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The conflict between the US and Mexico regarding US immigration policy is likely to worsen during 2008, as the topic becomes a major theme in the US presidential campaigns, particularly among Republican candidates. The issue has also taken on political overtones in Mexico, with critics accusing President Felipe Calderon's administration of being timid in the dispute. Calderon has strongly criticized a US crackdown on immigrants, but critics say the president is not backing up his words with actions. One US state, Arizona, implemented tough sanctions against employers who hire undocumented immigrants, effective Jan. 1, 2008. Even as the debate continues, the number of Mexicans who died attempting to cross the border increased during 2007.

Both major US parties favor tight enforcement at border

US immigration policies have been a central theme in electoral speeches leading up to the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire presidential primary in January. The issue is likely to remain in the public discourse in the coming months, with a large number of the US states holding caucuses or primaries in January and February. The leading candidates for both parties continue to push for measures to tighten surveillance at the US-Mexico border, including improvements in infrastructure and an increase in Border Patrol agents to deter illegal immigration. There are some differences among Republicans and Democrats. Three leading Republicans, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, ex-Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, have endorsed the construction of the controversial fence along the US-Mexico border (SourceMex , February 21, 2007, July 11, 2007, and October 10, 2007). Another Republican front-runner, Arizona Sen. John McCain, voted last year for a Senate measure to expand the wall along the border.

The Democratic candidates have mixed positions on the wall. Sens. Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois have come out in support of the border wall, while New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, the only Latino candidate in the race, has come out strongly against erecting the barrier. Ex-North Carolina senator John Edwards has not specifically addressed the questions of the wall but has called for doubling Border Patrol agents at the border. The one area where Democrats distinguish themselves from Republicans is their openness to legalizing the millions of undocumented immigrants already inside the US. "We want to have a situation in which those who are already here, are playing by the rules, are willing to pay a fine and go through a rigorous process should have a pathway to legalization," said Obama, which is a position similar to ones expressed by Clinton, Edwards, and Richardson.

In contrast, Republicans argue that any "amnesty" for undocumented immigrants would worsen the problem. "We have to enforce the law, welcoming legal immigration but ending illegal immigration," Romney said. Most Democratic and Republican candidates have also supported
creating a guest-worker program, one of the provisions included in a package proposed by the Senate in 2007 (SourceMex, May 23, 2007).

While candidates from both parties favor tightening immigration policy, Republicans have taken the tougher stance in order to appeal to conservative constituencies. "The people who really care about cracking down on illegal immigration...are very intense and very vocal," said Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster. "They're more likely to vote on that issue." The hard line adopted by Republicans does not reflect the point of view of all of the Republican electorate. "But while Americans especially Republicans increasingly identify 'illegal immigration' as important to their vote, many polls suggest that the nation's views are more nuanced than the rhetoric of many candidates," said the New York-based daily newspaper Newsday. "For example, 54% of voters nationwide say they would support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, compared with 39% who are opposed, according to an October survey conducted by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center." Divisions are even evident among Republicans, says the newspaper. "Although most Republican candidates say they oppose amnesty for illegal immigrants, GOP voters are evenly divided, with 47% saying they favor amnesty if the immigrants pass background checks, pay fines, and have jobs." Republicans' stance may alienate Latino voters. Some observers suggest the hard line taken by Republicans might alienate many Latinos, who are becoming an increasingly important voting bloc. "There is no doubt that Romney and the rest of the Republican field will find an audience for anti-immigration rhetoric in the primaries," wrote Paul Waldman in The American Prospect. "But by indulging this particular corner of the Republican id, they could be doing monumental, long-term damage to their party."

The National Council for La Raza (NCLR), one of the largest Latino lobbying organizations in the US, projects a large Latino turnout in the 2008 presidential election. "We expect Latino voter turnout on Election Day 2008 to shatter the previous record of 7.5 million in 2004," said Cecilia Munoz, senior vice president of NCLR. After the primaries, the eventual Democratic nominee is expected to make every effort to contrast his or her more flexible position with that of the Republican nominee. "I think when we get to the general election, where there are going to be some pretty stark differences between the two parties, it's going to be a very important issue," said Andrew Smith, director of the University of New Hampshire Survey Center. Still, the immigration issue has created some divisions within the Democratic Party. "Top Democratic elected officials and strategists are engaged in an internal debate over toughening the party's image on illegal immigration, with some worried that Democrats' relatively welcoming stance makes them vulnerable to GOP attacks in the 2008 election," said the Los Angeles Times.

The newspaper noted that a group of conservative Democrats, led by Rep. Heath Shuler (D-NC), introduced legislation in November to boost the number of Border Patrol agents, increase surveillance of the US-Mexico border area, and tighten requirements for employers to verify the legal status of workers. The proposal lacked any provisions to legalize millions of undocumented workers, a measure that had been supported by Democrats nationally. Some states have taken matters into their own hands. Arizona, with the support of the Republican-dominated state legislature and Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano, implemented a new law on Jan. 1, 2008, that imposes severe penalties, including the loss of a business permit, on employers who hire undocumented immigrants. By some estimates, about 500,000 undocumented immigrants live in Arizona, working in such areas as agriculture, construction, tourism, textiles, and gardening.
Experts call for bilateral dialogue

Experts argue that US political decisions regarding immigration are often made without the input of Mexico and often view immigration as a domestic issue that requires military and police solutions. Jorge Bustamante, UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, urged the US to make decisions in consultation with Mexico. The issue is "bilateral by definition" and must be treated as such, Bustamante said in a speech in Mexico City on International Migrants Day Dec. 18.

The anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US campaigns prompted President Calderon to accuse US presidential candidates of "swaggering, macho and anti-Mexican" posturing. "The seeds of animosity, or in some cases even hate and discrimination...being planted are not only against immigrants, but sometimes against Mexicans in general," said the Mexican president. As part of a campaign to address this concern, Calderon instructed Mexican consuls in the US in early December to participate in the debate on immigration by appearing at public events, talking more to the media, and working with nonprofit groups to promote Mexican immigrants' role in supporting the US economy. "The key is to neutralize this strategy of confrontation and discrimination that forms part of US society's mistaken perception and be able to newly focus arguments on the complimentary aspects of our economies," he told the Associated Press.

Critics accuse Calderon of inaction

Critics say, however, that Calderon has not done enough to stem the anti-immigrant sentiment in the US. Former foreign relations secretary Jorge Castaneda said Calderon seems to be waiting to see who gets elected as US president before taking any decisive action. "I don't think this passive attitude is the correct stance for several reasons," said Castaneda during a recent speech in Washington, DC. "The most important of these is that the [Mexican communities in the US] are suffering now." Castaneda, who served under ex-president Vicente Fox, was a staunch advocate of immigration rights for Mexicans (SourceMex, January 15, 2003). He was in Washington to present his new book, Ex Mex: From Migrants to Immigrants. Jorge Santibanez Romellon, ex-president of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), concurred with Castaneda, saying that the government's weak defense of Mexican nationals was a contributing factor to the deaths of many undocumented immigrants. Santibanez, now an official with the Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP), was not reticent about criticizing the policies of his boss, Calderon. He said there are regions of the world that are in conflict that do not see 450 deaths on an annual basis. "[The US and Mexico] are two countries that are friends and partners; yet we have a high number of casualties," he said. "We cannot continue to accept this type of border."

Increase in immigrant deaths reported in 2007

The opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) offered its own criticisms of Calderon, attacking the president for economic policies that failed to create jobs in Mexico during his first year in office. In a special report on immigration released in late December, the PRI said 562 Mexicans died attempting to cross the border in 2007. "This figure is even higher than the death toll during some years of Vicente Fox's administration," said PRI Deputy Edmundo Ramirez Martinez,
who worked on the party's immigration report. "This result is a consequence of the lack of job creation and the lack of an immigration policy on the part of the Mexican government." If the number estimated by the PRI is correct, the death toll would be much higher than in 2006. The initial government estimates were that 426 immigrants died attempting to cross the border in 2006 (SourceMex, January 17, 2007). Those figures were later revised to 485 deaths.

In early December, the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) reported the total deaths at 447 as of Dec. 5. A large number of the deaths have occurred in the Arizona desert, where migrants cross through inhospitable terrain because of tight controls at border crossings in California and at formal crossing sites in Arizona. The Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol reported 204 deaths during the 2006-2007 fiscal year that ended in September, an increase of 21% from 2005-2006.

The Tucson Sector, known as the "death corridor," covers about 90% of the Arizona border with Sonora. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) say the official number of deaths is understated. Enrique Morones, director of the California-based immigrant-rights group Border Angels, estimates that the strict vigilance of the US border with Mexico has resulted in the deaths of at least 10,000 migrants from Mexico and Central America since 1994. This is an average of 760 persons per year, Morones told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy in late December. There are signs that fewer migrants may attempt to make the trip in 2008, in part because of increased workplace raids and tighter sanctions against employers. Another major reason is a slowdown in the US construction industry, which had been a major source of employment for undocumented workers, said the Los Angeles Times. But some in Mexico believe there will be increased pressure to emigrate, particularly by residents of rural areas who will be affected by an expected slump in the Mexican agriculture economy. This slump will be tied to the elimination of tariffs for corn, beans, and other products under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), say groups like the Asociacion Nacional de Empresas Productoras del Campo (ANEC), which organized a protest at the border crossing between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas, at the start of 2008.

The market-opening measure, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2008, was especially expected to hurt the small-scale and subsistence producers, with a recent surge in corn prices helping the larger farmers (December 12, SourceMex, 2007). In an editorial on Dec. 27, the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said emigration from rural areas to cities and to the US is the result of polices by recent governments to abandon campesino communities. "This policy is underscored by the adherence to agreements like NAFTA," said La Jornada. "While it has helped the large agriculture interests, it has caused devastation to the majority of producers who make a living from agriculture."

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