

April 29, 2013

## As President Obama Heads to Mexico, Americans Have Mixed Views of Neighbor across the Border

*President Obama will visit Mexico on May 2, where he is expected to discuss ways to deepen US-Mexico economic relations and reinforce cultural and commercial ties between the two countries. While still plagued by issues related to organized crime, today Mexico has one of the world's fastest growing economies, and it is the United States' second largest trading partner and third largest source of oil. But a just-completed survey (April 12-14) conducted by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows that American views of Mexico are at their lowest point ever in Chicago Council surveys and relatively few are aware of the depth of bilateral economic integration. At the same time, however, a majority still say that ties with Mexico are important and consider Mexico an economic partner rather than a rival. Taken together, the results suggest that increased public awareness of bilateral endeavors could boost support for increased economic and energy integration in the future.*

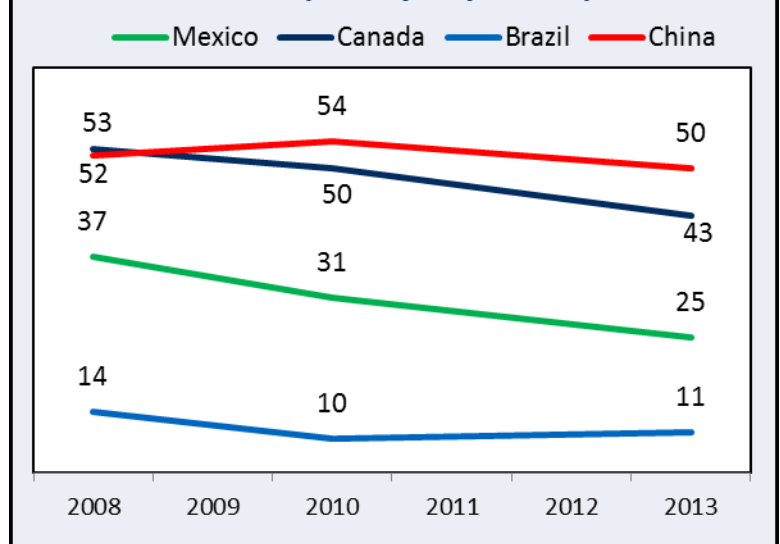
### Key Highlights

- A majority of Americans consider Mexico an important country to the United States, and twice as many say it is an economic partner than an economic rival.
- But favorable ratings of Mexico are at their lowest point ever in Chicago Council surveys dating back to 1994, and relatively few Americans are aware that Mexico is one of our top trading partners.
- As in 2004, more say that the Mexican economy has benefitted from NAFTA than the US economy, though more now say that NAFTA has been good for the US economy than did in 2004.
- More Americans believe that Mexico is working in a different, rather than same, direction as the United States on energy production, securing the border, and combating organized crime and illegal drug trafficking.
- A majority says the United States should have greater responsibility than Mexico for dealing with the smuggling of guns and assault weapons from the United States into Mexico, where they are illegal. Americans are somewhat more divided on who should take the lead on dealing with illegal drug trafficking from Mexico into the United States.

### Attitudes toward Bilateral Relations Are Positive, But More Now See Worsening Ties

Mexico is seen as an important country to the United States, though somewhat less so than in past years, and Americans place greater weight on other bilateral relationships. Majorities of Americans say that China (89%), Canada (86%), Mexico (68%), and Brazil (61%) are at least "somewhat important" to the United States "in terms of the role each country plays in the world." Given its impressive economic advances, China is more frequently considered "very important" (50%) to the United States than Canada (43%), Mexico (25%), or Brazil (11%). Back in 2008, more believed that Mexico was "very important" (37% in 2008, 31% in 2010, 25% now), though

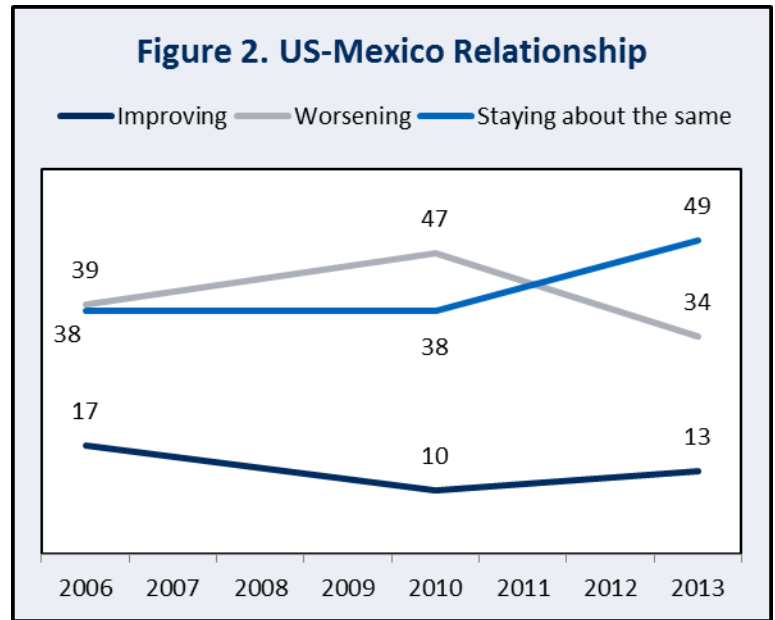
**Figure 1. Importance of Countries to the US (% very important)**



results show a broadly consistent downshift across time in the percentages deeming each country “very important” (Figure 1).

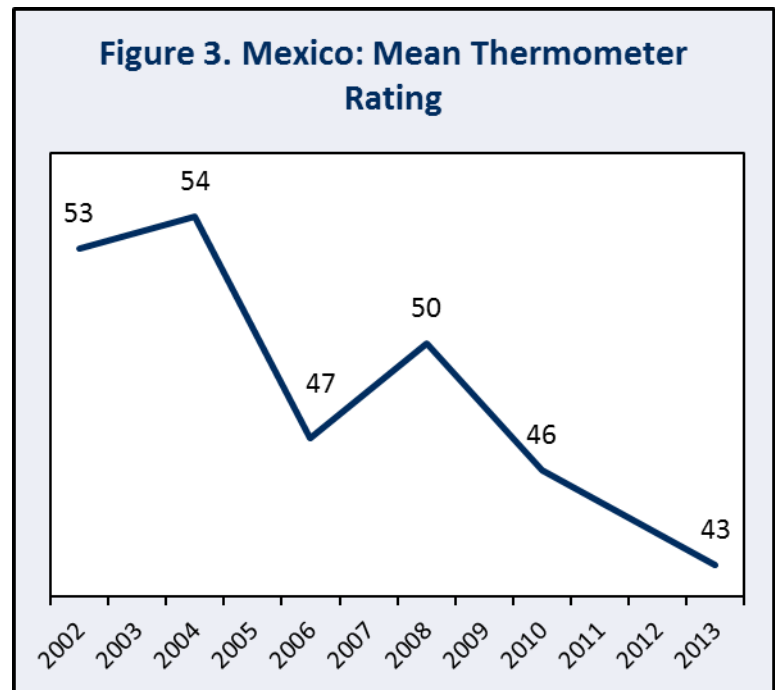
While the American public may view China as more important to the United States for broader strategic reasons, they think that US ties with Canada and Mexico are stronger than ties with China. Six in ten Americans say that relations between the United States and Mexico are good (63%), and nine in ten believe that ties with Canada are good (93%). Eight in ten also say that ties with Brazil are good (82%), while 56 percent think that US-China relations are good.

Compared to previous years, more now say that US-Mexico relations are staying about the same (49%) with fewer saying that relations are worsening (34%, down 13 percentage points from 47% in 2010). However, only 13 percent say that US-Mexico relations are improving (Figure 2).



**Favorable Ratings of Mexico at a New Low**

Despite majority affirmation of positive ties between the United States and Mexico, American feelings toward Mexico are now at the lowest level since the question was first posed in Chicago Council online surveys in 2002. Mexico receives a mean rating of 43 on a thermometer scale of how Americans feel towards other nations (with 0 meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling; 100 meaning a very warm, favorable feeling; and 50 being neutral). From 1994 to 2002 the question was also asked in telephone surveys; the mean rating of the telephone surveys in 1994 and 1998 was 57 and in 2002 was 60. The current mean rating is higher than that given to China (39), but lower than that for Brazil (53) and Canada (78) (Figure 3).



The low rating appears to be linked at least in part to the perception that the two nations are not working together on key bilateral issues (see Figure 9, page 6). Negative views of Mexican immigrants may also play some role (a separate report on attitudes toward immigration is forthcoming).

### Only Two in Ten Recognize Mexico as a Top Trading Partner

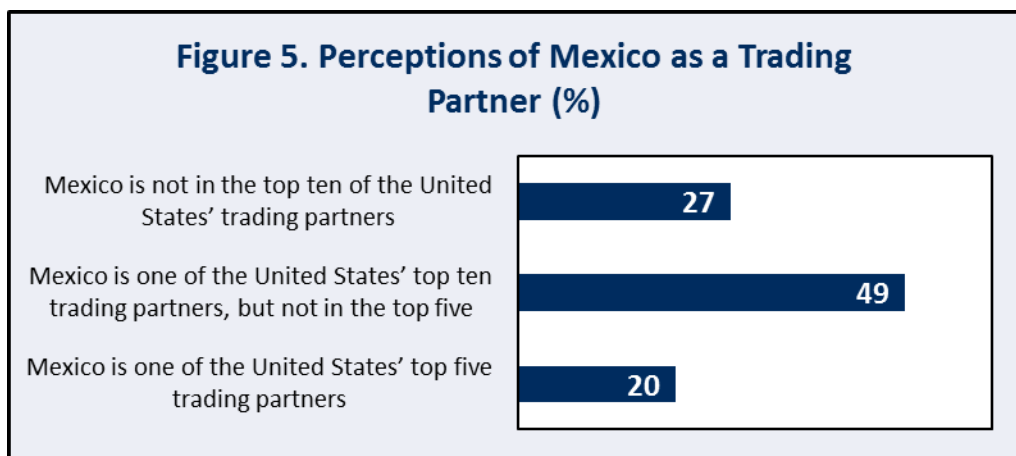
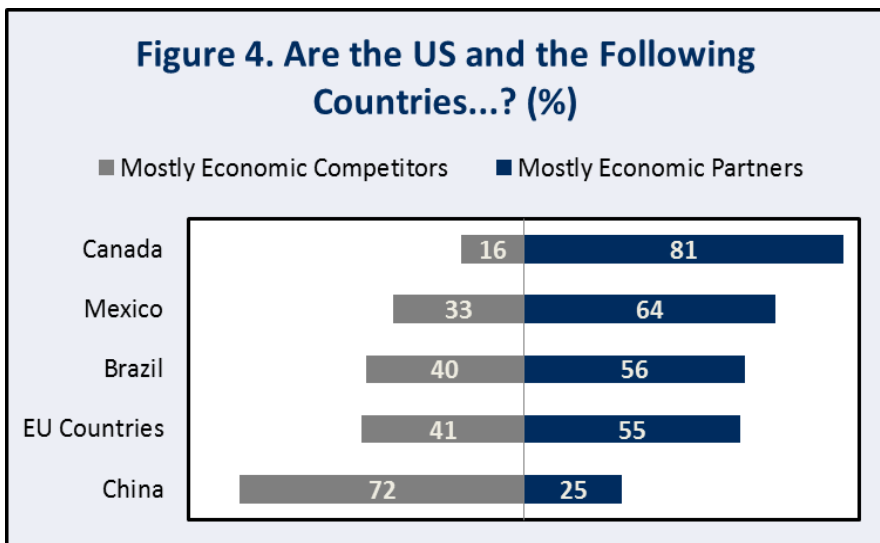
While China outshines other countries in terms of overall importance to the United States, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) participants Canada and Mexico are seen as closer economic partners to the United States. Solid majorities of Americans consider Canada (81%) and Mexico (64%) mostly economic partners, followed by smaller majorities who say the same about Brazil (56%) and EU countries (55%). Only a quarter consider China mostly an economic partner (25%), with seven in ten considering it mostly an economic competitor (72%) (Figure 4).

Since the implementation of NAFTA, US-Mexico trade has more than tripled. Currently, Mexico ranks second among US export markets and third in total US trade, which last year hit a record high of \$500 billion. In addition, Mexico and the United States are partners in manufacturing through production sharing, where products are assembled sequentially across the border at various stages, supporting jobs in both countries.<sup>1</sup>

While most Americans know that Mexico is currently among the *top ten* trading partners to the United States, relatively few (20%) accurately identify Mexico as being one of the *top five* (Figure 5). Three in four Americans (73%) believe that in the future there will be higher levels of trade between Mexico, Canada, and the United States, and a majority (57%) believes that the United States and Mexico are working in the same direction on trade and economic development (see Figure 9, page 6).

Awareness that Mexico is a key trading partner has an influence on attitudes toward overall relations. Those who know that Mexico is in the top five of US trading partners are more likely to think that US-Mexico relations are improving and are more likely to characterize the US-Mexico relationship as good. More broadly, those who see Mexico as a top-ten trading partner are more likely to say that the

United States and Mexico are working in the same direction on major bilateral issues. Perceptions of Mexico's status as a trade partner are also related to overall feelings toward Mexico, with those who recognize Mexico's position as a top trader being more positive than others (Figure 6, next page).



<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/working-together-economic-ties-between-the-united-states-and-mexico>.

**Figure 6. Average Favorability Rating of Mexico Based on Perceptions of Trade Status (0-100)**



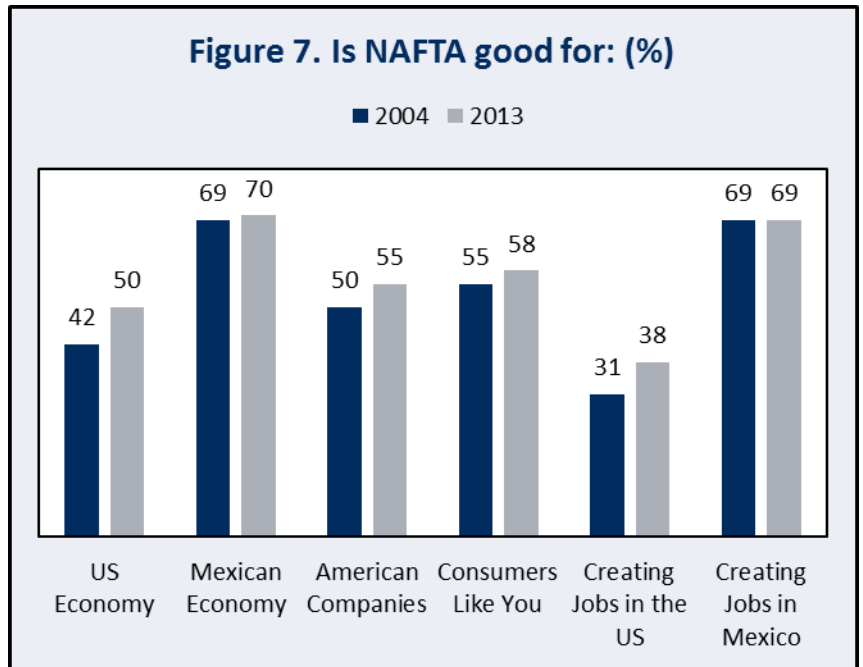
**Mexico Still Seen As the Greater Beneficiary of NAFTA**

Twenty years on from its signing, NAFTA remains the world's largest free trade area and encompasses roughly one-third of global GDP. More Americans continue to believe that NAFTA has greater benefits for the Mexican economy and Mexican jobs than it does for the US economy and US jobs.

Unchanged since 2004, seven in ten believe that NAFTA has been good for the Mexican economy (70%) and creating jobs in Mexico (69%). At the same time, there has been an incremental increase in those who say that NAFTA has had a good impact on the US economy (50%), American companies (55%), and creating jobs in the United States (38%) (Figure 7).

Attitudes towards NAFTA are more positive among younger Americans and the university-educated. At least six in ten among those under 45 and with higher education say that NAFTA has been good for the US economy; seven in ten of those same demographic groupings say that NAFTA has been good for US consumers.

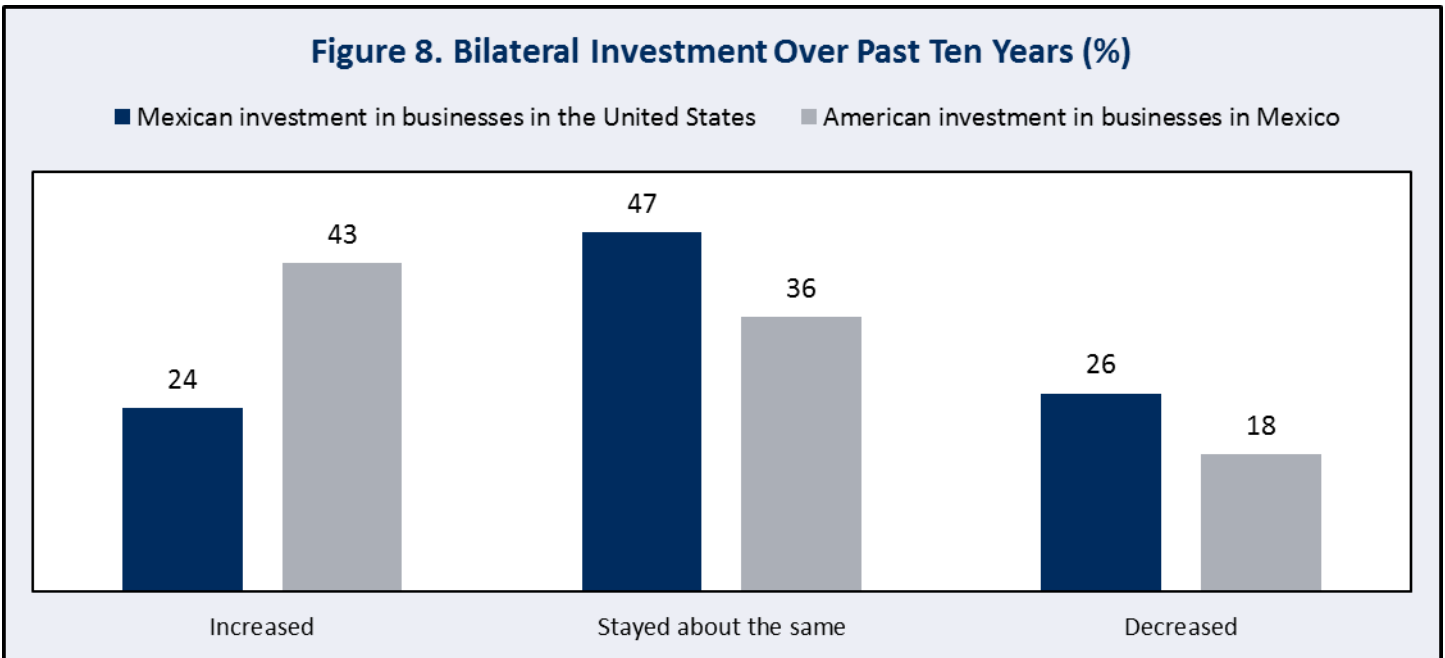
**Figure 7. Is NAFTA good for: (%)**



**Americans Generally Unaware of Growing Bilateral Investment**

In the past ten years, investment between Mexico and the United States has increased significantly. In 2011, US foreign direct investment (FDI) in Mexico totaled \$91.4 billion, up 8.4 percent from 2010. Mexican FDI in the United States, meanwhile, increased 22.2 percent to a total of \$13.8 billion. However, a plurality of Americans think that Mexican investment in the United States has stayed about the same over the past decade. Of the rest, as many believe it has increased (24%) as decreased (26%). As for American investment in Mexico, somewhat more think American investment has increased (43%) than stayed the same (36%); only 18 percent think it has decreased. Those who think that Mexican investment in the United States has increased over the past ten years are more likely to express positive views of US-Mexican ties, suggesting that this information could make Americans more favorably disposed to future or deeper cooperation. But amplifying US investment in Mexico does not have the

same effect, likely reflecting concerns about the US economy (and preferences for investing at home rather than in Mexico) (Figure 8).

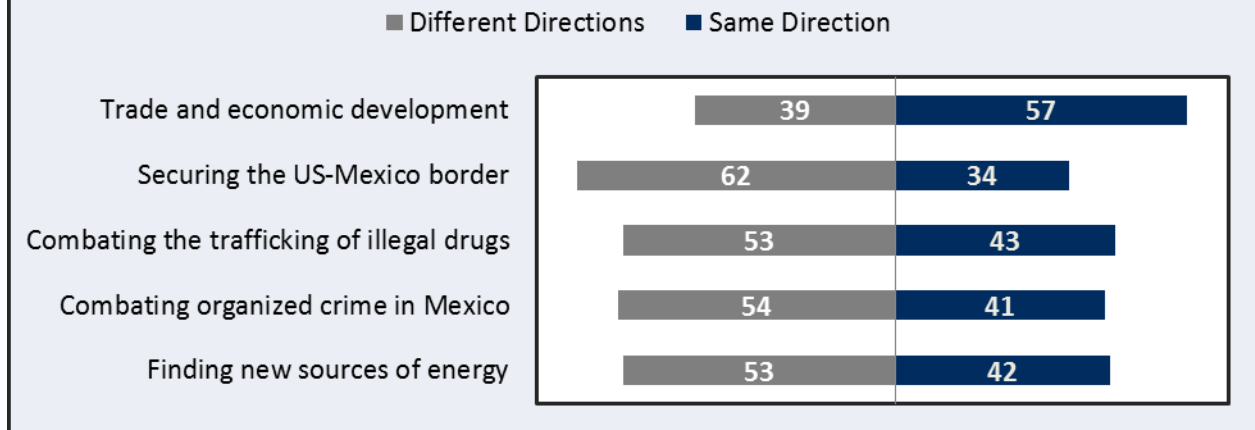


**On Energy and Border Issues, Americans Tend to Think Mexico and the US Are Taking Different Directions**

Energy is a key component of the bilateral relationship, and Mexico is the second-largest crude oil supplier to the United States, behind only Canada. Americans may not be fully aware of this connection. By a 5 to 4 margin, more Americans think Mexico and the United State are working in *different* directions on finding new sources of energy (53% vs. 42% for working in the same direction)(Figure 9, next page). In addition, fewer now—but still a bare majority (53%, down from 66% in 2006)—favor an agreement between Mexico and the United States in which Mexico would permit the United States to invest in its oil and energy sectors in return for the United States providing greater financing for Mexico’s economic development. Opposition has grown 16 percentage points since 2006 (from 28% to 44% now). Opposition to such a plan is at least in part related to the perception that the two nations are working in different directions on energy. Among those who think the United States and Mexico are working in the same direction on finding new sources of energy, more support such an agreement (64%, with 36% opposed). Among those who say they are working in different directions, a majority opposes the agreement (53%, with 47% in favor).

Americans also tend to believe that Mexico and the United States are moving in divergent directions on securing the US-Mexico border (62% different), combating organized crime in Mexico (54% different) and combating the trafficking of illegal drugs (53% different)(Figure 9, next page). In reality, the United States and Mexico have been working very closely on these security issues, anchored by the Mérida Initiative, an agreement begun under the Bush administration and redefined under the Obama administration. It outlines US-Mexico cooperation in a number of areas, including disrupting organized criminal groups, institutionalizing the rule of law, and building a “21<sup>st</sup> century” border.

## Figure 9. Are the US and Mexico Working in the Same or Different Directions on These Issues?

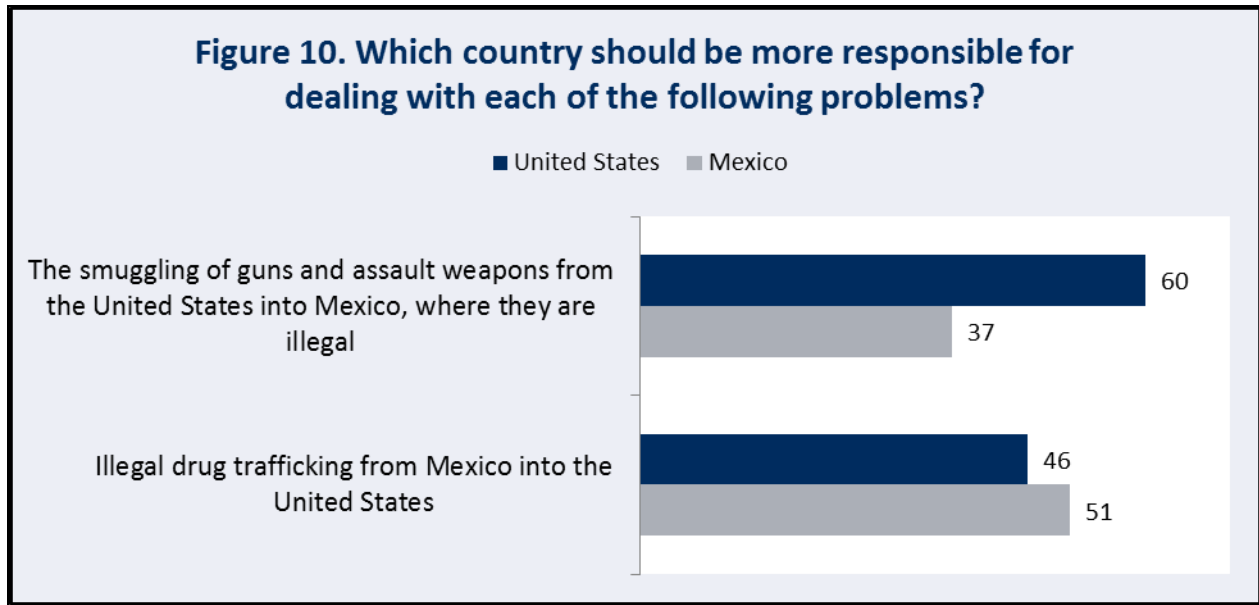


Positive favorability ratings of Mexico are closely tied to optimistic perceptions of the US-Mexico relationship, while poor favorability ratings are tied to more pessimistic impressions. This is also true for perceptions of joint policy undertakings. For example, those who say that the two nations are working in the same direction on securing the border feel more positively about Mexico (a mean rating of 50) than do those who say the two nations are working in opposite directions (a mean of 39) (Table 1).

**Table 1. Mean Thermometer Ratings by US-Mexico Working in Same or Different Direction on Various Issues (from 0 to 100)**

<i>Issues:</i>	Border Security	Energy Development	Organized Crime	Combating Drug Trafficking	Developing Trade and Economy
Same Direction	50	48	48	49	48
Different Direction	39	39	39	38	36

When Americans are asked in a separate question which country should be more responsible for a number of issues, Americans are slightly more divided now than in the past on which country should take the lead in dealing with illegal drug trafficking from Mexico into the United States (51% say Mexico, 46% say the United States). A majority says the United States should have greater responsibility for dealing with the smuggling of guns and assault weapons from the United States into Mexico, where they are illegal (60%, compared to 37% for Mexico). Similarly, when it comes to immigration issues, Americans think the United States should take the lead (52%, with 45% for Mexico)(Figure 10).



**Partisan Differences Mainly on Perceived Cooperation across Issues**

There are no consistent age or education differences across these questions, though Americans who are of Hispanic<sup>2</sup> and African-American descent are more positive in their ratings of Mexico and US-Mexico relations. Partisan differences among the American public often help explain policy preferences, and to some extent they are at work here.

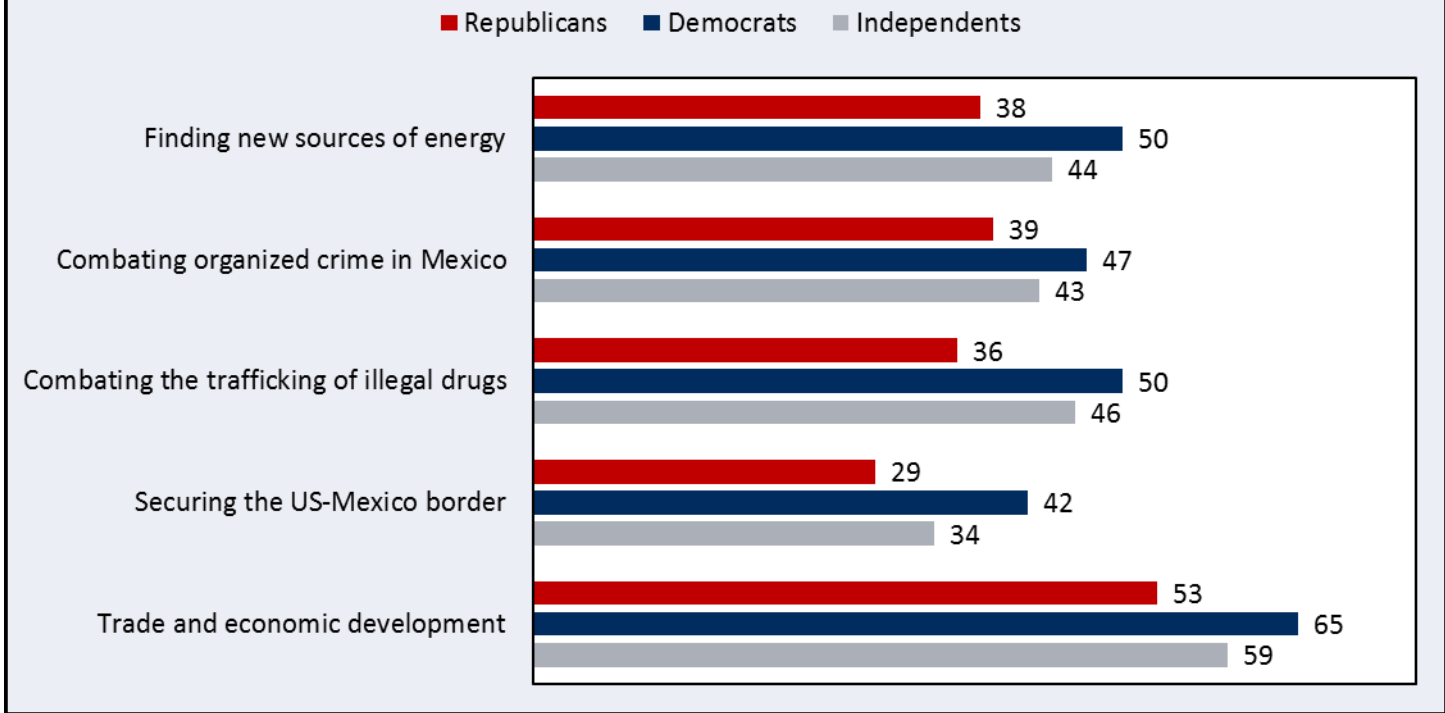
**Table 2. Partisan Differences on Attitudes toward Ties with Mexico**

	<b>Republicans</b>	<b>Democrats</b>	<b>Independents</b>
Mean favorability rating of Mexico (from 0-100 degrees)	36	47	43
US-Mexico relations very/somewhat good	56%	67%	67%
Mexico very/somewhat important to the US	65%	75%	68%
Mexico mostly an economic partner	65%	68%	63%

While both Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued close relations with Mexico, Republicans tend to view Mexico somewhat less favorably than Democrats, but they are still generally positive on the US-Mexico relationship. While Republicans give Mexico an overall mean rating that is lower than other partisans, majorities across the political spectrum say that relations between the United States and Mexico are good, Mexico is important to the United States, and Mexico is more of an economic partner than rival (Table 2).

<sup>2</sup> Hispanic and African-American respondents are more positive than others on these and other questions, but the sample sizes for these subgroups are small, and thus merely suggestive of views among these groups. The survey sample did not include Spanish-only speaking households.

**Figure 11. US and Mexico Working in Same Direction on... (%)**



Americans of all partisan stripes generally agree about which of the two nations should take the lead of various issues, though Republicans are more likely to believe that the two nations are working in different directions on issues such as combating the trafficking of illegal drugs, securing the US-Mexico border, and finding new sources of energy (Figure 11). In fact, Republicans and Democrats disagree on a proposed agreement in which Mexico would permit US investment in its oil and energy sectors and the United States would provide greater financing for Mexican economic development (covered on page 5). A majority of Republicans (52%) oppose the agreement, while majorities of Democrats (61%) and Independents (52%) support it.

### Conclusion

Policymakers interested in building public support for deepening ties between the United States and Mexico would be well-served to amplify the cooperation already underway in joint border security and economic endeavors. Those who think Mexico and the United States are working in the same direction rather than different directions in each of these areas are more positive toward Mexico generally and in terms of the bilateral relationship. The results show that the growing success story of Mexico's economic gains in recent years has not fully reached the American public, and could help cement American attachment to their southern neighbor.

Please follow the [www.runningnumbers.org](http://www.runningnumbers.org) blog featuring Chicago Council and other surveys on international affairs and foreign policy.

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**Methodology**

This report is based on the results of a Chicago Council survey of public opinion conducted from April 12 to 14, 2013. GfK Custom Research conducted the survey for The Chicago Council using a randomly selected sample of 1,017 adults age 18 and older from their large-scale, nationwide online research panel, recruited using address-based sampling. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points. The margin of error is higher when analyses are conducted among subgroups.