

CONTRIBUTOR

Donald Trump Encourages a Nationalist Backlash in Mexico

01/23/2017 10:05 pm ET

Mark R. Yzaguirre Attorney in Houston, Texas.

There has been no shortage of commentary about President Donald Trump's rhetoric relating to immigration and trade with Mexico. President Trump's statements about the need for a border [wall](#) and his inflammatory remarks about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, including the [judge](#) overseeing the Trump University fraud lawsuit, have received a lot of attention in the press.

What has drawn less attention is the backlash in Mexico that such comments and policies, like [renegotiation](#) of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), may engender. All too often, we Americans fail to adequately consider that other nations have their own political dynamics and our actions will trigger reactions abroad.

This is particularly true in Mexico. Mexico has a long history of nationalist politics which can be marked by strains of anti-Americanism. And to be fair, Mexicans have strong historical reasons to be skeptical of the intentions of their northern neighbor. However, such tensions have diminished over recent decades and NAFTA can be seen as part of a broader North American project that Mexican and American politicians have embraced, sometimes at their political peril.

President Trump threatens to undo much if not all of that goodwill and to increase mutual suspicion between the U.S. and Mexico. As pointed out in a recent [piece](#) in *The Economist*:

Mr. Trump's pugilism increases the chances that Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a left-wing populist, will win. He would probably counter American protectionism with the sort of self-destructive economic nationalism to which Mexico has disastrously resorted in the past. Vital reforms of energy, telecoms and education, enacted under Mexico's current president, Enrique Peña Nieto, might be reversed.

Leaving aside whether or not López Obrador's approach will be self-destructive to Mexico, it is clear it would be a shift away from the programs of recent decades. Also, and perhaps more importantly on some levels, the prospect of a backlash in Mexico isn't limited to the political left.

Mexico's center-right National Action Party (PAN) has been a staunch supporter of closer relations with the United States. But the PAN faces the same domestic political pressures that other parties face in Mexico and all one has to do is look at the Twitter [feed](#) of former President Vicente Fox (the [first](#) President of Mexico who was a member of the PAN) to see how President Trump's rhetoric is pushing America's friends in Mexico away.

Further, a turn by Mexico away from the United States cannot fairly be described merely as a resurgence of anti-Americanism. In fact, it would be a completely reasonable response if Mexico's economy is damaged by American actions. As stated by a Mexican attorney quoted in a recent *Washington Post* [article](#) by Joshua Partlow, "If American companies leave, we have to open ourselves to the Asian economies. To look for new horizons." It's hard to dispute the logic of that position

and it would be unfair and self-centered to refer to it as simple anti-Americanism.

It's possible this sort of adverse reaction may be seen as a feature rather than a bug by some in the Trump Administration, as it could further feed xenophobic politics here. Perhaps Senior Counselor to the President Steve Bannon sees Mexican nationalism as part of the broader [global](#) populist movement he wants to feed. That's speculation on my part, but I think that is something worth considering.

In any case, it's one thing to make boisterous comments on the campaign trail. Politicians everywhere do that to get elected and that is understood all over the world to be part of the background noise of the electoral process. Also, there certainly are good reasons to build up border security (I grew up on the U.S.-Mexico border and have written [about](#) the very real threats that exist there) and to try and protect American jobs. But President Trump's belligerence risks wrecking decades of improved U.S.-Mexico relations.

The relationship between the United States and Mexico isn't one in which American politics are the only politics that matter. Mexicans are watching what's happening in Washington just as keenly as Americans are and they will make their own decisions on how to respond to President Trump. It is vain for Americans to think we will be the sole arbiters of how the U.S. and Mexico will interact with one another, and thoughtless blustering by the President of the United States will not make either nation better off.