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Stakes are High for Latin America in the U.S. Presidential Race

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Latin America has watched in disbelief alongside the rest of the world as the US primaries have unfolded. There has been widespread shock not only to the outlandishly xenophobic comments of Republican candidate Donald Trump, but also to the weight of support for him from the US electorate, and the gaping ideological distance between him and his potential rivals from the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders.

The importance of the outcome of the US presidential election for Latin America is evident. Despite their relations having drifted somewhat in recent years—with US foreign policy more focused on events in the Middle East and North Africa, and Latin America becoming more independent through diversified global trade relationships—they remain economically interdependent, with many mutual security, diplomatic, and commercial concerns.

Postures toward the region

Concrete foreign policy proposals, particularly with regard to Latin America, have been scarce from all three presidential hopefuls. All have principally focused their campaigns on domestic issues, with foreign policy mentions mainly concerning the Middle East, leaving their approach to the future of Latin American relations to be inferred from their wider political ideology, public comments and past record.

Donald Trump’s slogan, “Make America great again,” encapsulates his view of US supremacy over its neighbors, and his nativist ideology calls for US ideas to be dominant and for the US to dictate the terms in relationships with other countries, as outlined in his foreign policy speech on April 27. In general, he favors breaking relations over ceding US influence.

His comments about Mexicans when announcing his candidacy in June, which included the phrase “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, and they’re rapists,” provoked outrage across Latin America. His proposals to build a much larger and fortified wall along the US border with Mexico, which he would force Mexico to pay for by withholding remittances, canceling visas, and enforcing trade tariffs, have shown his contempt for cooperation on issues of mutual importance. An existing wall spans about 670 miles (1,070 kilometers) of the US-Mexico border (SourceMex, May 13, 2009). And in an interview with CNBC at the beginning of May, Trump described how a Democratic win would transform the US into “a totally different country. It will be Argentina… It will be Venezuela. You have no idea.” This disparaging comparison also caused great offense in the region.

Hillary Clinton, while failing to address foreign policy toward Latin America in her campaign proposals, has shown greater acknowledgement of the importance of the relationship with the region. At the Atlantic Council in Washington in November, she said, “No region is more important to our long-term prosperity and security than our friends in Latin America.” She is the candidate most likely to continue the policies initiated by President Obama, such as the rapprochement with Cuba (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015, and Sept. 24, 2015) and the promotion of free trade agreements
(NotiSur, Feb. 12, 2016). She believes it is the responsibility of the US to promote democracy, human rights, and stability in Latin America, though her critics interpret this as favoring governments that are open to US demands and punishing those that are not.

Bernie Sanders has broken with tradition in his outspoken criticism of US intervention and support of regime change in Latin America. His foreign policy view is based on the peaceful resolution of conflict through diplomacy, and he is against US unilateralism. Interestingly, his view that the US “is not a global policeman” breaks with both Trump’s and Clinton’s assumption of the country’s right to extend its own values abroad. And unlike Trump, he believes in maintaining communication with enemies, where the presumptive Republican nominee would force them into submission or leave the negotiating table altogether.

The key issues

The impact of a new US president will be felt in the main areas of US-Latin American relations: immigration, trade, interventionism, drug trafficking, and relations with Cuba. Immigration has featured prominently in the campaigns of all three candidates, chiefly as a domestic issue. However immigration reform within the US will impact migrants’ countries of origin, particularly in Central America and Mexico (SourceMex, Dec. 10, 2014, Jan. 14, 2015, July 1, 2015, and July 29, 2015). Trump has been unequivocal on the matter, threatening mass deportations of undocumented immigrants and the construction of a wall to secure the US border. He uses aggressive rhetoric against immigrants, accusing them of committing crimes, taking Americans’ jobs, and increasing poverty. Both Democrats favor greater immigrant integration and reform to improve their rights while at the same time addressing the flaws in the system.

All three candidates have broken away to some degree from Obama’s support of free trade agreements with Latin America. Trump and Sanders have declared themselves to be wholly against free trade agreements, albeit for different reasons, while Clinton rolled back on her previous support of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in October, saying that it may not meet job creation and economic expectations. Three Latin American countries have signed the TPP: Mexico, Chile, and Peru (SourceMex, Oct. 28, 2015, and NotiSur, Feb. 12, 2016). Clinton has, however, remained supportive of existing free trade agreements, including those with Colombia, Panama, and Central America. The possibility of the US backing away from the TPP would create the need for more leadership from Mexico, Chile, and Peru, and for cooperation with other member countries if the deal were still to come into effect.

In addition, a Trump administration would greatly disadvantage Latin American exports to the US. Trump is proposing a 35% tax on all goods manufactured by US companies abroad and has threatened to enforce import tariffs on Mexican products as leverage for payment of the wall. Gabriela Siller, director of economic and financial analysis at Banco BASE, estimates that Mexico’s GDP would fall by 4.9% in the first year of a Trump administration alone. In addition, José Fernández, former US assistant secretary of state for energy, economic, and business affairs, said to news agency EFE in May that due to the uncertainty over Trump’s foreign policy, the “damage is done” to relations with Latin America, whether or not he becomes president. This uncertainty also signals a need for greater mutual support in the region. Bill Emmott, former editor-in-chief of The Economist, said in an interview with El País, “It is time to put regional solidarity above old enmities and the forces of fragmentation. The friends and allies of the United States should begin to prepare for a less-friendly United States.”
Sanders has been scathingly critical of the US’ history of military intervention and of its role in regime change in Latin America, claiming that policies such as the “toppling of... Guatemalan President [Jacobó] Árbenz in 1954, Brazilian President [João] Goulart in 1964, Chilean President [Salvador] Allende in 1973... do not work, do not make us safer, and must not be repeated.” In an interview with René Pérez, a Puerto Rican vocalist from group Calle 13, Sanders used even stronger terms, saying, “The countries of Latin America deserve to be respected and treated as partners of the United States... The United States cannot continue to go into Latin America and overthrow or try to disrupt—for economic reasons—countries... Those decisions have got to be made, the future of each country has got to be made, by the people themselves and not the United States.”

Trump and Clinton have not outlined clearly their views on interventionism in the region; however critics have accused Clinton of supporting the overthrow of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 and of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2012—or at least of an over-hasty recognition of their successors. And in an interview with EFE in October 2015, Clinton expressed hopes that the rest of Latin America would help the US “achieve peaceful change in Venezuela.”

Regarding the fight against drug trafficking, in which the US and some parts of Latin America work closely together, many believe that little will change following the 2016 presidential election. Political analyst Alexander Main, in an interview with the Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica (Latin American Center for Geopolitical Strategy, CELAG), considers that any change would need to come from Latin American governments themselves, which is unlikely given their dependence on US financing.

Both Democrats are strongly supportive of re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba and of lifting the economic embargo, in effect since 1960. If this thawing of relations continues, it could open the way for improved cooperation with the rest of Latin America, which has always supported Cuba over the embargo.

Reactions from Latin America

The provocative nature of Donald Trump and the overwhelming press coverage of his controversial comments have made him the focus of much of the reaction in Latin America to the US presidential race. Leaders have openly criticized the Republican candidate, with reported comments including Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega accusing him of “racist and war-like thinking,” the Mexican secretary of the interior, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, calling his proposals for Mexico “prejudiced and absurd,” and Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa referring to Trump as a “clown, a demagogue, and a racist.”

Others have lamented his lack of knowledge of the region, with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto saying that Trump’s views were due to “an ignorance of Mexico” and that he was damaging the relationship both countries had worked hard to build. Argentine Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra said that in his disparaging comparison with Argentina and Venezuela, Trump was “ignoring what we’ve been trying to do for five months.” Some shows of regional solidarity in reaction to Trump have also emerged, with Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro responding to Trump’s comments about Mexico by saying, “Whoever messes with Mexico, messes with Venezuela.”

However, Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa made headlines by claiming that a Trump presidency would be positive for the Latin American left, as his discourse is so “clumsy and basic” that it would
awaken a reaction. He drew a comparison with the unpopular presidency of George W. Bush, which boosted the popularity of a number of progressive governments in the 2000s. He added that Clinton is a far superior candidate and praised Sanders for his stance against Wall Street and multinational companies.

Jimmy Morales, the president of Guatemala, has pledged support for the candidate who promotes the integration of immigrants and is against wall building. And finally, some Argentine officials are reported to be actively pursuing closer relations with Clinton’s campaign, seeing her success as the best option for continuity of the commercial and investment agreements reached by Presidents Mauricio Macri and Barack Obama. Macri has spoken little on the subject himself, however, which may be due to his previous business connections with Trump or to an unwillingness to harm relations in the event of a Trump presidency.

Whatever happens in the US between now and November, Latin America should be prepared for a shift in relations. It would be wise to proactively continue to balance its traditional economic dependence on the US through the pursuit of both deeper relations with other economies and greater regional solidarity

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