

ISSUE BRIEF **06.19.15**

The Cultural Dissonance of Mexico–Texas Relations

Jesus Velasco, Nonresident Scholar, Mexico Center, Baker Institute

Maribel McMillian, Graduate Student, Texas A&M University

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Mexico and Texas is in dire need of reassessment, given the chasm between the reality of the countries' economic and cultural relationship and the political rhetoric that surrounds it.

Indeed, Mexico and Texas' economic and cultural ties are growing rapidly and continue to deepen. Commercially, about one-third of all US–Mexico trade originates in Texas. In 2014, for example, 29.8 percent of Texas imports came from Mexico and 35.5 percent of Texas exports went to Mexico.¹ That same year, 3,744,622 (about 69 percent) of all trucks that crossed the US–Mexico border did so at Texas ports of entry, followed by California, a distant second with 1,187,675 trucks.² Many other economic indicators in investment, tourism, and trade show similar interdependent patterns. Culturally and demographically, the relationship also continues to grow. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 9,794,000 Hispanics lived in Texas in 2011—about 38 percent of the state's population—with 88 percent of them being of Mexican origin. One-third of all Texas Hispanics were born in Mexico.³ According to a US Census Bureau report from the same year, 29.21 percent of Texans spoke Spanish. Mexicans are otherwise connected intimately with Texas. In 2012, the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas estimated that Mexican tourists spend “more than \$4.5 billion annually on food, clothing, auto parts, and other retail items in Texas border cities.”⁴ And 43.9

percent of Mexican students in the United States are studying at Texas universities.⁵

At the federal level, border cooperation has also increased during the Obama and the Calderón and Peña administrations. In 2013, then–US Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, asserted: “the United States and Mexico have taken unprecedented steps in recent years to deepen our cooperation along our shared borders.”⁶

This reality, however, does not match the rhetoric coming from Austin, Texas, particularly from the political elite. On the contrary, the rhetoric from Texas' lawmakers about Mexico and the Mexican border has often emphasized the negative and sometimes taken a more confrontational tone. The deployment of the National Guard to the border, authorized by former Texas Governor Rick Perry and current Governor Greg Abbott, has baffled Mexican citizens and politicians alike. In September 2014, Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted its “deepest rejection and condemnation” of the measure. Similarly, Mexican President Peña called the measure “unpleasant.” Texas officials quickly reacted to these statements. Former Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst declared: “I find it puzzling and frankly offensive that the government of Mexico chose the 13th anniversary of the most tragic attack on our homeland to call on Texas to throw open our international border to illegal immigration, trafficking in drugs and human lives, and potentially even terrorists who wish to harm America.”



Mexico's MC/MO policy arose as a patchwork of reactions to various acts by regulators and Congress.

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The Mexican government has been irked principally by the continual anti-immigration statements made by Texas officials, their open support for US government travel warnings to Mexico, and the executions of Mexican citizens in Texas.⁷

Paradoxically, Texas officials are aware of the importance of the border and trade with Mexico for Texas's prosperity and have also expressed an increasing interest in the potential business opportunities opening up in Mexico, particularly in light of Mexico's recently liberalized oil and gas industry. This awareness, however, further highlights the fact that Mexico and Texas need to reassess their relationship.

What explains these ongoing strains in the Texas-Mexico relationship? There seems to be a gap between the reality of interdependence and the rhetoric between Austin and Mexico City. This issue brief tries to explain this discrepancy.

PARTY POLITICS AND THE TEXAS-MEXICO RELATIONSHIP

One potential explanation lies with Texas politics. Over the last three decades, Texas has become both increasingly Republican and increasingly conservative. According to a study conducted by professor Mark P. Jones of Rice University, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick was rated the most conservative senator in 2013.⁸ He is one of the most conservative Texas politicians in recent years. Both Patrick and Attorney General Ken Paxton are highly sympathetic to far-right Tea Party politics, as is US Senator Ted Cruz, a potential 2016 Republican presidential candidate. The Republican Party also has been in control of both chambers of the Texas Legislature since 2003.

This has been a natural path for Texas politics. According to Southern Methodist University professor Cal Jillson, a leading expert on Texas politics, "the Texas way has always highlighted individualism, small government, and a states' rights interpretation of federalism." In his view, "Texas against federal intrusion has been

an enduring theme of state politics."⁹ Today, this orientation is in tune with the Republican Party platform, specifically the Tea Party, which seeks to crack down on undocumented immigration and seems to prefer a closed border. To placate this political base, Texas politicians have taken a more confrontational tone on these issues—with the understanding that an adversarial attitude toward Mexico is politically inexpensive and keeps the most conservative members of the Tea Party satisfied.

PRIORITIES AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

It is possible that Texas' politics clash with Mexico's more centralized political culture. Recent surveys may illustrate that. According to an opinion poll conducted on February 15, 2015, by the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin, Texans consider border security (21 percent) and immigration (17 percent) to be the most important problems facing the state.¹⁰ Texas leaders responded to these concerns, arguing that the federal government has failed and Texas must now resolve these problems itself. Thus state officials deployed the National Guard, a move approved by 44 percent of Texans and opposed by only 9 percent. This deployment is viewed by Mexico as an aggressive move. The same poll reveals that 35 percent of Texans strongly agree with deporting undocumented immigrants. Texas politicians' rhetoric accommodates these concerns, but often ends up upsetting Mexico.

Moreover, 49 percent of Texans strongly support the death penalty. This injects further confusion into the relationship, as it is difficult for Mexico to accept that the US government cannot bring Texas to comply with the Geneva Convention on Consular Relations and other death penalty treaties to which both the United States and Mexico are parties. In *Medellín vs. Texas*, a 2008 case, the US Supreme Court made it clear that Texas is not bound by such treaties and that if the US government wants Texas to comply with them, Congress would have to legislate explicitly on the matter.¹¹

Another important issue is guns. Gun control is very much a states' rights issue in the United States, but Mexico, concerned with the significant number of weapons purchased by drug traffickers in Texas, frets over gun control in the United States. Guns are an issue for only 2 percent of Texans, and Mexico's attempts to negotiate on guns with the US federal government do not sit well in Texas.

These misunderstandings reach even into the positive aspects of the two countries' relationship. According to the Mexico and the Americas poll conducted by the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE) from 2012–2013, 45 percent of Mexicans considered trade and investment the most important issue to the US–Mexico relationship, with Texas and California being very important for Mexicans. Texans are, on the other hand, generally unaware of the importance of Mexico to the Texas economy.¹²

All of this reveals a complicated set of issues that create opportunities for misunderstanding between Texas and Mexico. Texas leaders' rhetoric has been assertive toward Mexico not only because it reflects Texans' concerns, but also because taking shots at immigration, border security, and Mexico is politically expedient and costs little. At the same time, Mexico has hardly paid attention to the concerns in Austin and prefers to deal with binational issues in Washington DC.

MEXICO AND TEXAS: SAME ISSUES, DIFFERENT READINGS

To underscore our observations above, we illustrate further how Texas and Mexico misread each other. While the Mexican government insists that immigration is a foreign policy issue, leaders in Austin—and in Washington—consider it a domestic policy concern. For Mexico, immigration is, in fact, a central theme of the bilateral relationship. Mexico has not figured out how to triangulate this issue in its favor.

Moreover, a majority of Texans support deportation of undocumented workers.¹³

Texans argue that the United States is a nation of laws and citizens, residents, and foreigners alike are expected to respect the law of the land, including immigration laws. Governor Abbott expressed this idea in July of 2014 when he asserted, “the reasons why the United States of America is the premier nation of the entire globe is because we are a nation that is based upon the rule of law.”¹⁴ Although more holistic and sustainable solutions would involve greater cooperation with Mexican and Central American officials, the United States often opts to unilaterally control the flow of undocumented migrants simply by restricting access at the border. Oddly enough Texas views the federal government as a failure on the matter and acts independently on what Mexico views an issue for the two federal governments to resolve.

Worse, Mexico believes that undocumented workers come to the United States primarily because the American labor market attracts them to do the jobs Americans do not want to do. Mexican officials argue that the majority of Mexican migrants to the United States have found employment and that the US government rarely penalizes employers that hire undocumented workers.¹⁵ Moreover, Texas's friendly business culture has contributed to creating a job market for Mexican immigrants, while at the same time fueling Texans' desire to stop immigration with walls, border surveillance, and the National Guard. That is a puzzling ambiguity to Mexico.

Security measures irritate Mexico, no matter what kind. The presence of the National Guard is, according to President Enrique Peña, “not only unpleasant but reprehensible,” calling the move “an attack on good relations and neighborliness.” Peña continued to say that “the policy is completely unacceptable, and it does not embody the spirit of cordiality and friendship between two nations.”¹⁶ Recurring reports of unfair pay, repeated violations of human rights, and even killings of undocumented workers at the hands of Border Patrol agents and other police forces reinforce this view.¹⁷

Texas politicians have taken a more confrontational tone [with Mexico]—with the understanding that an adversarial attitude toward Mexico is politically inexpensive and keeps most of the conservative members of the Tea Party satisfied.

[Texas and Mexico] share a history and increasingly an economy...but there has been little political will to seek to understand the perspective of the other, and this has created ups and downs in the relationship.

Binational disagreement on the death penalty follows a somewhat similar logic, as already pointed out. Although Mexico did not abolish the death penalty until December 2005, it had not been used since 1937. In Mexico, according to the polling company Parametría, in 2004, only 38 percent of Mexicans approved of the death penalty, with 42 percent opposed.¹⁸ In January 2014, 39 percent favored death penalty while 50 percent disapproved of it.¹⁹ On the other hand, a 2012 University of Texas/Texas Tribune poll revealed that 73 percent of Texans approve of the death penalty, while just 21 percent disapprove.²⁰ But Mexicans argue that Texas should adhere to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which demands that foreign citizens have access to their consulates immediately upon arrest, whereas Texans believe that they are not subject to it. The US Supreme Court has agreed with Texas, much to Mexico's chagrin. According to Parametría, 81 percent of Mexicans, for example, expressed disapproval of Mexican national Edgar Tamayo's execution, even though he killed a Houston policeman. The reactions of Mexican and Texas authorities to Tamayo's death clearly illustrate opposite stances on the issue. The Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the execution and declared it a violation of the Vienna Convention and a direct affront to the decision the International Court of Justice dictated in the Avena case of 2004, in which the International Court of Justice ruled that the United States had breached its obligations under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.²¹ On the other hand, Lucy Nashed, a spokeswoman for former Governor Perry, maintained, "the state was committed to enforcing its law...It doesn't matter where you're from—if you commit a despicable crime like this in Texas, you are subject to our state laws, including a fair trial by jury and the ultimate penalty."²²

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are clear dissonances in the Mexico-Texas relationship. Society is an expression of culture. Culture, in the view of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is a system of beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ideas that distinguish the members of one group or category of people from another. In this perspective, Mexico and Texas have a very different culture and are therefore very different societies. All of this is reinforced by the nature of the local political and economic institutions on either side of the border. This does not necessarily mean that the two countries cannot reframe their relationship. They share a history and increasingly an economy. The problem is that there has been little political will to understand the perspective of the other, and this has created ups and downs in the Texas-Mexico relationship. Unfortunately, this sort of dissonance will remain a constant into the foreseeable future, unless Texas' political and electoral interests shift so as to facilitate clearer lines of communication with Mexico and Mexico understands that its diplomatic efforts in Austin must match its efforts in Washington DC. Geography, familiarity, and economic interests can and should be the building blocks of a new relationship, but it is also imperative that leaders on both sides of the border acknowledge that a new, open dialogue is required between Texans and Mexicans.

ENDNOTES

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AUTHOR

Jesús Velasco, Ph.D., is a nonresident scholar at the Baker Institute [Mexico Center](#) as well as the Joe and Teresa Long Endowed Chair in Social Sciences at Tarleton State University. He is a former visiting scholar at the Wilson Center, the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, and Harvard's Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. He is the author of *Neoconservatives in US Foreign Policy Under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush: Voices Behind the Throne*. [Velasco](#) earned a Ph.D. in political science at The University of Texas at Austin.

Maribel McMillian is a Texas A&M University graduate student obtaining a master's degree in education and human development. She works at the university's Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning. McMillian holds a B.A. in international studies with a minor in Spanish from Tarleton University.

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Cite as:

Velasco, Jesus, and McMillian, Maribel. 2015. *The Cultural Dissonance of Mexico-Texas Relations*. Issue brief no. 06.19.15. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.