

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especially from the Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan camps,¹ distress many in Mexico because they seem to distort the benefits that Mexico has allegedly accrued from NAFTA. Although the implementation of NAFTA has caused profound dislocations in Mexico with painful consequences for practically all sectors of the economy, Mexican public opinion has generally accepted economic integration with the United States and Canada as not necessarily desirable, but inevitable. The December 1994 peso devaluation challenged and still challenges the public perception of NAFTA, as many in Mexico have come to associate the peso crisis with misguided economic integration, although most still accept the agreement resignedly.

The early victories of Pat Buchanan in the Republican primaries demonstrated that a strong anti-NAFTA and anti-free trade position could find electoral support in some sectors of American society, a warning for Mexico that NAFTA might be in trouble. And the

¹ Steven Stark, *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1996.



Seeking reelection.

collapse of Phil Gramm's campaign, a staunch advocate of free trade, further reinforced that opinion and pointed to Buchanan as the representative of the populist conservative right among the Republicans.²

Further, as part of his nationalist economic program, Buchanan has bitterly criticized the financial package that the Clinton administration arranged to help Mexico during the first throes of the crisis after the peso devaluation as basically an aid package for New York banks.³ But as Roger C. Altman has written, Buchanan's position on NAFTA, free trade and the Mexican bailout is more a function of rallying the insecurity of American workers than addressing the realities of the evolving and already profitable new commercial relationship.⁴ Whatever the shortsightedness of the Buchanan campaign regarding international commerce, the image of his electoral victories persists as a symbol of resistance in the United States to economic integration with Mexico.

While President Clinton has been careful not to involve himself in the internal debates of the Republican Party regarding NAFTA, he has made use of opportunities to promote the idea of free trade. In Detroit, at the beginning of March, Clinton took pains to praise the American auto industry, whose exports to Japan have increased 37 percent.⁵ The Clinton administration has clearly supported the notion of expanding the export sector of the economy as much as possible.

Second, the mistreatment of undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the United States personified by California's Proposition 187, and later so graphically illustrated by the recent incidents in Southern California, has grabbed public attention and sympathy in Mexico as nothing else has since immigration to the north became statistically significant during the Revolution.⁶ Historically, Mexico has been ambivalent about the emigration of so many workers north.

² *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1996.

³ Eduardo Mora Tavares, *Época*, March 4, 1996.

⁴ *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1996.

⁵ *The New York Times*, March 5, 1996.

⁶ It is estimated that around one million Mexicans emigrated to the United States to avoid the economic and political hard-

While not a frequent topic of conversation, many policymakers have been aware of the common problems of low wages, substandard living and working conditions and even worse experienced by many migrants. But the undocumented status of many immigrants, a lack of funds, and a sometimes inconsistent policy in Mexico have hampered efforts by Mexican diplomats to better protect their compatriots.

Further, the employment opportunities provided by migration to the United States, regardless of legal status, have helped to offset chronic unemployment and underdevelopment, especially in the Mexican countryside, but also increasingly in the cities. The funds that migrants send to Mexico are often significant sources of income for their families and towns, and in many instances it would be difficult to replace that income with a local source.

More immediately, the poisonous campaign surrounding Proposition 187 in California took many aback in both Mexico and the United States. The emotional criticisms directed at the undocumented Mexican community seemed entirely inappropriate to the Mexican public, but the resounding electoral support that the initiative generated served to demonstrate that anti-Mexican sentiment can win votes. Most in Mexico assume that the subsequent graphic efforts by the Clinton administration to prevent undocumented immigration at the Border are a response to the electoral success of Prop. 187 and to a fear that it would influence the outcome of the presidential election of November 1996.

Moreover, the dramatic videotape of the recent beating of an undocumented Mexican immigrant by a law enforcement officer in Riverside, California, and the tragic deaths of several undocumented Mexican immigrants in a police chase underscored the concern in Mexico about the political climate in the United States. The intensity of the Prop. 187 campaign possibly affected the attitudes of law enforcement per-

ships created by the Mexican Revolution. Although many later returned, immigration as a product of internal turmoil has remained a point of reference for understanding some United States policies toward the border and Mexican emigration.

sonnel and demonstrated how precarious the lives of undocumented immigrants really are. However, the incidents reinforced an argument that the Mexican government has been using for some time: that one must view the problems of undocumented immigrants within the context of human rights violations.⁷

Not surprisingly, almost all the prospective Republican candidates included the topic of immigration in their primary campaigns, and we can be sure that the final platform adopted at the convention in San Diego will include immigration. Unlike the traditional Republican support for liberal immigration laws, the control of legal and undocumented immigration has become a cornerstone of the Republican party, basically a legacy of the social conservatives. While some, more liberal, Republicans confine their immigration position to stricter enforcement of undocumented immigration at the border, others have addressed the question in general as an analogy for rooting out the causes of American society's ills.

Although no one would deny that Mexicans are the largest group of undocumented immigrants in the United States, the fact is that immigrants from many countries around the world arrive and stay. Moreover, many estimate that about one half of the undocumented immigrants are "overstays," individuals that go to the United States on a plane, boat or car legally and simply stay when their visa expires. Yet, since around the 1970s, public debate in the United States about undocumented immigration basically revolves around Mexicans crossing the border, an image that still persists, and one that was reinforced by the incidents in California.

No one in Mexico was surprised when Governor Pete Wilson tried to launch a campaign for the presidency. It would seem that the strong electoral support that Prop. 187 received encouraged him. In any event, his early withdrawal from the Republican primaries came as a surprise but not a disappoint-

⁷ The Mexican Commission for Human Rights has been investigating complaints of human rights violations of immigrants at the border and issuing reports about it.

ment in Mexico. The possibility that Wilson could have carried his Prop. 187 campaign to the national level as a platform was not welcomed south of the border.

Buchanan has also taken the most decided anti-immigrant position, indicating that as president he would build a steel fence on the border⁸ that separates (or joins, depending on your perspective) the United States and Mexico. Although conservative rhetoric in the United States has toyed with the image of building a fence along the border for many years, the proposal is not practical and leaves many wondering about the practicality of Buchanan's policies. One Mexican analyst writes that for Buchanan fence-building takes on allegorical proportions; he seeks to establish barriers to "disturbing liberal" ideas.⁹

In Arizona, Buchanan stressed his anti-immigrant and anti-NAFTA postures, but lost to Steve Forbes and Bob Dole, in part because many voters thought him too extreme.¹⁰ For the first time, Buchanan "met voters who understand their future lies with economic growth tied to exports and a global marketplace."¹¹ Unfortunately, conservative Republicans in states less obviously affected by NAFTA may not have the personal experience to arrive at the same conclusions.

The interesting exception was the Republican primary in New York, where the triumphant electoral machine developed by "Al D'Amato, Inc." to support Bob Dole extolled the ethnic and racial diversity of the region.¹² Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani even vowed to thwart Buchananism which targets New York as the "symbol of immigration's evils."¹³ But New York is worlds away from the Bible Belt, the Sun Belt, the Mexican border and the Republican National Convention to be held in San Diego.

⁸ *Financial Times*, February 10, 1996. Journalist Jurek Martin finds it "odd" that an Irish-American Catholic would be so anti-immigrant.

⁹ Eduardo Mora Tavares, *Época*, March 4, 1996.

¹⁰ *The Washington Post*, February 28, 1996.

¹¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, February 29, 1996.

¹² Steven R. Weisman, *The New York Times*, March 5, 1996.

¹³ *Mexico City Times*, March 6, 1996.

Of course, still the unknown factor among the social conservatives is Ross Perot, who has taken a militant and dramatic position against NAFTA. The national convention of his new political organization, United We Stand (Reform Party), will not take place until after the national conventions of the two major parties. If Buchanan and his followers are not happy with the outcome of the Republican convention, of course it is still possible that United We Stand could court their support.¹⁴

The proposal that illegal aliens be denied social benefits, a legacy of Prop. 187, has also received attention among the Republican candidates. Even fiscal conservative, social moderate Steve Forbes opposes welfare for undocumented immigrants, except emergency medical assistance.¹⁵ Moderate Tennessean Lamar Alexander included the control of illegal immigration in his vision of the future in the United States, ahead of education and abortion.¹⁶

The Clinton administration has defended its position on undocumented immigrants for the last two years by implementing a series of policies designed to reinforce the Mexican border. Not only have the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service received additional funding, but federal authorities have launched highly publicized "projects" to halt undocumented immigration from Mexico. While these policies are intended to respond to domestic criticism arising from Prop. 187 and other anti-immigrant sentiments about the permeability of the Mexican border, immigration from Mexico is inherently a bilateral phenomenon and falls within the parameters of diplomatic relations.

The dilemma of Mexican immigration reflects the emphasis of our argument presented in this article. Obviously, the U.S. presidential elections develop in a domestic framework, but some questions regarding Mexico will play out in the ensuing debates, campaigns and final results. The 1996 presidential election year is one that Mexican society cannot ignore. ❧

¹⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1996.

¹⁵ *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1996.

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, March 1, 1996.