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## U.S.-Mexico Relations at Center of Presidential Campaigns

by Carlos Navarro

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Conflicts with the US over immigration and drug enforcement have surfaced occasionally during recent presidential elections, ([SourceMex, April 12, 2000](#), [May 31, 2006](#), [Dec. 14, 2011](#)), but the relationship with the US appears to be one of the dominant themes in the months leading to this year's election, scheduled for July 1.

With the Mexican electoral campaign fully started, reports circulated that Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto was planning to host his US counterpart, President Donald Trump, to discuss security, trade, and immigration. According to Mexico's Office of the Presidency, the two leaders spoke on the phone on Feb. 20 to discuss common issues, but the press release did not mention a meeting. "The two leaders reiterated their pledge to try to move their stalled bilateral agenda forward on the themes of security, trade, and immigration, via a coordinated effort by groups on both sides," the statement said.

According to the weekly newsmagazine *Proceso*, the two leaders had planned to meet on Feb. 27-28 in Mexico City, but the reunion was canceled. "The two leaders communicated by telephone to express condolences for recent tragedies in each country: the massacre of 17 school children [and faculty members] in Florida and the crash of a helicopter that was assessing damage from a recent earthquake in Oaxaca state," *Proceso* reported. "But something happened during the conversation, because the planned meeting scheduled for next week in Mexico City was canceled."

### *Opposition candidates hammer Trump*

Trump and his administration's stance toward Mexico have taken center stage in Mexico's electoral campaign. The two main opposition candidates, Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Ricardo Anaya, have strongly criticized Peña Nieto for failing to show more backbone in his dealings with Trump, who has adopted an extreme hard-line policy against immigrants from Mexico and other countries ([SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2016](#)). Trump has moved forward with his proposal to construct a wall along the US-Mexico border to discourage illegal immigration. While he has continued saying that Mexico would somehow pay for the structure, the US president has included the project in his US budget proposals ([SourceMex, March 22, 2017](#)).

Additionally, Trump has taken a strong protectionist stance against Mexico, threatening US manufacturers—particularly automakers—with economic sanctions if they proceed with plans to construct or expand facilities in Mexico to assemble vehicles for export to the US ([SourceMex, Jan. 11, 2017](#)). More recently, the Trump government has made its protectionist stance evident during renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) ([SourceMex, Aug. 23, 2017](#), [Oct. 18, 2017](#), [Jan. 10, 2018](#)).

The US president also continues to peg Mexico as a country that allows criminals to thrive. As recently as late January, Trump sent out a Twitter message describing Mexico "as the number one most dangerous country in the world," despite statistics from the UN and the World Bank indicating that other places in the hemisphere actually have a higher crime rate.

Trump's disregard for Mexico has made him an easy target during the presidential campaigns, which officially started on Feb. 18.

"President Donald Trump is causing a lot of anger among Mexicans ... and a negative attitude towards the United States, which is not helpful, beneficial, or healthy, least of all with a neighboring country," Heriberto Galindo, a former federal deputy and ex-consul of Mexico in Chicago, said in an interview with Reuters.

López Obrador announced his intention to seek the presidency last year, long before the other parties and coalitions had selected their candidates. Because of this, he got an early jump on his criticism of Trump. The fiery center-left candidate—who is representing a coalition composed of Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and Partido Encuentro Social (PES)—has developed a reputation as an anti-establishment candidate and is seen by many voters as a leader who could potentially stand up to Trump ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)).

"Without being disrespectful, we're going to put [Trump] in his place," López Obrador said during an informal rally in the city of Veracruz in January.

A few weeks later, López Obrador criticized Trump's proposed wall as an unnecessary project that would not solve the migration dilemma for the US. "If he insists on building the wall, we're going to turn to the United Nations to defend the rights of Mexicans," the Morena candidate told several hundred supporters at a hotel in Mexico City.

Recent polls have shown Anaya cutting into López Obrador's lead, in part because he has also credibly portrayed himself as someone who could take on Trump. "Mexico will never again be treated like a doormat for the United States, as it has been in this government," said Anaya, who at 38 is the youngest of the three major candidates seeking the presidency. Anaya is representing a coalition composed of parties with seemingly opposite philosophies: his own conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and center-left parties Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and Movimiento Ciudadano (MC). The PRD and the PAN have a recent history of forming coalitions in state elections ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010, July 10, 2013, June 14, 2017](#)).

In the most recent public opinion survey, conducted by Consulta Mitofsky on Feb. 9-11, López Obrador led preferences among would-be voters with slightly more than 27% of support. The Morena candidate, who had double-digit leads in polls conducted before the formal start of the campaigns, had a single-digit margin over his nearest rival in the Mitofsky poll. Anaya attained slightly more than 22% in voter preferences, followed by the third major candidate, José Antonio Meade, with 18%. Meade is representing an alliance formed by the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the Partido Verde Ecologista de México, and Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL).

Both López Obrador and Anaya left the door open for a possible dialogue with the Trump administration

"With a border spanning 2,000 miles, the security of the US depends directly on a stable and cooperative Mexico and not on a wall," Anaya said in a video posted on social media.

During a recent trip to Baja California, López Obrador said he would seek to enter into a dialogue with Trump to try to sway him against constructing the wall. "If he insists, we are going to bring the matter to the UN, which is something that our government has not done," he said. "Before we do

any of that, we will try to convince Donald Trump ... that the best option is to promote economic growth in Mexico, which would reduce the flow of migrants to the US and also solve the problem of insecurity and violence.”

While both López Obrador and Anaya have paired their criticisms of Trump with what they perceive as a mild response from Peña Nieto, Meade has focused primarily on the US president, and has acknowledged that Trump represents a “challenge” for Mexico.

Meade has also expressed opposition to Trump’s insistence that Mexico would pay for construction of the border wall. “Mexico will NOT under any circumstances pay for that wall,” Meade said in a Twitter message.

Meade, however, suggested that Mexico should not depend so much on external factors.

“We are convinced that change in Mexico is not going to come from outside, nor will it come from a trade agreement,” he said during a campaign rally in Tabasco, alluding to the recent difficulties by Mexico, the US, and Canada to reach an agreement during the NAFTA renegotiations.

Three independent candidates are also likely to appear on the ballot on July 1: Sen. Armando Ríos Piter, the ex-legislator and former first lady Margarita Zavala, and Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, also known as “El Bronco,” who was governor of Nuevo León between 2015 and 2017. The three candidates appear to have attained enough signatures to run on July 1, although electoral authorities are still verifying the signatures.

María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, also known as “Marichuy,” failed to qualify for the presidential election. She had been chosen by the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI) to represent Mexico’s indigenous peoples in the July 1 vote ([SourceMex, June 7, 2017](#)). but was unable to obtain the necessary signatures. According to a CNI spokesperson, Patricio Martínez will continue organizing work in indigenous communities around Mexico, although he admitted the goal is “no longer to get on the ballot.”

## *Impact of migrants in the US*

One segment of voters that could have an impact on the election are Mexican expatriates in the US. According to electoral authorities, the change in rules allowing Mexicans to register to vote at Mexican consulates in the US has meant a seven-fold increase in the number of eligible expatriates. Previously, Mexicans were required to travel to Mexico to register to vote ([SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2005](#)).

The Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE) has already approved more than 460,000 credentials for voters abroad and is processing thousands more ahead of a March 31 registration deadline. Many of those who have received voting credentials are first-time voters, and they could vote for the candidate who would best stand up to Trump.

“It could potentially decide the election,” David Ayón, a senior fellow at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles told Reuters.

Benito Nacif, an INE official, agreed.

“It’s very early to say what percent of them will vote, but in a tight election, these votes could make a difference,” he commented.

Mexican expatriates in the US are already expressing their concern about Trump in other ways. Remittances sent from the US to relatives in Mexico in 2017 approached a record US\$28.8 million, an increase of almost 7% over the US\$27 million sent in 2016, according to statistics from Mexico's central bank (Banco de México, BANXICO). The increase was evident not only in terms of the total amount of money sent to Mexico but also in the number of transactions, which increased by about 2% from 2016. On average, expatriates sent US\$308 per transaction, about 5% more than in 2016.

"Remittances increased because of the economic recovery in the US and the fear of Trump," financial columnist José Yuste wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

According to a study by the Inter-American Dialogue, other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean saw a major increase in remittances from expatriates in 2017. The amount of money sent back home by citizens of Colombia, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and El Salvador also increased in the double digits.

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