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Mexican Perceptions of the United States: Interests, Preferences, and Realities

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Mexico is geographically and economically in North America (more than two thirds of the country's trade and financial flows take place within this region), but historically, geopolitically and culturally, it has more in common with Latin America. In the last two decades, and with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, Mexicans are confronting a dilemma in defining whether their country is North American or Latin American, or whether Mexico could somehow be part of both regions. There seems to be a perception that the relationship with the United States has gone as far as it can go. This belief may be attributed to the stagnation in the regional integration process, the concentration on security issues, and the dramatic decline in affinity and trust in the United States during the second George W. Bush administration.

Mexicans have ambivalent feelings towards the United States, and the level of affinity for the U.S. has decreased dramatically in the course of the last years. On a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 represents a very favorable opinion, 50 means neutrality, and 0 is a very unfavorable opinion, in 2008 Mexicans had the highest level of affinity for Canada (public 71 points; leaders 84).

* This article summarizes the central findings on Mexican perceptions on the United States found in Guadalupe González González, Ferran Martínez i Coma, and Jorge A. Schiavon, *Mexico, the Americas and the world. Foreign policy: Public and leader opinion 2008*, Mexico City, CIDE-DEI, 2008, 89 pp. *Mexico, the Americas and the World* is a research project of the Department of International Studies of CIDE that analyzes Mexican public and leader opinions on foreign policy and foreign affairs. The project is an on-going biennial survey (2004, 2006, 2008, and to be conducted in 2010) designed to measure Mexicans' opinions, attitudes, perceptions and values regarding the world and Mexico's role in international affairs. The survey is a representative sample of the adult Mexican population and of a segment of leaders in Mexico. The complete dataset, in SPSS format, survey questionnaires and top-line results for the 69 subject and 18 socio-demographic questions are publicly available in English and Spanish free of charge at <http://mexicoyel mundo.cide.edu>. Jorge Schiavon is reachable by email at: jorge.schiavon@cide.edu.

Mexican's affinity for the United States dropped 12 points and 6 positions compared with the level in 2006. The change in favorable opinion toward the United States since 2004 is remarkable. The United States was tied with Japan for first place with an average rating of 68 in 2004. In 2006, Canada was in first place (75 points) and the United States was second (74 points). By 2008, the United States has dropped to seventh place (62 points). This can be a consequence of the negative perception in Mexico of the hegemonic foreign policy of the Bush administrations.

In qualitative terms, the United States is the only country that an overwhelming majority of Mexicans consider a *partner* and not a *friend*—all Latin American and European countries are perceived as *friends*. In 2008, the option of *partners* (51%) was much more common than *friends* (28%) for the public. Leaders are more emphatic in labeling the relationship as *partners*: 78% consider the two countries to be *partners* and 13% say the countries are *friends*.

In 2006, most Mexicans thought that being neighbors of the United States was more of an advantage for the country (public 52%, leaders 85%) than a problem (39% and 13% respectively). Skepticism increased in 2008, with slightly more people seeing it as a problem than an advantage (46% against 45%, while identification as a problem climbed from 13% to 26% among the leaders). Mexicans in the North are more likely to say that proximity to the United States is an advantage (64%), while Mexicans in the South (47%) and in the Center (51%) are more likely to consider it a problem.

In 2008, fewer Mexicans (45%) than in 2006 (54%) agreed strongly or somewhat *that Mexico and the United States should form a single country, if this meant an improvement in their standard of living*. The survey also asked part of the respondents the same question, leaving out the condition of an improvement in their standard of living. In this case, even fewer Mexicans (36%) would agree with the union.

The Mexico-United States relationship is imbued with a distrust that has increased substantially in recent years among both the public and leaders. Distrust of the United States rose from 43% in 2004, to 53% in 2006, and to 61% in 2008 among the public. Such distrust increased from 41% in 2006 to 64% in 2008 among leaders. Regional differences in distrust of the United States are noteworthy. The further away from the northern border, the higher the degree of distrust: 45% of Mexicans in the North distrust the United States, while 62% of Mexicans in the Center and 72% in the South feel the same way. Distrust is highest among centre-left party (PRD) supporters; centre party (PRI) and centre-right party PAN (31% and 20%) supporters are less likely than PRD's (65%) to distrust the United States.

Even if distrust should make cooperation between Mexico and the United States problematic, Mexicans are very pragmatic and know that their country has to cooperate with the United States to solve joint problems. On a scale from 0 to 10 (where 0 means working alone and 10 implies working closely with the United States), Mexicans, on average, believe there should be a level of

cooperation with the United States of 6; leaders rate the level of cooperation one point higher, with an average of 7.

Mexicans' nationalism takes on new forms when they face issues that have a direct impact on their security. Close to half of the population (49%) and 33% of leaders are willing to allow U.S. agents to participate with Mexican agents in securing Mexico's airports, ports and borders in order to fight drug-trafficking, while 58% of the public and 76% of leaders approve of Mexican criminals being extradited to the United States to be tried for crimes committed in that country. With the same pragmatism mediating their nationalist distrust of the United States, 55% of the public and 70% of leaders support receiving financial aid from the United States to fight drug-trafficking and organized crime.

However, energy is an issue for which Mexicans leave no space for pragmatic negotiation with the United States. A large majority of the public (67%) would be against an agreement between Mexico and the United States to allow U.S. investment in Mexico's oil sector. Leaders are more divided, with 39% in favor and 49% against. The recurrent regional gap between the North on one hand and the Center and South on the other is noteworthy: in 2008, disagreement to permit U.S. investment in the energy sector was 55% in the North, compared to 70% in the Center and 71% in the South of the country.

In sum, in the course of the last years, Mexicans have lost interest in their relations with the United States: pessimism and distrust predominate, particularly concerning the accomplishments of NAFTA and the possibilities of a more in-depth integration with the United States. However, with the election of President Barack Obama, America's image in Mexico has improved considerably. This will have a positive impact in increasing affinity and trust in the United States, especially if the Obama administration provides targeted aid to cooperate in the fight against drug-trafficking and organized crime (Merida Initiative), works in transmitting diplomatic messages clearly and seeking consensus decisions (message and action have to match, and unilateral actions need to be avoided), and invests in building bilateral and regional relationships (Mexico-U.S. Binational Commission and North American Leaders' Summit).