

How migration shaped US and Mexican politics in the twenty-first century

The elections of George W. Bush and Vicente Fox in 2000 appeared to augur well for US–Mexico relations. Both presidents wanted to improve relations, especially through closer cooperation on migration issues. President Bush’s first foreign visit was to President Fox’s ranch and the US–Mexico immigrant initiative topped the agenda. However, there was significant Congressional opposition. Then, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the migration initiative was put on the back-burner as securitization of US immigration policy ensued. With the re-election of President Bush in 2004, comprehensive immigration reform became a priority for the second term. But deep divisions between Republicans doomed reform in the Bush presidency with perhaps fateful long-term consequences for the Republican Party.

In 2008, newly elected Mexican President Calderón sought to de-emphasize the centrality of migration in US–Mexican relations whereas newly elected US President Barack Obama continued to support reform, albeit tepidly. In the absence of comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level, pro and anti-immigration activists launched initiatives at the state and municipal levels. Several states adopted restrictive measures which led to an important US Supreme Court ruling in 2012 that upheld the paramount prerogatives of the US federal government in determination of immigration law and policy. Nonetheless, the rules adopted in Arizona and other states led to many deportations of Mexican undocumented workers and contributed to a decline in Mexico–US migration.

President Obama too was unable to secure comprehensive immigration reform in his first term. However, he proclaimed it a principal goal of his second term after his re-election in 2012. The magnitude of his victory appeared to underscore the long-term significance of President Bush’s inability to secure reform. The burgeoning minority population of the USA voted overwhelmingly in favour of Obama whereas the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney won most of the white non-immigrant vote. Gender also played a key role: 55 per cent of all women voters chose Obama over Romney, while for black women the figure was a massive 96 per cent, and for Latino women 76 per cent. A key question for the future is: can the Republican Party increase its appeal to minority populations, especially to Latinos?

Sources: Calmes and Thee-Brenan, 2012; Lopez and Taylor, 2012; Suzanne, 2012.