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Center for Latin American Studies

A Critical Juncture: Public Opinion in U.S.- Mexico Relations

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Introduction

To a greater extent than U.S. relations with any other country, U.S.-Mexico relations extend far beyond the diplomatic and official levels. More than 35 million people in the United States are either Mexican born or have Mexican ancestry. Similarly, there are over a million Americans living in Mexico, and probably a much larger number of dual nationals. Mexico is the top destination for U.S. foreign travel, and the United States tops the list of Mexican travel as well. Thousands of U.S. companies and around five million American workers have jobs that depend on trade with Mexico, and with approximately 80 percent of Mexico's exports being purchased by U.S. buyers, there are a huge number of Mexicans that owe their livelihood to bilateral trade and joint manufacturing.

Since the 1980s, the cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican governments has improved by leaps and bounds. Overcoming suspicions that have roots in the early post-colonial histories of each of our countries was a difficult, slow, and incomplete process, but the progress in doing so—especially with and since the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s—has been profound. The U.S. and Mexican governments now work closely together not only on economic issues but also public security, anti-money laundering, preventing terrorism, managing migration, and more. In fact, this cooperation has become so institutionalized that it largely continues full-steam ahead even as the new Trump administration in the United States has introduced challenging topics, such as the renegotiation of NAFTA and new immigration restrictions, to the context of bilateral relations.

Despite governmental, economic, and social ties that have deepened over the past two to three decades, the way in which the U.S. and Mexican publics view one another has experienced several ups and downs. Drug-related violence, high-profile corruption cases, and persistent poverty have greatly affected the perception of Mexico in the United States, providing fuel and staying power for many of the outdated, overly simplistic, and even plainly incorrect perceptions held by many Americans regarding Mexico. The campaign and now administration of President Trump echoed many of these perceptions, incorporating them into its political discourse. This in turn has offended a large segment of the Mexican population, causing a sharp decline in Mexican perceptions of the United States.

The fact that public opinion in the bilateral relationship has risen and fallen even as official relations between the United States and Mexico have steadily improved points to a serious problem. Leaders and elites have seen value in forging a crossborder partnership, but they have failed to fully bring the public along. For a variety of reasons, after the difficult campaign to pass NAFTA in the United States, leaders often chose to pursue a quiet, incremental and bureaucratic approach to building U.S.-Mexico relations. The most public push for deepened regional integration after NAFTA, the Security and Prosperity Partnership, was left to quietly fizzle after a small group of detractors began making inroads in convincing the public, especially in the United States, that it was the beginning of a plan to cede sovereignty in the creation of a European Union-style regional governance structure (which, to be clear, it was not). In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and again with the creation of the Mérida Initiative in 2007-2008, the United States and Mexico greatly deepened security collaboration, but many of the details of increased intelligence sharing and law enforcement cooperation were never (intentionally) shared with the public, largely out of concern that public discussion of the cooperation would expose Mexican leadership to nationalist critiques. Each decision to quietly advance bilateral responses to on-the-ground challenges without fueling nationalistic responses is individually understandable, but the unwillingness or inability of U.S. and Mexican leaders to convince the public of the need for efforts to improve bilateral relations and jointly tackle regional challenges has created a precarious situation in which the bilateral relationship could be at risk despite the tangible benefits it provides to citizens in both countries.

Major efforts are needed in both countries to overcome this challenge, and thankfully there is evidence from public opinion research that suggests both significant resilience in the bilateral relationship and important opportunities to build a stronger future. The depth of economic and social integration that exists today means that millions of Mexicans and Americans form their opinion of the other country not only in response to media coverage but also based upon personal experiences. Perhaps surprisingly for many, even as Mexican opinion of the United States has fallen to a historic low, U.S. opinion of Mexico is quite strong and on the rise. With some exceptions,¹ those with the greatest exposure to their neighboring country, whether through daily life and their jobs or through travel and tourism, tend to have the most positive views. Border communities, for example, largely reject divisive initiatives like the construction of a border wall and support bilateral cooperation to address common challenges. The younger generations in both Mexico and the United States hold more positive views of each other's country, signaling that despite the current political climate, the trajectory of improving official relations and deeper integration may ultimately result in favorable changes in public

opinion. Of course, this cannot be taken for granted, and indeed recent political rhetoric is exposing many young people for the first time in their lives to significantly negative perceptions in the bilateral relationship. There is also a sense of pragmatism expressed by Mexicans that suggests a level of sophistication in approaching the future of bilateral relations—even as perception of the United States has fallen precipitously, there remains an understanding that the two nations must work together on shared regional challenges.

The relationship between public opinion and policymaking is complex and causality can work in both directions. In this sense, what is at stake at this critical juncture in the U.S.-Mexico relation is not just the policy framework for tomorrow but also the public opinion constraints that will determine what is possible in the bilateral relationship for a generation to come. Whatever results emerge from the current bilateral negotiations, a thoughtful approach will be needed to take advantage of opportunities to develop cooperative projects without leaving the public behind and to avoid risks of backlash in the form of nationalist and protectionist rhetoric and policies. Failure to address the current challenges related to public opinion could, on the other hand, solidify negative perceptions and put decades of progress in U.S.-Mexico relations at risk.

The Public Opinion-Foreign Policy Connection

Historically, many scholars argued that public opinion was not a particularly important determinant of policymaking. This argument was especially common for foreign policy, with many assuming that the public did not know or care enough about international affairs for it to impact their political activity and especially voting behavior, or that the public prioritizes domestic concerns so much that the influence of foreign policy considerations is generally inconsequential.¹

However, newer research shows that the public does have strong, cohesive views of foreign policy and that, despite important disagreements between public opinion and the reality of policymaking, there is a strong relationship between the two.² U.S. voters see foreign policy issues as similarly important to domestic issues, and in some U.S. elections, foreign policy has been found to have been more of a determinant of outcomes than domestic policy.³ In Mexico, there is evidence that policymakers generally follow public opinion on foreign policy, particularly with regards to the United States.⁴ At a broader level, there is a wide body of evidence that suggests that democratic leaders are influenced by their understanding of the views the public holds of foreign policy.⁵

These findings have myriad implications for the U.S.-Mexico relationship and for most of the policies that are considered in this paper. NAFTA, which has had an important impact on Mexico, Canada, and the United States, now faces an existential threat that is in part the result of public ambivalence regarding the agreement. The outcomes of the Mexican general election in 2018 could also be affected by public opinion of the United States, and the results of the election are likely to impact the future of bilateral relations.

Sources:

1. Bernard C. Cohen. *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy*. Little, Brown and Company (1973). 222.
2. Michael Tomz, Jessica Weeks and Keten Yarhi-Milo. *How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies?* Working paper (August 2017). Benjamin I. Page and Marshall M. Bouton. *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get*. The University of Chicago Press (2006). 356.
3. Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida. 1989. Foreign affairs and issue voting: Do presidential candidates 'waltz before a blind audience'? *APSR* 83:123-41.
4. Ole R. Holsti. *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: How Publics Abroad View the United States after 9/11*. The University of Michigan Press (2011). 234.
5. John H. Aldrich, Christopher Gelpi, et al. "Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 9, February 2006. 477-502.

Because public opinion research captures the public's perception, it opens a window to the general reaction to the discourses, policies, and strategies of both governments, and how successful or not they have been in the eyes of their populations. It may also help avoid a dangerous disconnect between elites and the general public that can fuel populist political movements lacking effective strategies for the future. The way we perceive each other will partially determine how we feel, (re)act, and understand each other. How Mexico is perceived in the United States, and vice versa, has had and will continue to have an impact on many areas of the bilateral relation.

This paper reviews U.S. and Mexican perceptions of their neighboring country, first looking at broad attitudes and then delving into important topics in the bilateral relationship including security cooperation, migration, trade, and tourism. We provide a brief analysis of both long-term trends and recent changes in each of these areas, identifying issues that should be closely monitored by policymakers as well as avenues through which policymakers could seek to strengthen public support for mutually beneficial policies.

Looking at the role of public opinion in the U.S.-Mexico relationship helps clarify that at any given moment, but especially now, official rhetoric and action shape much more than simply the policies of today and tomorrow—current actions will create or limit the space for cooperative policies for decades to come. At this critical juncture, leaders in the public and private sectors in Mexico and the United States need to work harder than ever to cultivate public support for mutually beneficial policies and a framework of partnership.

General Perceptions of Mexico and the United States

Views from the United States

U.S. attitudes toward Mexico are mixed and at times contradictory. They include both outdated stereotypes and pointed perceptions about the shortcomings of Mexican governance and society. These views are informed by a mix of holidays in Mexico, interactions with migrants, and press reports of violence and corruption. As a result, U.S. perceptions of Mexico reveal contradictory impulses: in the latest surveys two-thirds of Americans express somewhat or very favorable views of their neighboring country, yet when Americans are asked what comes to mind when they think of Mexico, the picture they paint is far from pretty (it also varies by demographic segments, see Figure 1).² U.S. attitudes toward Mexico have fluctuated greatly over the last two decades, ranging from a low of 35 percent favorable to a high of 74 percent (see Figure 3). As a country familiar to all but known deeply by few in the United States, views of Mexico are complex and rather unstable. As a result, the quality of thought leadership and media reporting on Mexico are vitally important. None of this, however, should be taken to suggest that an image campaign alone would be sufficient to strengthen and stabilize U.S. public opinion on Mexico, as major shifts in U.S. perception are clearly correlated to major events in Mexico, such as democratization and organized crime fueled violence.

Figure 1. Most common answers when asked the top 3 words respondents associate with Mexico. Clockwise, starting from top: overall, people over 66 years of age, people 19-25 years of age.



Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project.³

Though some word associations remain consistently high across age groups, like “immigration” and “crime,” it is clear there are substantial differences between the youngest and the oldest surveyed. (It is also of note that this survey by Vianovo reflected a far less positive overall view of Mexico than others made around the same time; a Gallup

poll from a few months earlier, shown in Figure 4, found an overall 55 percent approval rating for Mexico among Americans, compared to just 22 percent in Vianovo’s poll.)⁴ For example, words with negative connotations like “drugs,” “corruption,” and “illegal” were less than half as likely to be mentioned in the 19-25 age group as in the 66+ age group. Additionally, words that are more associated with Mexico’s soft power traits, like “food,” “beach,” and “tacos,” were at least twice as likely to be mentioned in the youngest group (see Figure 2).

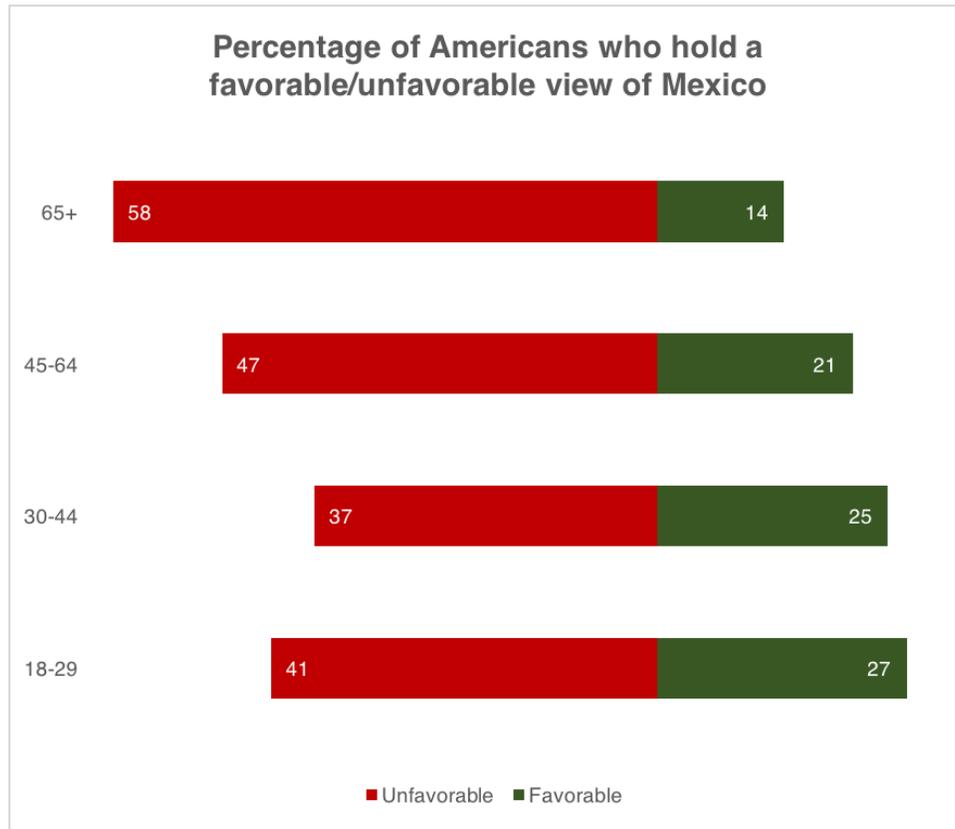
Figure 2. Selected words that Americans associate with Mexico by age group.

Word	Percentage who mentioned it by age group	
	19-25	66+
Drugs	4.9%	11.3%
Corruption	1.6%	4.6%
Illegal	1.6%	3.9%
Food	4.7%	2.2%
Tacos	3.4%	1.6%
Beach	2.3%	1%

Source: Vianovo.⁵

These differences in perception can also be seen when respondents are asked whether they have an overall favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mexico. People in younger age groups tend to have a more favorable opinion than those who are older, with the difference being especially sharp for people over 65 years of age (see Figure 3). But the increase in unfavorable views in the 18-29 age group suggests that reactions from the U.S. public towards events in Mexico are complex and can contribute to an explanation of the support from younger voters for some of the rhetoric seen during the 2016 presidential campaigns.

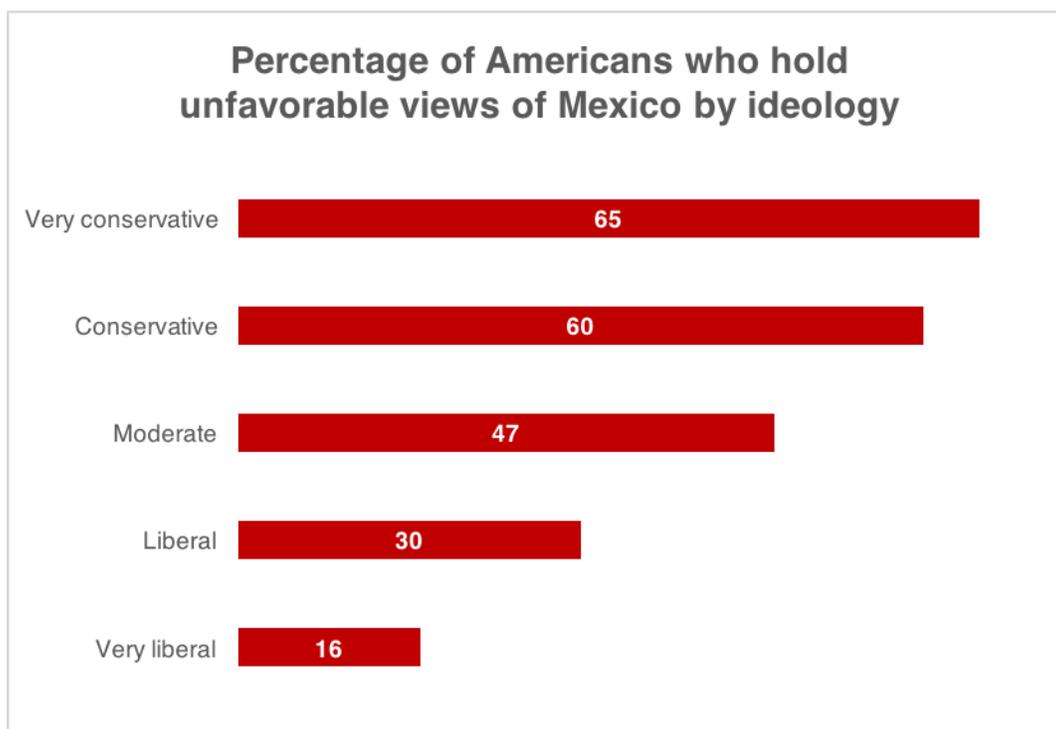
Figure 3. Opinions Americans hold of Mexico by age group, 2016.



Source: Vianovo.⁶

The public in the United States is divided on a wide range of issues, perhaps more divided than ever. The relationship with Mexico is no exception. The Vianovo survey provides further proof, with respondents identifying as *very conservative* having a 65 percent unfavorable view of Mexico, vis-à-vis a 16 percent unfavorable view by those identifying as *very liberal* (see Figure 4).

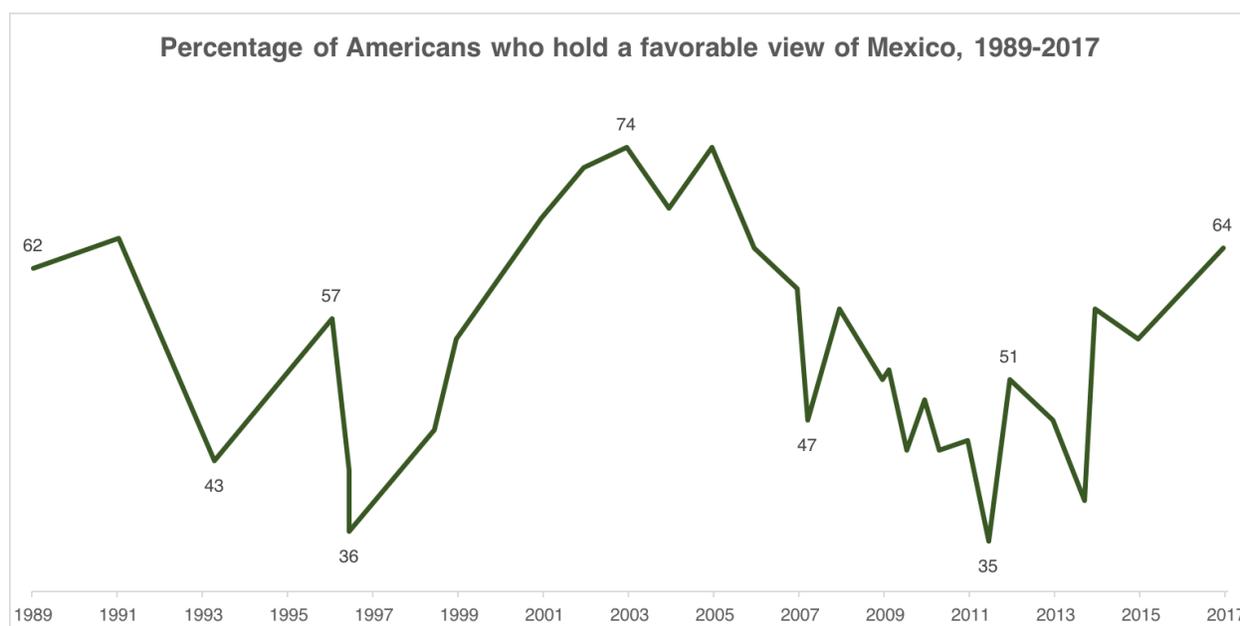
Figure 4. Unfavorable views of Mexico held by Americans disaggregated by ideology.



Source: Vianovo.⁷

Regardless of internal divisions, the overall view that Americans have of Mexico has been improving in the past few years and has varied widely in the past three decades. According to surveys carried out between 1989 and 2017 by Gallup, Pew, and others, favorable views of Mexico have fluctuated between 35 percent and 74 percent of respondents (see Figure 5). The two lowest points in U.S. perceptions seem to have occurred in conjunction with the Mexican peso crisis from 1994 to 1996, and with the most violent period in the war against drug cartels in 2011. Conversely, the most favorable views of Mexico occurred while Vicente Fox was president—a phenomenon that can be explained by the end of the 70-year rule by the PRI and the start of democratic political alternation, or perhaps by the visibly warm relationship enjoyed by Fox and then U.S. President George W. Bush.

Figure 5. Favorable views of Mexico held by Americans, 1989-2017.



Source: Data from Gallup, CNN, USA Today, Opinion Research Corporation, Pew Research Center, Los Angeles Times, Princeton Survey Research Associates, Council on Foreign Relations, and the University of Maryland.⁸

Despite increasing integration, cultural exchange, and economic ties, and an overall increasingly positive perception of Mexico by Americans, negative stereotypes still play a crucial role. In a 2016 Vianovo survey (see Figure 6), when respondents in the United States were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about Mexico, a majority backed views that frame the country as dangerous, unstable, overcome by drug trafficking, and controlled by a corrupt government. The only two positive views held by respondents were related to Mexico’s cultural heritage and manufacturing—which is perceived to be better than China’s.

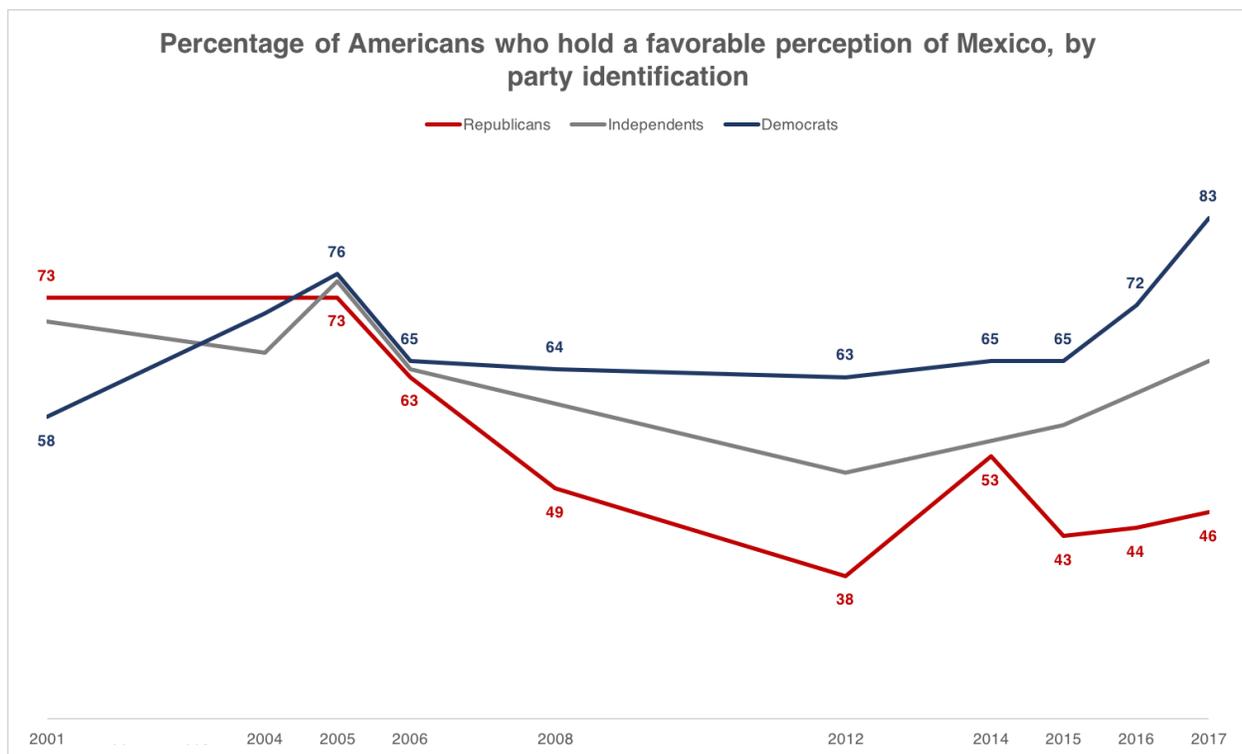
Figure 6 Agreement by Americans with statements related to Mexico, 2016.

Statement	Agree %	Disagree %
Mexico has a rich cultural heritage	76	10
Products made in Mexico are safer than products made in China	37	22
Mexico has a large, growing middle class	29	36
Mexico is a good place to do business	35	39
Mexico is a strong democracy	23	48
Mexico is a dangerous and unstable country	65	22
Mexico is winning the fight against the drug cartels and traffickers	13	70
The Mexican government is corrupt	72	9

Source: Vianovo.⁹

One of the most troubling developments in recent years has been the polarization of U.S. opinion. This is a broad phenomenon that extends much beyond U.S. perceptions of Mexico, but at the level of public opinion Mexico is beginning to look like a partisan issue. Since about 2006, people with a more conservative ideology or who identified as Republican have become significantly more negative in their perceptions of Mexico than those who identified as liberal or Democrat (see Figure 7). Even as the overall perception of Mexico in the United States has been improving since 2012, the gap between groups has grown wider. Though this partisan divide in perceptions of Mexico may have been exploited by the Trump campaign in 2016 as it relates to specific policy issues like immigration and trade, it is important to note both that the gap opened long before 2016 and that overall Republican perception of Mexico appears not to have been damaged by the rhetoric of the past year.

Figure 7. Americans' perceptions of Mexico by party identification, 2001-2017.



Source: Gallup.¹⁰

Political polarization in the United States is a much-studied phenomenon, and researchers point to a wide array of causes. Since 2000, one factor that has garnered special attention is the changing media landscape, including both the rise of an ideological slant in key cable news networks and an increasing reliance on social media as a gateway

to news consumption. Research in this field is ongoing and debated, but it appears that TV news, still the main source of news consumed in the United States, is pushing the politically active to further ends of the partisan spectrum, while moderates are increasingly deciding to change the channel away from political news altogether.¹¹ The most important actor within this space is Fox News, the main source of political news for 47 percent of ‘consistent conservatives’—‘consistent liberals’ are much more fragmented in their news selection.¹² Internet and social media news consumption is also often speculated to contribute to the creation of ideological echo chambers. Research suggests that echo chambers do in fact exist on social media,¹³ but given the fact that young people tend to be less polarized than their elder counterparts, the impact of social media use on overall political polarization is much less clear.¹⁴ The relationship between the widening partisan gap in U.S. perception of Mexico and the growth of partisan news sources deserves further study.

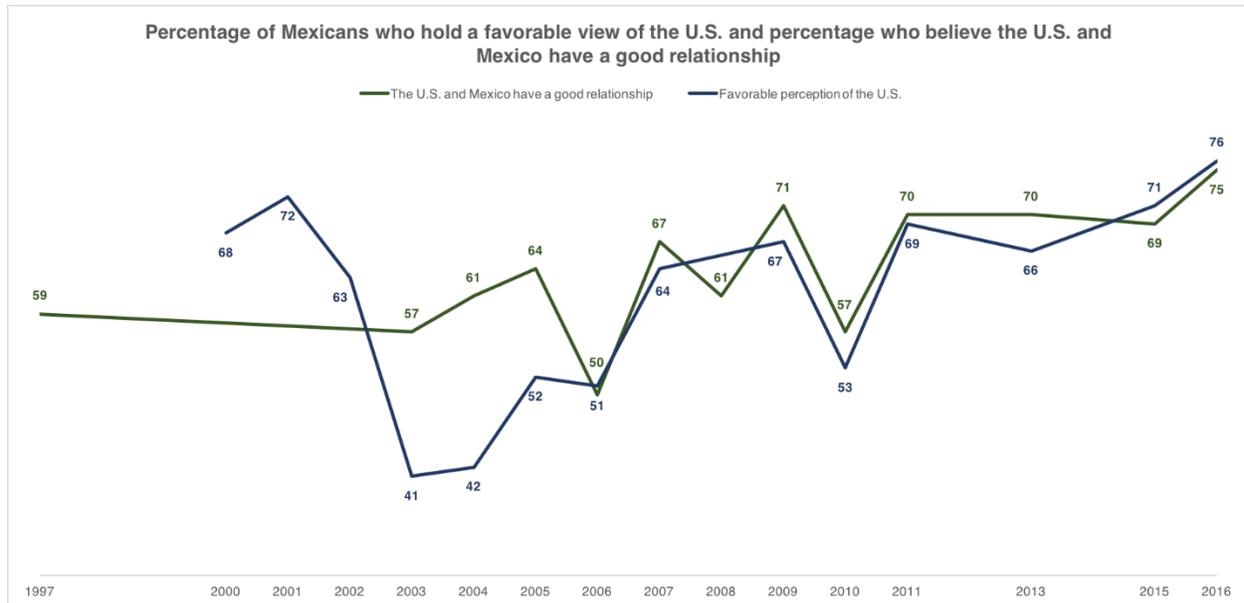
Views from Mexico

The perception of the United States from Mexico has long been defined by a mix of feelings of distrust and admiration, though the precise mix of the two has varied significantly over time. These views have been created by a complex shared history of partnership, conflict, and sharply differing economic circumstances. Indeed, very few land borders connect countries with such substantial differences in real incomes than the U.S.-Mexico border. Nonetheless, the U.S.-Mexico relationship and the Mexican public’s perception of it have improved over the past decades.

With some exceptions, there exists a generally positive trend in public opinion of the United States that began in the 1990s and continued until late 2016. Latinobarómetro surveys show a sixteen-point increase in the number of Mexicans that believe their country has a good relationship with the United States from 1997-2016 and, albeit with more ups and downs, an eight-point improvement in overall perception of the United States from 2000-2016 (see Figure 8). Other polling confirms the positive trend in recent years. According to the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas’ (CIDE) Americas and the World surveys, feelings of trust towards the United States in Mexico increased from just above 20 percent in 2004 to nearly 50 percent in 2016 (see Figure 9). Further evidence can be found by looking at the views of various age cohorts. In the Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Project’s 2015 Survey (see Figure 8), younger people are found to hold more favorable views of the United States than older generations. Younger generations have grown up during an increasingly positive time in the bilateral relationship, exposed to a climate framed more by cooperation than acrimony. As such, they offer great promise to the future of U.S.-Mexico relations, although the recent crash

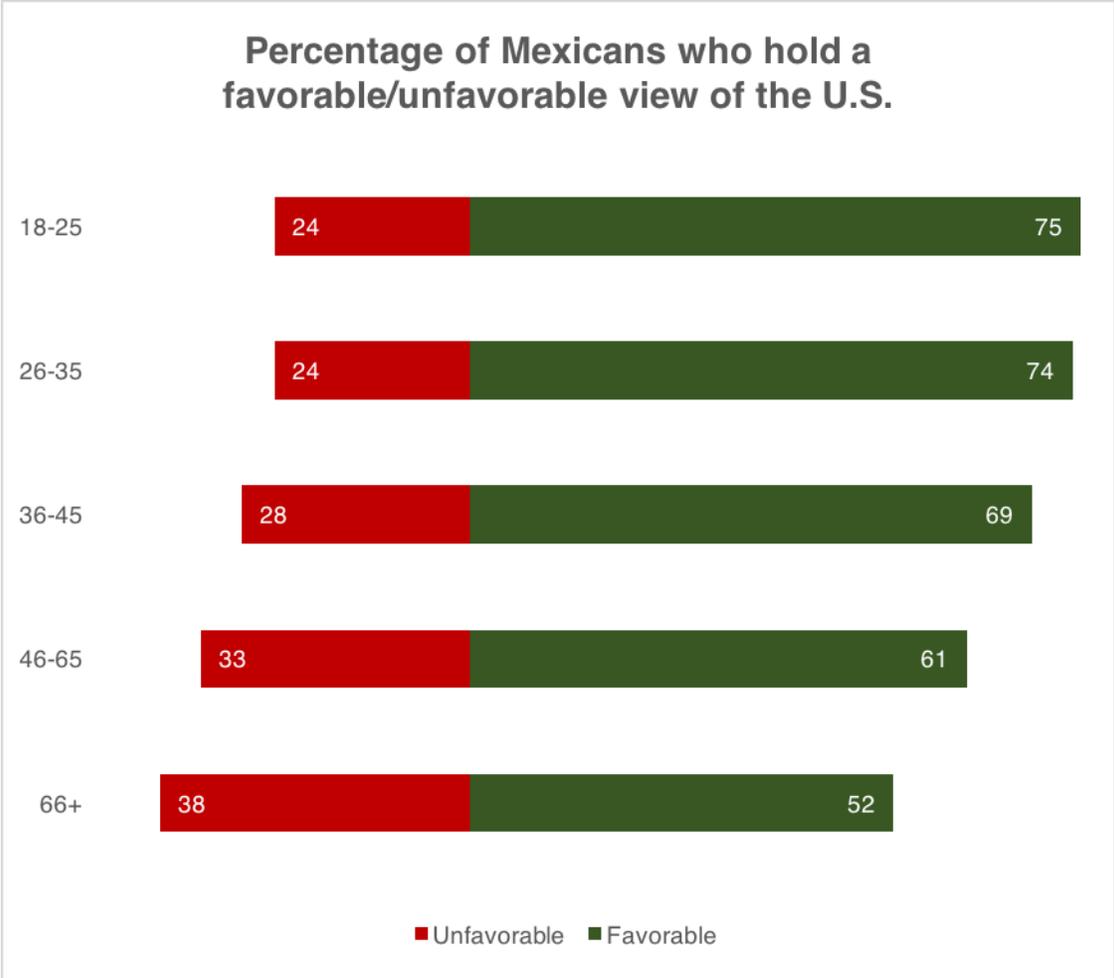
in opinion of the United States gives significant reason to worry that the opportunity may be squandered (See Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 8. Views of the United States held by Mexicans, 1997-2016.



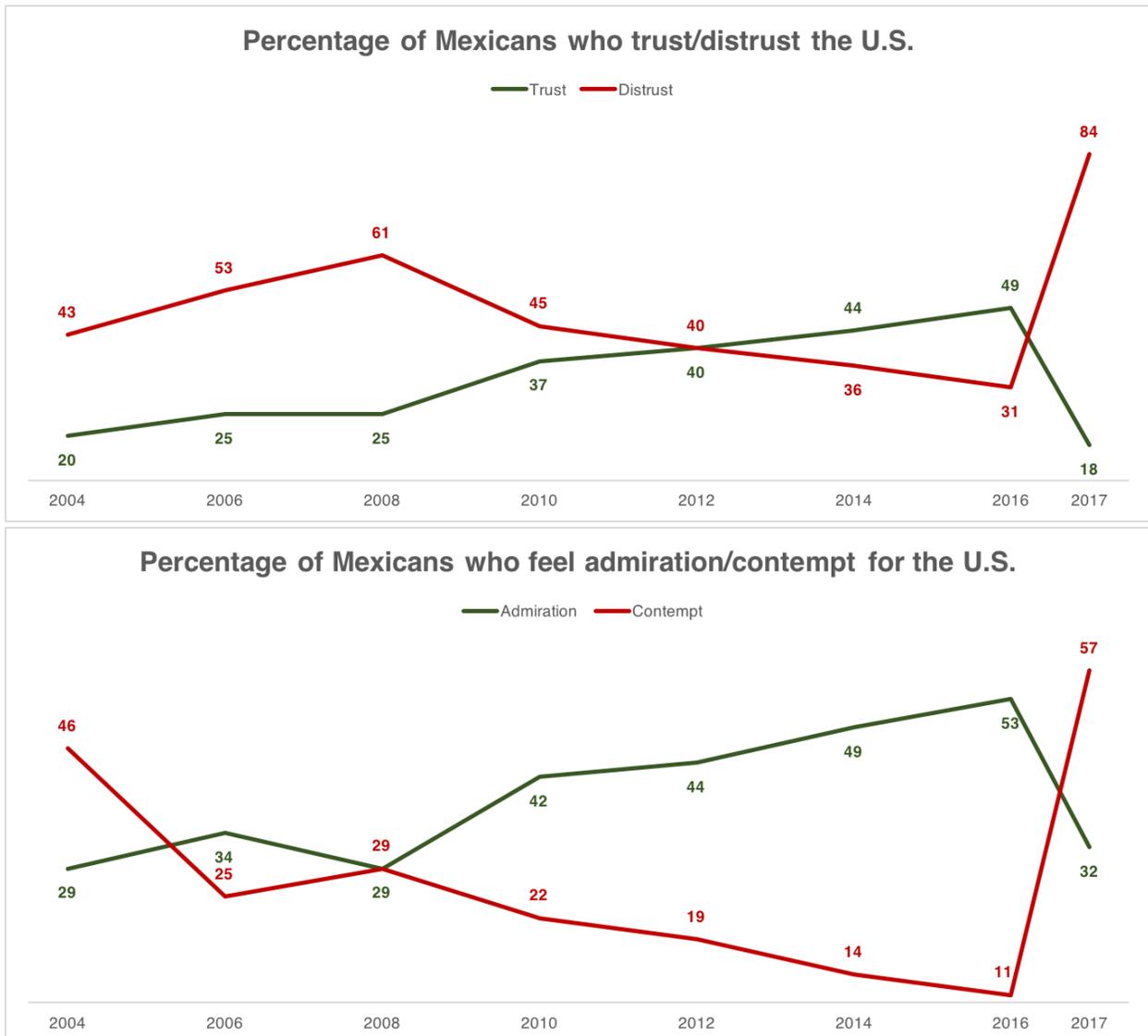
Source: *Latinobarómetro*.¹⁵

Figure 9. Opinions Mexicans hold of the United States by age group, 2015.



Source: Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Project.¹⁶

Figure 10. Feelings towards the United States held by Mexicans, 2004-2017. Above, feelings of trust and distrust. Below, feelings of admiration and contempt.



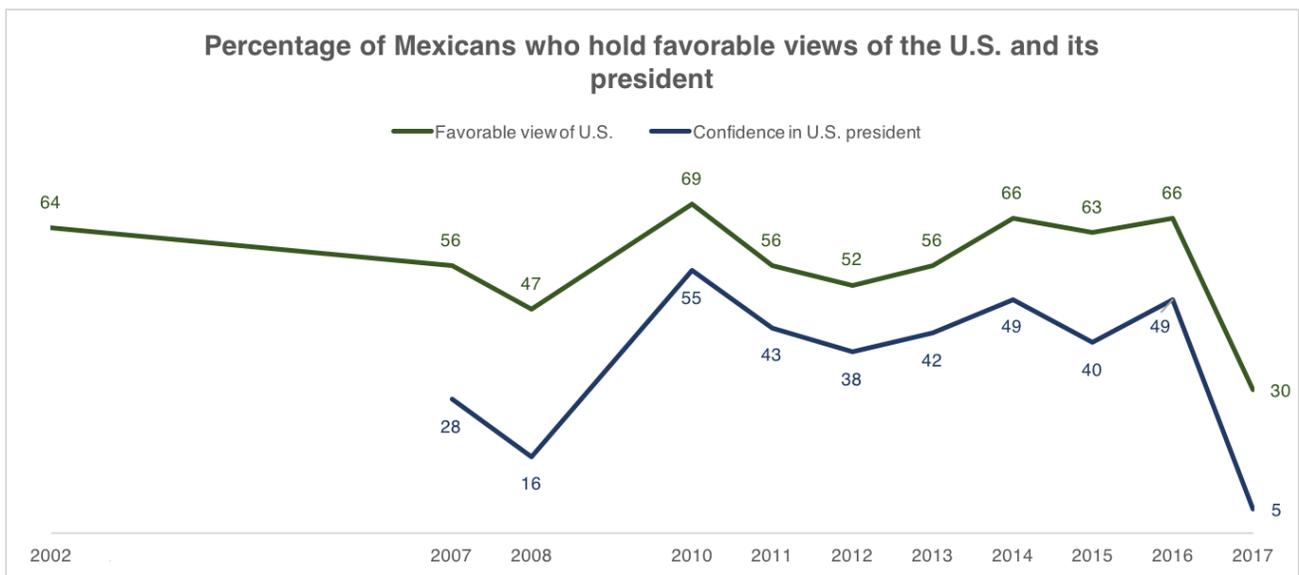
Source: CIDE Americas and the World Survey.¹⁷

The positive trend has reversed over the past year as Mexico became a symbol of and focal point for U.S. anxiety regarding the local impacts of globalization, as seen in the treatment of immigration and trade as related to Mexico during the 2016 presidential campaigns. Now in office, the administration of President Donald Trump has put forward policy initiatives to build a wall, make U.S. visa policy more restrictive, and drastically change NAFTA, all of which have been understood as an affront to Mexican interests and, for many, also as an insult to Mexicans. A series of surveys carried out by the CIDE and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) show an abrupt shift towards distrust in the perception the Mexican public holds of the United States after the most

recent U.S. election, with views also shifting significantly from admiration to contempt (See Figure 10).

Similar views have been recorded in other surveys. For example, the 2017 Global Attitudes & Trends Survey by the Pew Research Center found that favorable views of the United States declined from 66 percent to 30 percent, and that favorable views of the U.S. president declined from 49 to 5 percent—the sharpest declines found in the perception of the United States from any of the 37 countries polled (see Figure 11). A national survey carried out in Mexico by INEGI found that only 4 percent of respondents thought the bilateral relationship would improve under President Trump, while 75 percent said it would worsen.¹⁸

Figure 11. Views of the United States and its president held by Mexicans, 2002-2017.



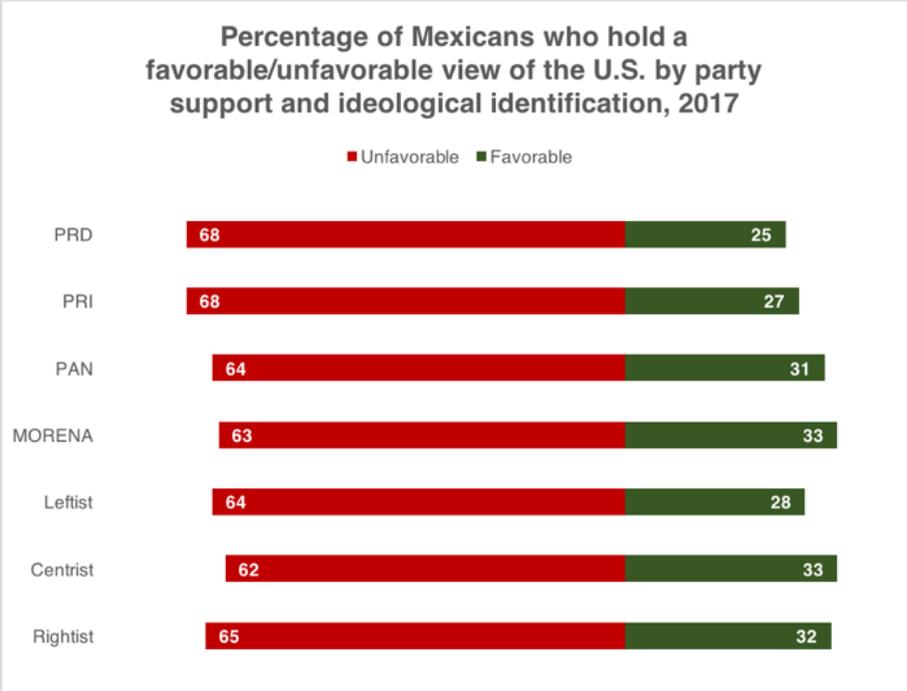
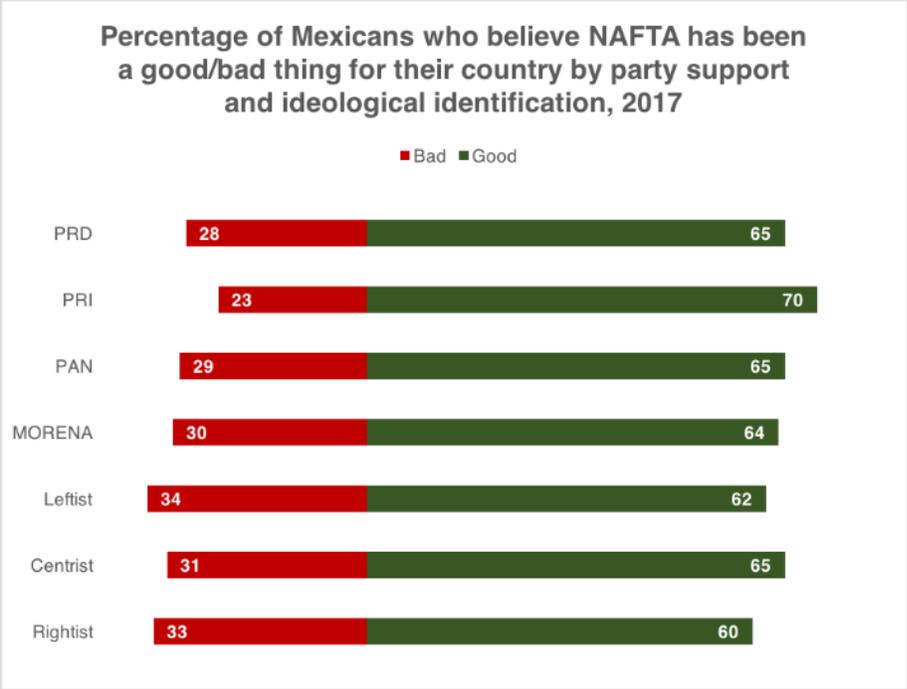
Source: Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Project.¹⁹

The clear correlation in views of the United States and the U.S. president suggest the public makes only a limited distinction between the country and its government. This suggests that the policies and rhetoric from the current U.S. administration will have (and are having) a significant impact on the bilateral relationship in its broadest sense. If even individuals unrelated to the governments experience an erosion of trust, the effects of this change could be felt in areas ranging from law enforcement cooperation to business and tourism, and others.

This sharp drop occurred across party lines. In contrast with the situation in the United States, political polarization on this issue in Mexico is virtually non-existent, with Mexicans

of all ideologies and parties agreeing in their views of the United States and support for NAFTA (see Figure 12). Results from surveys in the last decade show that this is a consistent result, that there is a lack of political polarization on views of the United States, with the largest variation between overall views and the views of supporters of any party never being larger than 11 percent.²⁰

Figure 12. Views of Mexicans on NAFTA and the United States by party support and ideological identification, 2017.

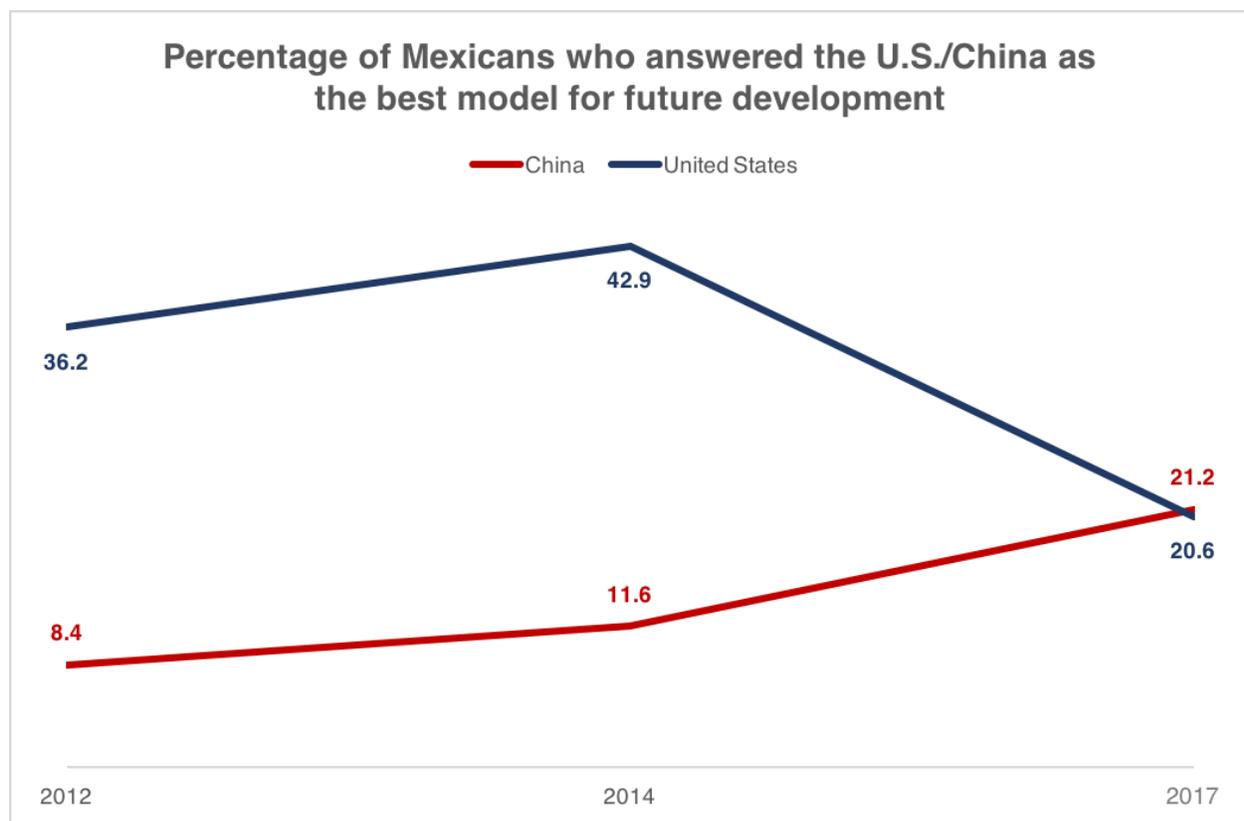


Source: *Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Project*.²¹

For all of the complexity and at times even contradiction found in Mexican views of the United States, the northern neighbor had until recently been seen as the preferred model of development for Mexico. However, by early 2017, that had changed, with China for the first time topping the United States, suggesting a decline in U.S. influence and soft power (see Figure 13).

While the decline in Mexican perceptions of the United States has been sudden and dramatic, it is important to note that responses to many of these questions have experienced significant ups and downs over the past two decades. This indicates a degree of malleability, a willingness on the part of Mexicans to change their views of the United States depending on events and changes in policy or personality. This opens the door to significant potential improvements in Mexican opinion should major issues currently damaging perception in the bilateral relationship, such as the NAFTA renegotiation, be successfully resolved.

Figure 13. Country perceived by Mexicans to be the best model for future development (only top two answers shown), 2012-2016.



Source: *Latin American Public Opinion Project*.²²

Though the top-line dramatic decline in Mexican views of the United States holds across subgroups, there are also important variations. For example, recent changes appear to have had different impacts for people with different levels of education, with those with a higher level of education having a more positive opinion of the United States. In the 2017 Data OPM survey conducted for the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Mexico Institute,²³ 56 percent of Mexicans thought that having the United States as a neighbor was more of a problem than an advantage, but only 40 percent of people with a university education agreed—with a larger 48 percent seeing the United States as an advantageous neighbor. While this could point to a growing gap between segments of the population, it also suggests that education is a key factor that can help bring the public along with North American cooperation and integration.

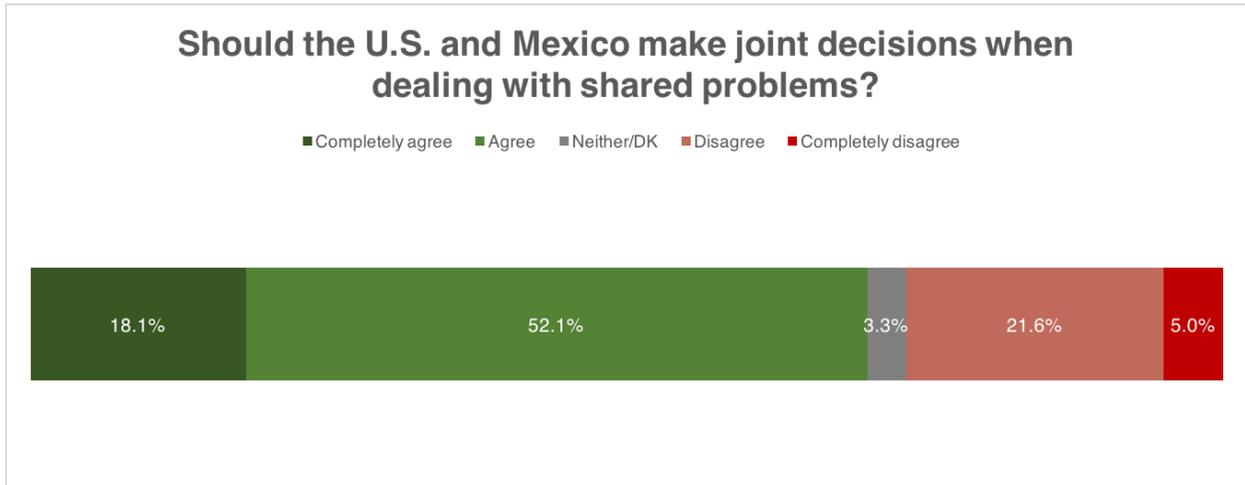
Figure 14. Perception held by Mexicans of sharing a border with the United States as a problem or an advantage, 2017.

Having the U.S. as a neighbor is more of a...	University degree	High school	Middle school	Elementary school
Problem	40%	57%	57%	64%
Advantage	48%	37%	33%	27%

Source: Data OPM.²⁴

Another encouraging finding from recent research is the willingness of the Mexican public to work with the United States. Regardless of the negative perceptions many Mexicans may currently have of the country, they overwhelmingly believe that the United States and Mexico need to work together to face problems common to both countries. In the Data OPM survey, 70 percent of Mexicans said that the United States and Mexico should make decisions about shared problems cooperatively (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Perception held by Mexicans of whether the United States and Mexico should make joint decisions to address shared problems, 2017.



Source: Data OPM.²⁵

As in the United States, the data shows that the Mexican public is attentive to changes occurring in its neighbor country. Furthermore, there are significant differences by demographic groups that could be explored to better understand the composition and complexity of the perceptions of both countries. In the following two sections, we turn to perception of specific topics of the bilateral relation that shed some light on how reality and perceptions are constantly shaped by each other.

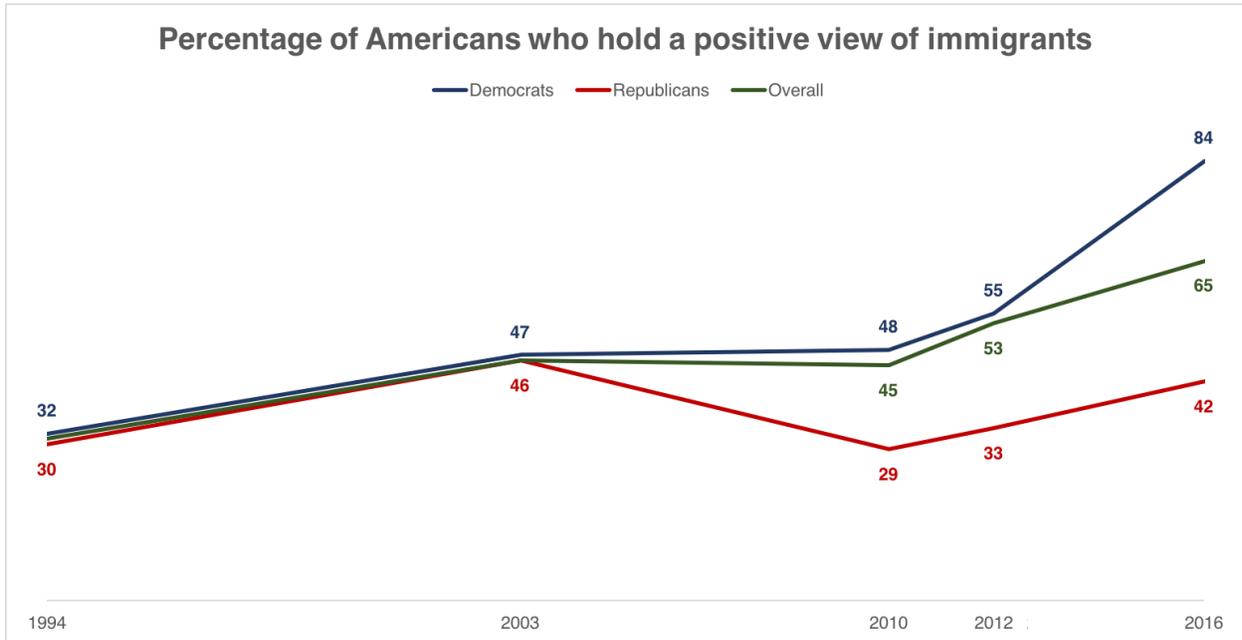
Perceptions on Migration, the Border, and Security

Americans' perception of immigrants has been improving since at least the mid-1990s: the proportion of Americans that believe immigrants are a positive force for the United States has more than doubled since 1994, increasing from 31 percent in that year to 65 percent in 2016 (see Figure 15). Moreover, a full 72 percent of the American public supports a pathway for undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States, whether allowing them to apply for citizenship or permanent residency.²⁶ However, as was the case for U.S. opinion toward Mexico, Americans are increasingly divided in their views of migration, with increases in favorable views of immigrants being outpaced by the growth of the gap across party lines, which went from only 2 percent in 1994 to 42 percent in 2016—with a consistently higher proportion of Democrats holding a positive view (see Figure 15).

The competing influence of the overall improvement in perception of immigrants and the political divisions within has allowed for a continued politicization of immigration and border policy. With a majority of Republicans seeing immigration as a critical threat to the United States, and 45 percent of President Trump's core supporters believing that illegal immigrants who are currently working in the United States should be required to leave their jobs and the country, it should come as no surprise that the current U.S. administration has supported a number of policy proposals to limit immigration.²⁷

Division regarding the perceptions of immigrants and immigration are not simply related to political views; age, education level, and race also make a difference. One of the most interesting—and in some ways unexpected—divisions has to do with geography. An initial exploration of census and survey data suggests that party lines are not the only relevant division for perception of immigrants—states that have a larger population of Mexican or Hispanic heritage tend to hold more favorable views.²⁸ Though this is a line of research that needs to be explored further, a preliminary analysis indicates that a higher percentage of immigrant population results in more favorable views of immigration, cooperation, and integration.

Figure 16. View held by Americans of the impact of immigrants in the United States, 1994-2016. Above, disaggregated by answer. Below, positive answers disaggregated by party identification.



Source: Pew Research Center.²⁹

Migration concerns are highly linked to security topics, and in fact U.S. views of Mexico and the bilateral relationship as a whole are driven in large part by issues related to public security and the rule of law. According to Vianovo’s 2016 Mexico’s Brand in the U.S. National Survey,³⁰ security is a very important factor for the view that Americans hold of Mexico. 36 percent of Americans say their image of Mexico is justified based on concerns about drugs, cartels, crime, and violence, by far the most often cited reason for image ratings.

Figure 17. Reasons given by Americans for their views of Mexico, 2016.

Reason	Percentage
Drugs/Cartels/Crime/Violence/Unsafe	36%
Don't know/Not familiar enough	16%
Corruption	12%
Other	10%
Depends on where you go/Some places safe	7%
Good people/Developing/Trying hard/Like it	7%
Illegal immigration/Border crossings	6%
Negative general comment	5%
Poverty/Poor	4%
Good place to visit/Things to see/Safe places	4%
Positive general comment	3%

Source: Vianovo.³¹

In order to address the above concerns about security, as well as other security issues in the bilateral relationship, Americans strongly agree that Mexico and the United States should work together on security. Mexicans also feel that security is an important topic in relations with the United States, although not as strongly as Americans. 72 percent of Americans and 51 percent of Mexicans believe that the bilateral relationship should focus on security issues (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Views held by Americans about Mexico and by Mexicans about the United States, 2016.

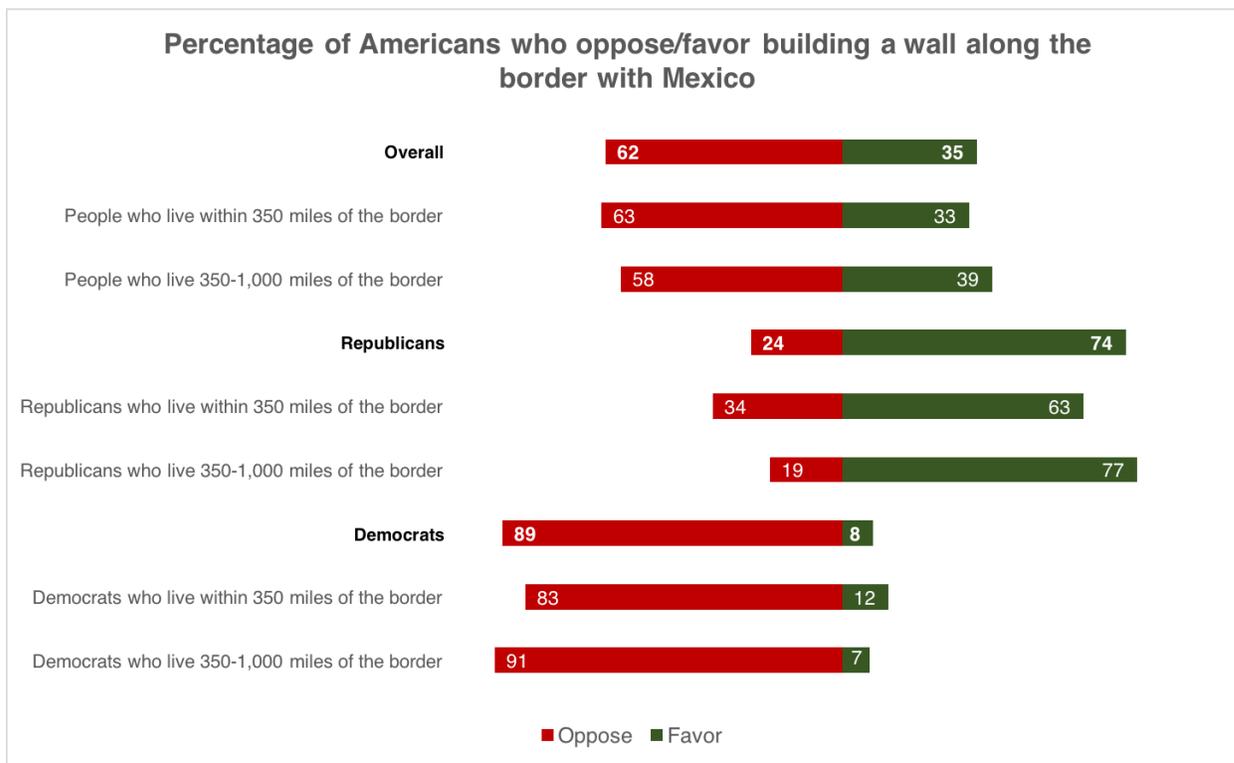
	Views held by Americans about Mexico	Views held by Mexicans about the United States
The opposite country is important for yours	69%	79%
The U.S.-Mexico relationship should focus on security	72%	51%

Source: Data OPM.³²

Concerns about security in Mexico help drive support for initiatives such as the proposed border wall. Still, a Pew survey carried out in February 2017 found that only 35 percent of Americans favor building the wall while 62 percent oppose it. Once again, surveys find a strong partisan division, with just 8 percent of Democrats favoring the wall compared to 74 percent of Republicans. Unsurprisingly, the Mexican public overwhelmingly opposes the wall (94 percent of Mexicans reject the wall, according to the Pew 2017 U.S. Image Report).³³

Interestingly, those living closer to the border are less likely to support a border wall—Republicans living within 350 miles of the border were less likely to favor building a wall between the United States and Mexico than their peers living further away (see Figure 18). Overall, surveys and research suggest that people who have more experience with their counterparts on the other side of the border will have more favorable views of the other country and in particular will support cooperative policies over divisive ones.

Figure 19. Percentage who favor and oppose a wall along the United States-Mexico border, disaggregated by party identification and distance to the border, 2017.



Source: Pew Research Center.³⁴

Other surveys support the finding that more contact leads to less favorable views of isolating policies. The Mexico-U.S. Border Survey 2016 carried out by Baseline & Associates for Univision, *The Dallas Morning News*, and Cronkite News found that 72 percent of Americans and 86 percent of Mexicans (see Figure 19) living in border communities—the areas that have the most contact with their counterparts—in both countries oppose the wall. Border region residents express a clear sense of interdependence, with 69 percent of Mexicans and 79 percent of Americans saying their city depends on their sister city across the border. They tend to place great importance of economic cooperation. 70 percent of Americans and 69 percent of Mexicans living in border communities said that they depend on their cross-border neighbors for economic survival.

In the same border region survey, there were other signs that closeness to the opposite side reduces negative views. 79 percent of Mexicans and 86 percent of Americans said they liked their cross-border neighbors. While not directly comparable to broader favorability ratings measured in other surveys, these numbers are certainly higher than nationwide averages (see Figure 19). Interestingly, a recent analysis of Pew

Research data found that while Mexicans living within 200 miles of the border have significantly more positive views of the United States than the national average (41 percent to 30 percent), Americans living within the same range of the border are actually slightly more likely to express negative views of Mexico (57 percent to a 64 percent national average). Additional research and analysis is required, but it seems likely that Americans living close to the border are simultaneously expressing positive attitudes toward their Mexican neighbors and negative attitudes toward the Mexican government and/or the levels of corruption and violence in Mexico—a somewhat more nuanced view of Mexico.

Figure 20. Views held by Americans about Mexico and by Mexicans about the United States, disaggregated by location.

Approval rating	U.S. perception of Mexico	Mexico perception of the United States
Border communities	86%	79%
Within 200 miles of the border	57%	41%
Nationwide	64%	30%

Source: Baseline & Associates, Gallup, Pew Research Center.³⁵

Note: Border communities includes cities that are directly on the border. People from both sides of the border were asked whether they liked their neighbors, meaning the city directly opposite to theirs. They were surveyed in 2016. Nationwide perceptions and perceptions of people living within 200 miles of the border were obtained in surveys carried out in 2017. They were asked how favorable or unfavorable their opinion of Mexico was.

In terms of public policies that bring the United States and Mexico closer, both governments should be looking at the border region. Granted, the area poses important challenges for both countries, including illegal immigration, drug and human trafficking, and inequality, but it is also an area where the attitudes towards the opposite side are largely based on direct experience rather than indirect information (e.g. from mass media or social networks) and where we see high levels of support for cooperative approaches to regional challenges. Contact between the publics of both countries—whether due to living near each other, educational exchanges, tourism, or joint business opportunities—will be crucial to building support for integration and breaking down damaging stereotypes and unfounded views of each other.

Perceptions on NAFTA, Trade, and Tourism

Despite the trade skepticism embraced by both mainstream presidential candidates in the 2016 U.S. election, support for international trade amongst the American public is quite strong. According to 2017 data by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, a strong majority of Americans believe that international trade is good for consumers, the U.S. economy, and for creating jobs in the United States (see Figure 21).

Figure 21. Views held by Americans of international trade, 2004-2017.



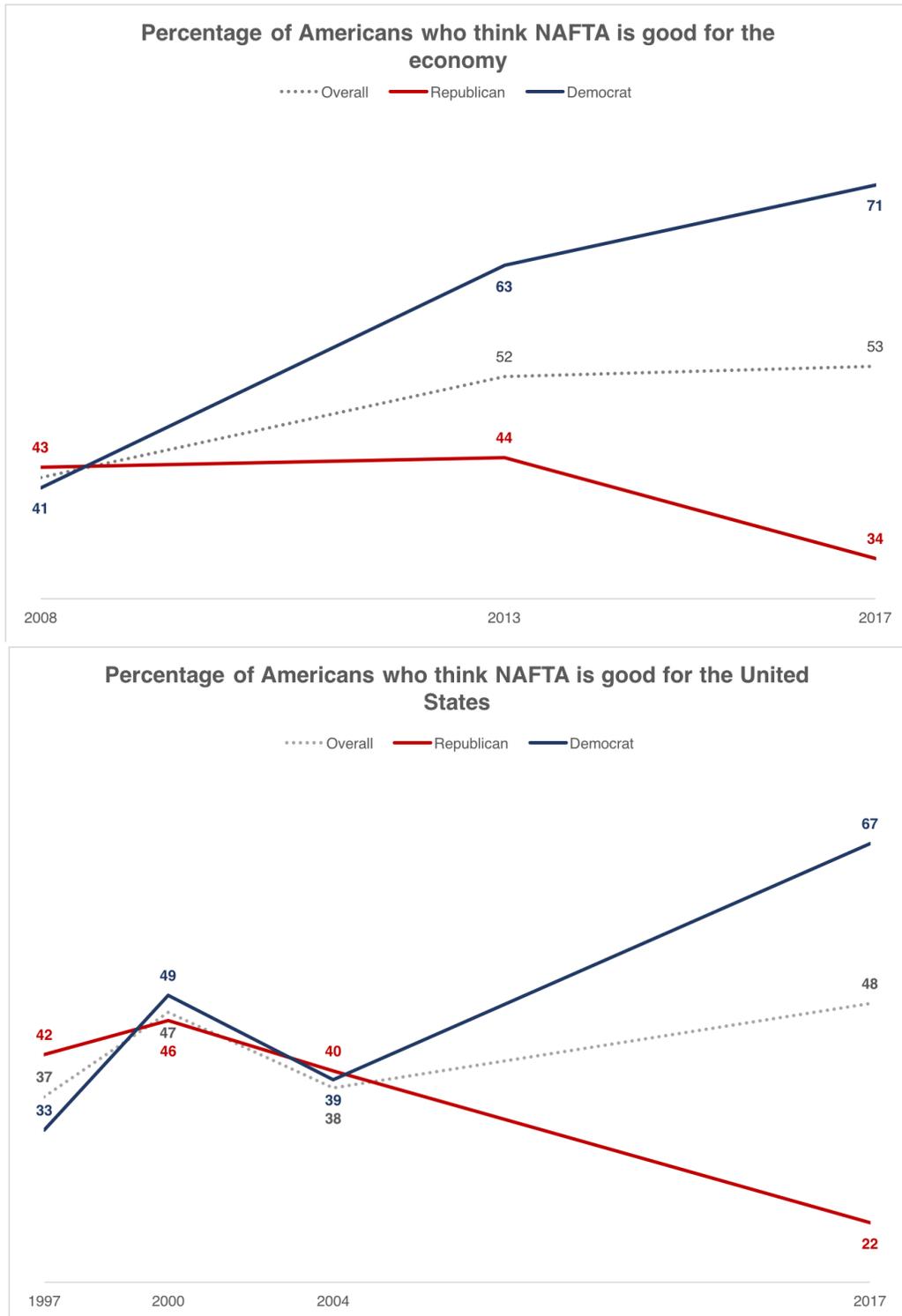
Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs.³⁶

Trade agreements, and the North American Free Trade Agreement in particular, do not fare quite as well. Depending on the wording of the question, a small majority or plurality of Americans do currently favor NAFTA, but the public can best be described as ambivalent toward the agreement, with nearly equal portions of the population expressing support and opposition (see Figure 22). Precise levels of support and opposition to NAFTA have fluctuated somewhat over the years, but the general sense of a public divided expressing significant trade skepticism has held true over time, even as there is some evidence of recent improvement.

Various segments of the U.S. population show significant differences in their views of NAFTA. Young people, especially what could be described as the “NAFTA generation” of 18 to 29 year-olds in the United States, are especially supportive of the agreement, with a full 73 percent agreeing with the statement that NAFTA is good for the United States (contrasting with under 40 percent support from those older than 50).³⁷ As seen in

Figure 21, Democrats have recently become much more supportive of NAFTA while Republicans have become less so. This suggests that thought leadership on an issue as complex and multi-faceted as trade is extremely important and that the overall stability of public ambivalence may be masking a significant degree of openness to reevaluating the impact of trade on the United States. These numbers also point toward a significant degree of instability in terms of trade politics, with Democratic policymakers still skeptical of trade even as their constituents become more pro-trade liberalization and Republican constituents increasingly skeptical of trade even as the party itself remains largely pro-free trade. Certainly, part of this split can be understood as a Trump effect, with the President having successfully campaigned on an anti-NAFTA platform in key swing states. Indeed, 58 percent of core Trump supporters believe trade deals mostly benefit other countries, while a similar percentage of Democrats (62%) believes that trade deals benefit both the United States and other countries.³⁸ Nonetheless, the Chicago Council's 2013 findings suggest this trend may have been underway several years prior to the last election cycle. Further research into the roots of this somewhat peculiar realignment on trade is warranted.

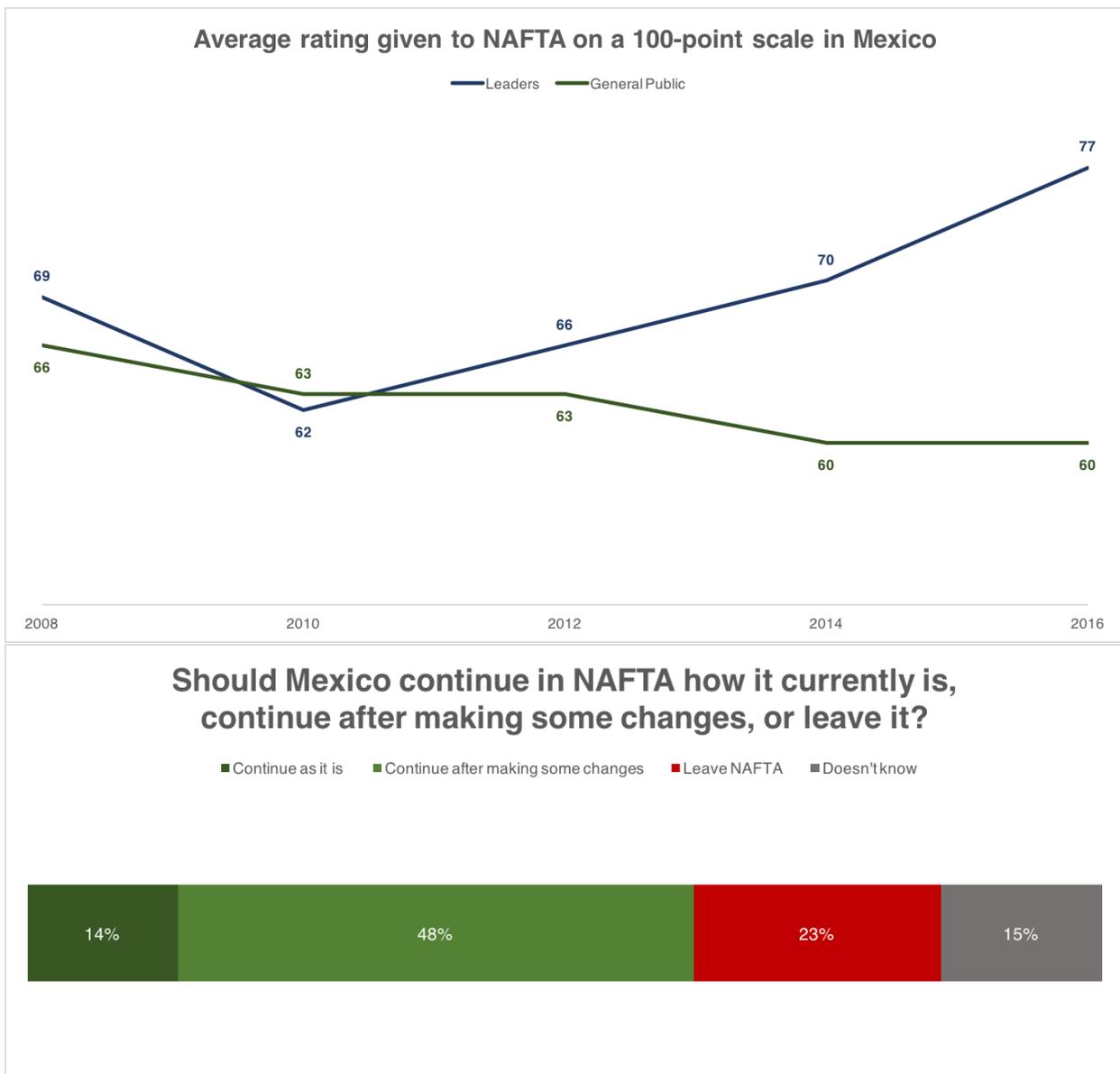
Figure 22. Americans' support for NAFTA, 1997-2017.



Source: Top, Chicago Council on Global Affairs.³⁹ Bottom, Gallup.⁴⁰

Even though the public in Mexico also questions the distribution of gains from NAFTA—in a 2014 survey by the CIDE, only 16 percent believed Mexico was the country that benefitted the most from the agreement⁴¹—, overall support for it has long been stronger than in the United States. CIDE’s Las Américas y El Mundo survey has long found favorable views of NAFTA among the Mexican public (see Figure 23). According to a survey by the INEGI,⁴² 62 percent of Mexicans believe their country should continue in NAFTA, with only 23 percent of Mexicans saying the country should leave the agreement. The most popular answer, with 48 percent of respondents agreeing, is that changes need to be made to the agreement if Mexico is to continue in it.

Figure 23. Mexicans’ opinion of NAFTA, 2008-2016.



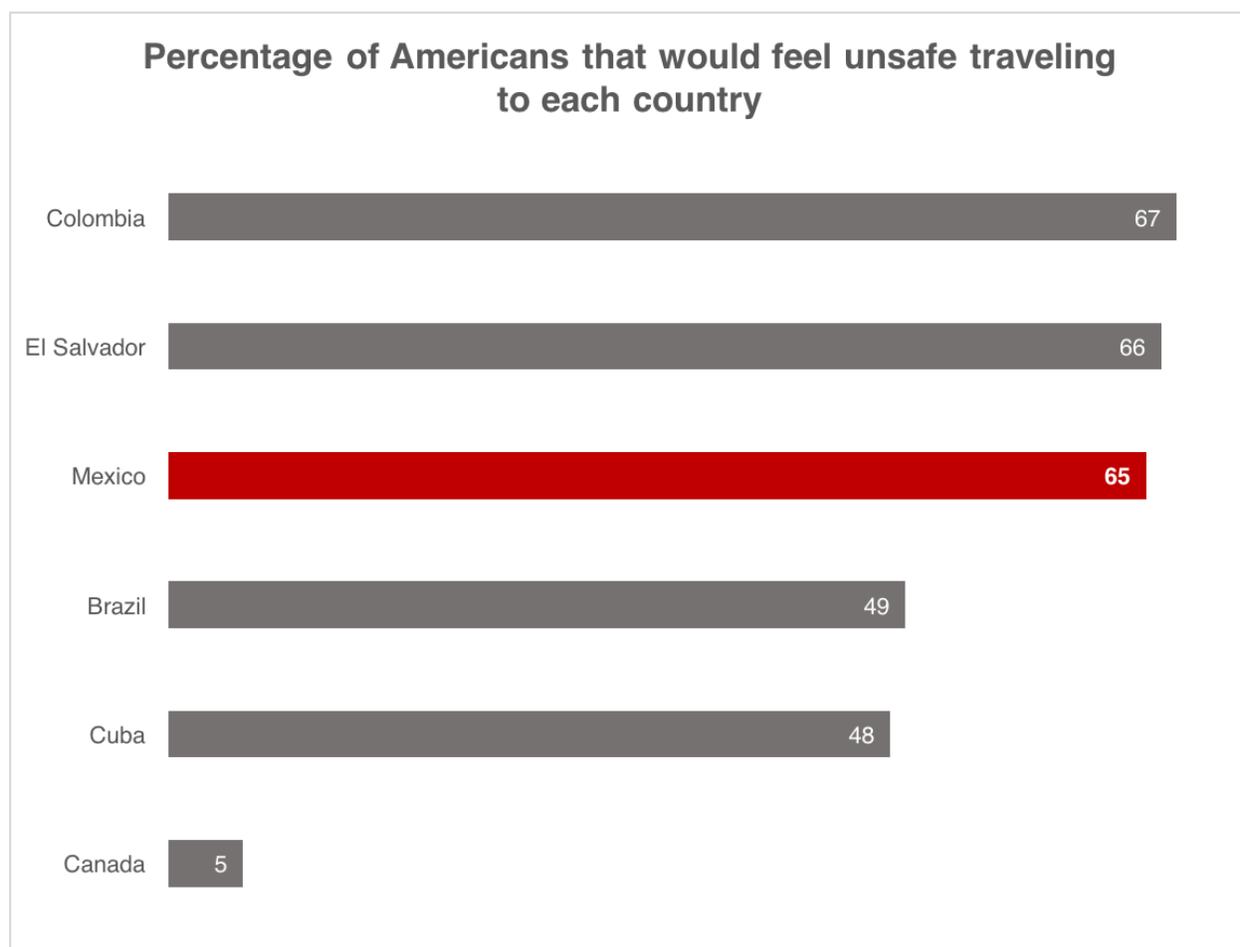
Source: Above, CIDE. Below, INEGI.⁴³

Tourism

Tourism represents an important opportunity for maintaining and improving the U.S.-Mexico relationship. Research presented by the World Economic Forum on their *Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017*⁴⁴ shows that tourism, in addition to creating jobs and contributing to growth and development, fosters tolerance between different countries and cultures. As seen in Figure 1, many of the positive perceptions that Americans hold about Mexico—like “vacation” or “beach”—are related to tourism. In 2015, over 20 million Mexicans entered the United States⁴⁵ and over 8 million Americans visited Mexico,⁴⁶ and both countries are each other’s most important tourist destination. However, tourism is at risk of deteriorating because of security issues in Mexico and an uneasy political climate in the United States.

Public security challenges in Mexico act as a drag on tourist travel to Mexico, although the tourism industry has proven quite resilient as well.⁴⁷ The 2016 Mexico’s Brand in the U.S. national survey carried out by GSD&M and Vianovo found that 65 percent of people in the United States perceive Mexico to be a dangerous travel destination—a rating comparable to the ones received by Colombia and El Salvador (see Figure 24). The impact of public security—both the image of public security challenges and the reality—on U.S. tourism to Mexico is doubly important because it not only affects Mexico’s economy but also represents a missed opportunity to improve U.S. perception of Mexico.

Figure 24. Perceptions Americans hold of travel safety to a selection of countries, 2016.



Source: Vianovo.⁴⁸

The current state of U.S.-Mexico relations may also affect the volume of travel into the United States. Research firm Tourism Economics estimated that in 2017, visits by Mexicans to the United States will decrease by 7 percent, with a direct economic loss of \$1.1 billion.⁴⁹ The anti-Mexican discourse may be to blame, as tourists feel less welcome and at risk of facing overly exhaustive revisions or of being denied entry.⁵⁰ Even though the dollar has gained value vis-à-vis most currencies in the world, this explanation is not enough, as there are substantial exceptions—tourism from Canada grew 14.8 percent despite the losses of value of the Canadian dollar. And the tendency does coincide with the overall decline of the image of the United States abroad. Overall, the United States lost 700,000 tourists in Q1 2017 when compared to Q1 2016.⁵¹ Researchers with the Dallas Federal Reserve are already noticing the impact of fewer Mexican visitors on the local economy in South Texas.⁵²

Just as is the case in Mexico, if the political climate in the United States leads to a decrease in Mexican tourists, then the United States may be vulnerable to significant monetary losses (Mexico has the largest number of tourism and business admissions to the United States)⁵³ and missed opportunities to improve Mexican perception of the country. Indeed, research shows that under the right conditions, tourism can help improve understanding between citizens of different countries and help change negative stereotypes.⁵⁴ This is especially true of tourism supplemented by education, with actions as minor as giving tourists an information brochure before their trip proving effective in increasing intercultural understanding.⁵⁵ Furthermore, study abroad periods have been found to have a strong and clear impact on international understanding and cross-cultural interest and openness.⁵⁶ If the way forward for Mexico and the United States requires an improved understanding of each other, then both countries would benefit greatly from initiatives to increase educational exchanges and international travel enhanced by learning experiences.

Conclusion

For two decades following the implementation of NAFTA, the official relationship developed through a slow, methodical, and iterative process to grow cooperation and deepen partnership. Diplomats and top officials found ways to isolate points of friction so that they could be kept quiet, bypassed, and eventually forgotten along the way, but the public was never quite as willing to do so. The U.S. involvement in the Iraq War eroded some Mexican good will toward the United States, and rising levels of organized crime-related violence in Mexico had a similar effect on U.S. perception of its neighbor. Each of these effects, nonetheless, ultimately proved temporary, with goodwill proving itself resilient.

There is a strength and a weakness inherent in the apparent malleability of public opinion in the bilateral relationship. On the downside, the fickleness suggests that the publics in Mexico and the United States are not fully convinced that their neighbor is a strong friend and trustworthy partner. The most damaging events in terms of attitudes have played into long-simmering negative perceptions, recalling the ghosts of the bilateral relationship (sometimes fairly, sometimes not). To a certain degree, this is simply the cost of having a long and complicated bilateral relationship, and progress in overcoming historic conflicts and misperceptions will take time. In another sense, though, it is the result of too little attention being paid to explaining to the public the value of North American cooperation. The controversial nature of NAFTA, the sovereignty issues raised by security cooperation, the sensitive politics of immigration, gun control, and drug policy have all incentivized a rather quiet and careful approach to deepening regional cooperation. Though understandable, this approach has left vitally important aspects of the bilateral relationship in a precarious, fragile position, and leaders in the future will need to be more upfront with the public about the need for and value of regional cooperation. U.S. and Mexican societies must understand the extent to which they depend on one another for their security and economic prosperity in order to depoliticize and increase the stability of the U.S.-Mexico partnership.

Looking toward the future, there is a strong opportunity to achieve just that. Young people on both sides of the border have grown up in the context of a much more positive era in bilateral relations, and it shows. Young adults have a better view of one another and a clearer sense that the United States and Mexico depend on one another to solve regional challenges. This generation and future generations, particularly to the extent that they receive higher levels of education (which are also linked to more positive views), are probably the strongest asset that the bilateral relationship currently has. They are predisposed to support efforts and policies to improve policy outcomes and deepen

cooperation. This, however, must not be taken for granted. If the reason they favor cooperation is linked to the improved context of bilateral relations that they have experienced, it is at risk. Great care must be taken in the current review of bilateral relations—NAFTA, migration policy—to maintain and strengthen goodwill, lest the work of the previous generation be squandered. Governments need to recognize this important shift in perceptions and use it as a driver of mutual understanding, deeper integration, and increased cooperation.

Initial evidence regarding Mexican opinion of the United States in 2017 is quite negative. This is concerning in its own right but should be doubly so in light of the fact that the NAFTA generation is currently being exposed to the greatest bilateral clash of their lifetimes. But some solace can be found in the historic resilience of public opinion and the fact that in terms of policy a huge amount is still to be determined. This suggests the stakes of the current negotiations may be even higher than many think, with not only the cooperation of today but also the public goodwill needed to develop and implement the cooperation of tomorrow at least partially on the line.

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