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## U.S. Midterm Elections Have Implications for Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

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The US midterm elections on Nov. 2 had some very important implications for Mexico, including the decision by California voters to reject Proposition 19 to legalize marijuana in the state and the election of a Republican majority in the US Congress, which could present further obstacles for the passage of comprehensive immigration-reform legislation. A related concern for Mexico was the anti-immigrant sentiment present in some of the campaigns. There were also some worries for the administration of Mexican President Felipe Calderón that a Republican-dominated Congress might present greater opposition to the effort to control the flow of arms south of the border.

"The change of control in the US House probably means that, even if he really wanted to move the immigration and gun control agenda forward, President Barack Obama won't have the political capital needed to counter newly elected right-wing Republicans and Tea Party representatives who generally oppose comprehensive immigration reform or any limitations on Second Amendment rights to buy and own all types of weapons, many of which find their way to the drug cartels in Mexico and beyond," Andres Rozental, president of Rozental & Asociados in Mexico City and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said in an interview with the .

Still, despite the election results, Calderón insisted that Mexico does not favor one party over another. "The government of Mexico will work, as it always has, with the party in power, whether it is Democrat or Republican," said the president.

### *Mexico pleased with results of California's marijuana vote*

If there was any positive development from the elections for Mexico, it was the overwhelming rejection of California's Prop 19. The measure was defeated by a margin of 54% to 46%. It would have basically legalized marijuana consumption by allowing licensed retailers to sell up to one ounce at a time, with no doctor's note required, to those over the age of 21. Advocates argued that young people already find it easier to acquire a marijuana cigarette than a tobacco cigarette or beer.

The California measure did not, however, protect state residents from the federal Controlled Substances Act, and many experts said the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was likely to intervene if Prop 19 had been approved.

Mexico and other Latin American countries made their objections known before the vote, saying that legalizing marijuana in California would send a contradictory message to the region. "They have exerted pressure and demanded for decades that Mexico and other countries control, reduce, and fight drug trafficking, and there is no discernible effort to reduce the consumption of drugs in the United States," Calderón told the .

"It is going to create a problem that is very tough to resolve," Calderón said in an earlier interview in Madrid with the Spain-based daily newspaper . "If approved, it is going to be very hard to imprison a peasant who is growing marijuana to sell to the Californians."

Presidents Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia, Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica, Porfirio Lobo of Honduras, and Álvaro Colom of Guatemala also weighed in with their objections to Prop 19. "What

we are seeing is that, despite the efforts that Central American countries have made to overcome our problems [with crime and violence], many lives have been lost as a result of social violence and the consumption of drugs in other countries," Chinchilla said in a news conference at a summit hosted by Santos in Bogotá.

The defeat of Prop 19 won some kudos from the Mexican government. In a television interview on Nov. 3, the day after the California vote, Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova expressed satisfaction with the vote, saying that easy access to marijuana increases the chances of addiction. "This result is compatible with Mexico's efforts to give a high priority to prevention and treatment of addictions," said Córdova.

Still, Mexico's opposition to Prop 19 appears hypocritical because in 2009 the government enacted a law decriminalizing possession of small amounts of narcotics ([SourceMex, Aug. 26, 2009](#)). Calderón opposed the initiative, but the Mexican Congress approved the measure overwhelmingly ([SourceMex, April 22, 2009](#)).

There are some efforts to push for full legalization of drugs in Mexico, which Calderón also opposes. Still, the president has offered to launch a national debate on this topic ([SourceMex, Aug. 11, 2010](#)). The president followed that pledge by reiterating his position that, if drugs are legalized, this should not occur in isolation. "This should happen globally," Calderón said recently.

There were other issues surrounding the legalization of marijuana in California, including the question of whether this would have an impact on production in Mexico. The California initiative would have allowed small-scale production of marijuana, which might have caused Mexican drug traffickers to lose some of their market. Still, a study conducted by the Rand Corporation, a US think-tank, said the impact would have been small because California's residents already prefer to grow their own pot. Mexican drug cartels supply an estimated 40% to 67% of all marijuana consumed in the US, but California accounts for only 7%, the study said.

The Rand study said, however, that the profits of Mexican cartels would have suffered if Prop 19 had turned California into a source of marijuana for other parts of the US.

Some Mexican officials said passage of Prop 19 would have had some short-term advantages for Mexican drug traffickers because it would have provided an immediate market for their product. In late October, Mexican authorities seized about 134 tons of marijuana from warehouses in Tijuana.

Mexican officials said a preliminary investigation indicated that the Sinaloa cartel, also known as the Pacific cartel, owned the marijuana, which had been stored in Tijuana, presumably to be moved into California after the Prop 19 vote.

Authorities said the execution-style killing of 13 people at a rehabilitation center in Tijuana might have been related to the seizure of the marijuana. Baja California state attorney general Rommel Moreno said an unknown individual broke into police frequencies shortly after the killings and hinted that the massacre, along with one in Ciudad Juárez that same week, was in retaliation for the marijuana seizure. The Juárez massacre claimed the lives of 14 victims, all young people, who were attending a birthday party.

The individual who hacked into the Tijuana police frequency played a narco ballad praising Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquín Chapo Guzmán and warning that one individual would be killed for every ton of marijuana that was seized.

There was another massacre of young people at a car wash in Tepic, Nayarit state, that same week. The facility was operated by a local drug-rehabilitation center. "The workers were all men. They were washing cars when the gunmen, probably members of organized crime, drove up in SUVs and opened fire," a spokeswoman for the Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado de Nayarit (PGJ-Nayarit) said in an interview with Reuters.

### *Effort to curb weapons smuggling could become more difficult*

The recent US election could stifle any efforts to slow down the illegal exportation of high-caliber weapons into Mexico. Mexico was already frustrated with the slow pace of this effort under Democratic President Obama and a Democratic-controlled Congress ([SourceMex, May 26, 2010](#)). The Obama government had allocated resources and personnel to implement tighter controls at the US-Mexico border ([SourceMex, April 1, 2009](#)), but this has done little to reduce the availability of weapons to the drug cartels.

There have been suggestions that tighter controls be imposed on sales at gun shows, which could help address the problem of illegal sales. Many of the newly elected members of the US House and Senate, however, have gone on record as opposing this measure because they say it would violate the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees the right of citizens to bear arms.

Congress is expected to stay the course regarding the amount of drug-interdiction assistance provided to Mexico under Plan Mérida ([SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2007](#)) and ([Nov. 28, 2007](#)). There have been no reductions in funding, but the US has been behind in providing some of the promised equipment such as helicopters.

Calderón said Mexico is grateful for the assistance, but he said controlling the flow of weapons and reducing drug consumption should be as much of a priority for the US.

The Mexican president reiterated his concerns about the ease by which members of organized crime have access to "an almost unlimited assortment of weapons." He noted that the Mexican government has confiscated 40,000 illegal weapons since he took office in December 2006. Roughly 90% of the weapons were traceable to the US.

"If the United States put half the effort that it puts into stopping illegal immigration into stopping the flow of weaponry, the story would be very different," Calderón said on Nov. 3, the day after the election.

### *Immigration reform also seems dead in near term*

Among Mexico's biggest concerns in the aftermath of the US election are the potential obstacles in the area of immigration. When Obama was elected, there was hope that the administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress would pass comprehensive immigration reform ([SourceMex, Jan. 21, 2009](#)).

"Given that President Barack Obama does not have a majority of members of his party in the House of Representatives, perhaps he'll have less room to maneuver his legislative agenda, including immigration," acknowledged Calderón.

The Mexican president said, however, that, despite these new obstacles, Mexico would continue to push forward on comprehensive immigration reform, including some path to legalization for undocumented immigrants who reside in the US.

Some Mexican legislators were more direct in their assessment of the US election and the Republican victory. Sen. Silvano Aureoles, a leader of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the lower house, said he anticipates "a brutal campaign against immigrants, especially those of Mexican origin."

The anti-immigrant sentiment was evident in some of the political campaigns ahead of the election, with Arizona's anti-immigrant legislation, SB1070, playing an important role. The law was approved by the Arizona Senate in April and was later signed by Gov. Jan Brewer ([SourceMex, April 28, 2010](#)).

In July, a federal judge threw out some important sections of the law after the federal government presented objections to SB1070 ([SourceMex, July 21, 2010](#)). The judge's decision provided material for Republican candidates in some districts to run campaigns against Democrats.

Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), who staunchly opposed SB1070, had a tighter-than-anticipated re-election race in a district that has supported him strongly in the past. Shortly after the passage of SB1070, Grijalva recommended that businesses and tourists boycott Arizona because of the anti-immigrant law. The stance might have won him some enemies in the district, with initial results from the race showing Grijalva leading his opponent, Republican Ruth McClung, by only a few thousand votes. That margin increased when all the ballots were counted, and Grijalva won the election with 50% of the vote.

In Nevada, an advertisement by Republican challenger Sharron Angle used an image of Calderón to attack Sen. Harry Reid's opposition to SB1070. "Waves of illegal aliens streaming across our border, joining violent gangs, forcing families to live in fear," said the voice of the narrator in an ad favoring Angle, a conservative candidate backed by the Tea Party. "And what's Harry Reid doing about it? Voting to give illegal aliens social security benefits, tax breaks, and college tuition," the narrator continued, with images of Latino people in the background.

Reid, who is Senate majority leader, managed to win re-election by a narrow margin despite the attacks.

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