



State Visits, White House Dinners and Congressional Addresses



In early September of 2001, then President Vicente Fox made a State Visit, enjoyed a White House Dinner, and delivered a Congressional Address to the US Congress. Fox received a bountiful reception in much of the US media, he shared what was touted as a special relationship with the new US President, and the Republican majority US Congress gave him a warm reception – perhaps especially when he couched the proposals for Immigration Reform between the US and Mexico with an eloquent call for the Mexican immigrants to return home and help him build a new Mexican society and economy. This was the kind of Mexican that Republicans of all stripes could like. And, he seemed to typify what they hoped was a new sort of business friendly leadership in Latin America.

Calderón on the other hand is not a President of promise, but rather a President beset by problems. From security problems coming out of organized-but-uncontrolled-crime, to national economic problems coming from within and without the country, to functioning as a kind of shadow party leader without being able to reverse a string of electoral defeats beginning in 2007, Calderón appears to need support. The visit, dinner and Congressional address to a responsive Democratic majority gave him support.

The forms of 2001 were observed again in 2010, but given the levels of misunderstanding and confusion on each side it is hard to see the visit as transcendent. Though there may be less confusion on the US side with regard to some points (see page 5-6 below). It is true that the visit was not as ill-starred as the Fox visit which took place just days before 9/11, but the stars are not all that well-aligned for Calderón. The only thing he seems lucky on is that his PEMEX reform dream project of working with BP or Shell in deep water drilling in the Gulf did not come to fruition; a bit of bad fortune in bed-fellowing and well-drilling might have forced the cancellation of the visit altogether.

A brief review of a handful of the confused understandings that limit possibilities between Mexico and the US include 3 promoted by the Mexican political classes, and another 2 visible in US policy and media circles.



Mexican Misunderstanding No. 1: Mexico does better with Republicans than with the Democrats.

In the winter of 2008, Calderón famously offered his binational political wisdom during a visit by presumptive Republican candidate John McCain that the Republicans would be better for Mexico than the Democrats. In this, Calderón was not offering a new idea. At the moment he spoke, it was neither smart nor prescient, but it came out of nearly three decades of neo-liberal Mexican political “wisdom.”



For a long time, Democrats and Republicans shared opprobrium in the Mexican view. The Democratic President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) competes as the principal historic bad guy with the Democratic President James K. Polk (1845-1849) for Mexico. The Republicans of 1921 through 1933 were bitter, even arrogant, negotiators with the newly established post-revolutionary regime. From the 1930s through the mid-1960s, there was a discernable sense that the Democrats might be the best friends of the country after all. It was a Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt who kept the oil expropriation of 1938 from troubling the waters. And, it was two Democratic Presidents who took the remarkable diplomatic steps to honor the Niños Héroes at their shrine: Harry S. Truman in 1947 and Bill Clinton in 1997.

The tilt toward the Republicans as Mexico's best friends began in the latter half of the 1980s, with an emerging PRI consensus (in time vigorously supported by the PAN, and not always disputed by the Left) that opening up trade and developing an export platform was Mexico's best bet for development. The NAFTA was passed in the US under a Democratic President in 1993, but with a strong Republican majority in the Congress, and a centrist neo-Democratic and neo-Republican free trade orientation in the key segments of the relevant bureaucracy. With the election of George W. Bush in 2000, the generation of NAFTA-promoters crystallized the current notion as if it were a time-honored historical rule: Mexico does better with the Republicans than the Democrats. Thus, without thinking through the vagaries of US electoral alternation or the complexities of bipartisanship in the US Congress, Calderón in 2008 risked an open statement in favor of the Republicans.

The Democratic victor, Obama, has shown no sign of holding this against Calderón (it was a political faux pas, but without much importance, except as an indicator of judgment). The agenda of the new Obama administration has emerged in a remarkably divisive partisan atmosphere which torches the notion that Republicans are best for Mexico. Democrats, however, are not automatically the new best friends. It depends on the issue, and requires what the Mexican political classes have often ignored – the careful study of US politics and processes including the dynamics of both major political parties.

Nonetheless, a critical juncture has emerged with regard to the rising significance of the Hispanic vote in US elections. While there are more Hispanics than any other minority (well over 13% of the U.S. population), they are significantly under-represented as registered voters. This is changing and with an immigration reform making citizenship more accessible, Hispanics represent the great new block of voters in the US. When Calderón was interrupted 27 times¹ by applause the most visible enthusiasts were Democrats, perhaps wanting to demonstrate that they were Mexican-Americans best friends.

Nonetheless, the best understanding is that it is in Mexico's interest to maintain a healthy bipartisan communication and base in the United States on those common issues of importance to the Mexican State and society. To read the US exclusively through its two main political parties is as confusing and dangerous as politicizing every aspect of Mexican life and culture.

¹ This is a statistic without inherent value, but a fascinating one that the pro-PAN commentators gloried in after the visit.



Mexican Misunderstanding No. 2: Mexican-origin Hispanic voters in the US are a key to Mexican interest policy issues in the US, not unlike Jewish-Americans supporting Israeli policy concerns.

This notion has been shared by political policy strategists in Mexico and by some policy-electoral strategists in the US. Without going into historical detail, our working notion is that each of the national immigrant groups in the US who have had or continue to maintain links to their country of origin have a specific and unique pattern. The Irish-American relation to Ireland and Northern Ireland is particular and continues to evolve over time. The Jewish-American relation to Israel is perhaps as complicated as it has ever been, but continues to be unique. The Mexican-American relation to Mexico is intense culturally, but distant politically; perhaps because the Mexican-American communities appear to be as much a mosaic on what is happening within Mexico as Mexicans themselves.

The reality is that Mexico has an “interest community” of support in the US which is different on different issues. Immigration reform “interest” includes Mexican-Americans, other immigrant communities, pro-immigrant church communities, service workers unions, chambers of commerce – and the persistently misunderstood-by-Mexico black community in the US.

As we noted in January of 2008 (Bulletin Series 7 Number 35):

“..there is no doubt, that the men and women of Mexico, full of dignity and the will and capacity to work get jobs that not even the Blacks want to do in the US.” When Vicente Fox made this statement in mid-May of 2005 it did have a measurable impact on the leadership of the Black community in the United States.

Within hours, Jesse Jackson had expressed his dismay at the formula and within days he was in Mexico City for a sit down meeting with the Mexican President. Fox never apologized, preferring to “explain” what he meant, again and again. Jackson was insistent that beyond the boorish racism of the expression, there were fundamental economic policy questions that people of good faith on both sides of the border needed to address.

What Jackson was offering at that moment was not a preacher’s reprimand, but the possibility of an alliance on immigration reform and related aspects of the economy, including workers’ rights. In fact, he brought with him a leading organizer of the Mexican American community’s participation in various rainbow groups. She was ignored, and the whole business became a missed opportunity.

The “Calderón team” in Washington, D.C. met with the Hispanic Caucus in the Congress; Carlos Navarette, current President of the Senate, with a tin ear to international protocols publicly urged a Democratic vote among Hispanics in this fall’s Congressional elections. There was a meeting with an Hispanic cultural leadership group.

But, no one visited the politically powerful Black Caucus. In fact, the “Mexico interest community” in the US is multi-ethnic, multi-class, and multi-regional.



Mexican Misunderstanding No. 3: When a part of the US political structure makes an egregious anti-Mexican move, it is smart national and international politics to oppose the error. Opposing Arizona's SB 1070 is a straightforward proposition which pays dividends for Mexican politicians in Mexico. By the time, however, that Calderón arrived in Washington the discussion over Arizona's 1070 had gone through a dozen news cycles of criticism and defense -- from the frivolous (Miss America pageant questions to contestants) to the increasingly profound (emerging consensus of professional police forces all across the country in opposition to Arizona type laws focusing on immigrant checks as materially damaging the decades-long hard-won rapport between the police and Hispanic communities).

Calderón's address to Congress included a simplistic polemic on Arizona's 1070 which came out as a partisan polarization. The Democratic leadership on the podium and the Democratic members in the chamber applauded, on their feet. The Republicans were silent and stony. Coming efforts at bipartisan support on Mexico interest questions may feel the effect.

Partisan politics are already taking advantage of the Calderón address. In the California Republican Governorship primary, candidate Steve Poizner, one of two strong contenders for the Republican nomination, has a currently running television spot with Calderón speaking in Washington against the Arizona 1070. Then, a voice-over asks "Do you want a governor of California that has the same posture on illegal immigration as the President of Mexico?" And then, a visual goes to the border fence on which we see the faces of Meg Whitman (his rival candidate in the Republican Party), Obama and Calderón. The voice over continues, "If Obama doesn't protect our borders, who will?"²

The day after the Congressional speech, Republicans in Virginia ran footage of Calderón at the podium in a series of attack ads against two Democratic Congressman who it was thought stood in the Congress to applaud Calderón's call to ban the sale of assault weapons.gun ads. The voice-over asked if they (the two Democrats) stood up for Felipe Calderón or if they stood for the Second Amendment (providing for the right to bear arms).

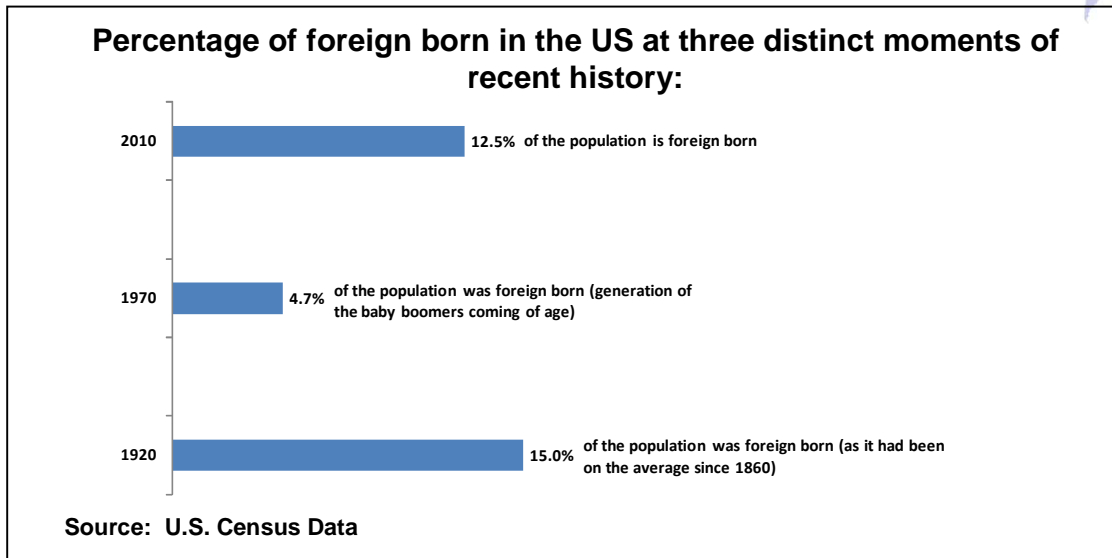
In this instance the Republicans were not on target. Neither of the two Democratic Congressmen is in favor of banning the sale of assault weapons, so the argument was moot and probably redounded to the Congressmen's favor. The point here is that Calderón chose to use the most public forum in the United States (the Congress is where the great bulk of all national political news is generated, and has been for decades).

At this most public of forums, Calderón entered simplistically in debates that have long defined aspects of US partisan politics. In doing this, he opened himself up to be used (his image and words) as a freely available reference point for local partisan politics. On any terms, this is arguably a poor use of the institution of the Mexican Presidency.

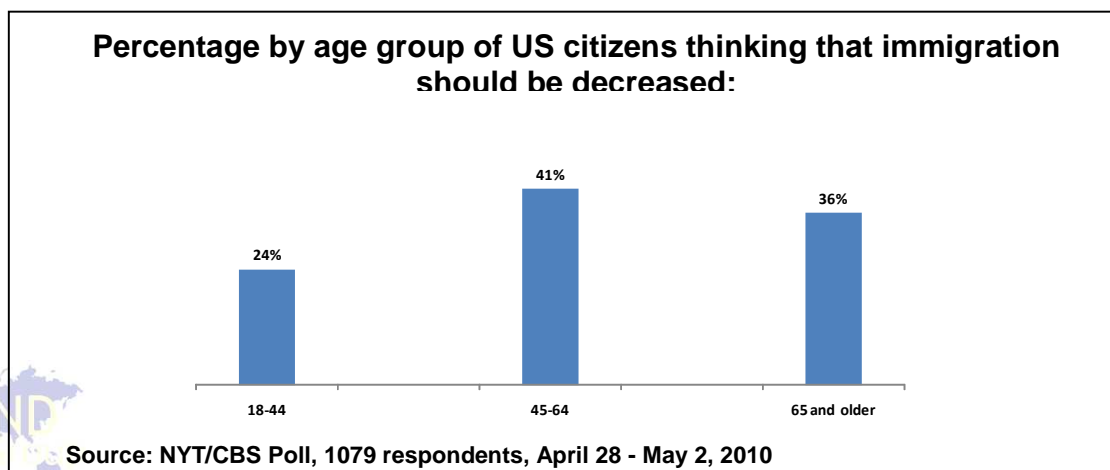
² Viewed on local television in Los Angeles, and noted in La Opinión, May 26, 2010.



The percentage of foreign born in the United States tends to condition some aspects of the debate over immigration. Once again, the percentage of foreign born is relatively high, especially compared with 40 years ago.



Younger people of all social and ethnic groups are less insistent on decreasing immigration. The problem of Arizona's 1070 is perhaps more generational than anyone has anticipated.



There is a texture to the immigration debate in the United States that makes easy moral condemnation risky, including the possibility of having a foreign authority (viz. Calderón) misused in image and words in a partisan political context.



US Confusion No. 1: Calderón is a brave leader who is popular in Mexico, and supported in his war against drugs and organized crime.

What do you call someone who is leading an anti-crime strategy that seems to be going nowhere, and in the meantime is raising a series of difficult questions regarding military and police abuse of basic law and human rights? You can call the person wrong-headed or misguided, but if he is an ally this is awkward. You can call the person stubborn, but stubbornness in the pursuit of an admirable end is ambiguous. Or, you can call the person brave, even valiant, and go from there.

Slowly but surely the foreign media and the US Government have come to understand the limits of Presidential approval polling in Mexico. Traditionally, Mexican media polls and other polling (much of it funded directly and indirectly by the Presidential office here) have shown extraordinary high approval ratings, rarely falling below the 60% level. Rather than being corrupt or manipulated polls, our sense is that the survey questions on approval tended to be confused between respect for traditional authority (strong in Mexico, only in its second decade of the “transition to Democracy”) and approval of actual Presidential leadership.

Even in these polls, a specific question about a Presidential policy or a general Governmental policy will evoke a modest (and probably realistic) level of support.

Thus, the general foreign media tag on Calderón, “nonetheless, he remains personally popular...” is now less frequently used, and the confusion is reduced. It is impossible to know how Calderón is seen while out on the street or in public contexts since from the beginning of his administration he has been under a security guard with logistical arrangements fitting a wartime President.

An incident in the visit to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard shortly after the State Visit to the US and on his way to beginning the State Visit to Canada illustrates the point indirectly. Calderón was introduced to the graduating group at the Kennedy School by Dean David Ellwood, who admonished the students, “I don’t imagine that any person here is dumb enough to protest. We have a lot of security, so it would be a bad idea.” True enough, both the Presidential Guard of Mexico and the US Secret Service controlled the surrounding area and the auditorium, with particular instructions to keep the press in an alternative room where they monitored the event on television.³

There is, in fact, no societal consensus on the conduct of the war against drugs/organized crime. The print media is filled with criticism and debate, as are the kitchen tables and coffee shops across the country – and they have been so, for some time.

³ La Jornada, Claudia Herrera Beltrán, May 27, 2010.



Thus, to a fascinating degree the initiatives taken by the US in redefining the drug problems and support for Mexico's effort have a ready if still skeptical audience. In the week prior to the Calderón visit the presentation of National Drug control strategy by the ONDCP of the US provoked more discussion in the Mexican media than the Calderon visit to the US itself. Likewise, there is lively interest in the current presentation of modifications to the US Congress for the Mérida Initiative strategies (less focus on heavy war equipment and more focus on combating law abuse, police corruption and military inadequacies in the respect for human rights).

The US leadership on redefining these questions has a ready audience in Mexico, even among Mexicans who are jealous in their conviction that in the final analysis the definitions must be completed in Mexico by Mexicans as national policy on the shared problems of crime and addiction.⁴

US Confusion No. 2: Mexican nationalism is a condition of dealing with Mexico, but it is often largely cosmetic and rhetorical, rooted in the romance of victimhood in history.

In all honesty, the terms and parameters of popular and elite nationalisms in Mexico need to be revisited and explored. Testiness when confronted by US attitudes or wariness of US proposals do not define nationalism. Its actual content and significance in the light of globalist dynamics and the transition to democracy in Mexico are not clearly understood either in Mexico or the US.

The current Bicentennial celebrations in Mexico (1820/2010) are strangely downbeat, but then so were most of the bicentennial events in the US (1776/1976) for reasons particular to that moment in US life.

The US does not have a good history of respecting local sensibilities, or even understanding the particular history of others. Given the geography of Mexico and the shared problems and responsibilities, recognized by the two countries, respecting and understanding Mexico is an evident priority.

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⁴ For a valuable historical perspective on US and Mexican lack of coordination on drug policies, see Lorenzo Meyer's *Agenda Ciudadana in Reforma*, May 27, 2010.

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