

NÚMERO 202

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Shaping or Constraining Foreign Policy?  
The Role of Mexican Public Opinion in the  
Response to the Iraq War

SEPTIEMBRE 2010



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## Abstract

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*This working paper explores the role of public opinion in shaping and constraining the foreign policy decision adopted by the Mexican government in the eve of the US led invasion to Iraq on March, 2003. The Mexican position in this case was particularly relevant given that the country was occupying a non-permanent position in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the American pressure on Mexico was considerable.*

*The working paper is divided in four sections. In the first section, we review the literature relevant to understand the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. In the second, we briefly summarize the main features of the US-Mexican relationship and describe in a detailed manner the situation that prevailed between both countries in the eve of the US led invasion to Iraq. In the third, we explore the role of public opinion in shaping and constraining the foreign policy that the Fox's government chose to adopt. In the final section, we underline the main findings of the working paper.*

*Keywords: public opinion, foreign policy, Mexico-United States, Iraq.*

## Resumen

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*Este documento de trabajo explora el impacto de la opinión pública en la posición internacional adoptada por el gobierno mexicano durante la invasión de Estados Unidos a Iraq en marzo de 2003. La posición mexicana en este caso fue particularmente relevante, dado que el país ocupaba uno de los asientos no permanentes en el Consejo de Seguridad de las Naciones Unidas (CSNU) y la presión estadounidense sobre México fue considerable.*

*El documento de trabajo se divide en cuatro secciones principales. En la primera sección, se revisa la literatura relevante para entender la relación entre la opinión pública y la política exterior. En la segunda, se resumen brevemente las principales características de la relación México-Estados Unidos y se describe de manera detallada la situación que prevalecía entre ambos países en ese periodo. En la tercera se analiza el impacto de la opinión pública en el posicionamiento que el gobierno de Fox optó por adoptar frente a la invasión de Iraq. En la última sección, se desarrollarán las principales conclusiones del documento de trabajo.*

*Palabras clave: opinión pública, política exterior, México-Estados Unidos, Iraq.*



## *Introduction*

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This working paper explores the role of public opinion in shaping and constraining the foreign policy decision adopted by the Mexican government in the eve of the US led invasion to Iraq on March, 2003. The Mexican position in this case was particularly relevant given that the country was occupying a non-permanent position in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the American pressure was such that president Bush directly called Vicente Fox and said “I want your vote, the security of the United States is at stake” (Woodward, 2004).

We argue that public opinion limited the options and established the boundaries for policy making in Mexico. In particular, we show that the vast majority of the public (around 80%) was inclined in maintaining the non-military approach to solve conflict that has traditionally dominated Mexican foreign affairs. Consequently, close to 80% of Mexicans did not want the government to support the US position. Interestingly, by February 2003, 50.2% of the public had a good opinion of the US and 51.3% said they admired it (Mitofsky, 2003). However, with the wake of the war, these percentages changed and sympathy and admiration fell; thus, it can be argued that the lack of support for the US invasion did not respond to a prevalent anti-Americanism.

The Mexican government remained very ambiguous in its position towards the conflict. On the one hand, the relationship between the two countries could be compromised if Mexico opposed the US position. On the other, the Mexican public would have not tolerated an open and strong support of the US’ position, despite the favorable opinion that people had towards this country. In that context, the Mexican executive was clearly constrained in its options and decided to just declare that Mexicans “regretted” the war. It is worth noting that the set of strategies was limited to diplomacy given that Mexican direct involvement in the conflict –sending troops at any stage of the war– was never even considered as an option by the president, Congress, political parties or the military. The most pressing issue in the country and for the US was the vote of Mexico in the UNSC and its cooperation to secure the US Southern border. The Mexican position was remarkably different from the reactions of other Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Cuba, who frankly opposed the military intervention. It also contrasted with the vote of confidence that Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic gave to the United States.

The working paper is divided in four main sections. In the first section, we review the literature relevant to understand the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. In the second, we briefly summarize the main features of the US-Mexican relationship and describe in a detailed manner the

situation that prevailed between both countries in the eve of the US led invasion to Iraq. In the third, we explore the role of public opinion in shaping and constraining the foreign policy that the Fox's government chose to adopt. In the final section, we underline the main findings of the working paper. Finally, we delineate some conclusions.

### ***1. Public opinion and foreign policy: The literature and the Mexican case***

According to the Almond-Lipmann consensus, the public in general is unable to make appropriate decisions related to foreign policy given the difficulties and subtleties of these subjects (Almond, 1950). Topics related to foreign policy tend to be complex and unfamiliar to most people and public opinion should be discarded or even ignored in the decision making process (Lipmann, 1922; Converse, 1963). This position is still very strong in the literature, although there are alternative ways to analyze the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.

Several authors have argued that public opinion does have a strong influence in the process of foreign policy decision making. For instance, Page and Shapiro (1992) and Holsti (1996) have proven that opinion regarding foreign policy remains stable over time. Public opinion may not be enough to initiate a public policy, but it can shape the limits of policy making (Sobel 2001). In general, many authors agree that public opinion has a powerful impact on policy making in most cases and, in others, it does at least set the boundaries of operating ability for policy makers (Russett, 1990; Powlick, 1991; Foyle, 1999; Kull and Ramsay, 2003; Foyle, 2004; Larson and Savych, 2005).

Sobel (2001) argues that "public opinion constraints but does not set American foreign intervention policy" (p. 5). Policy makers are worried about the electoral consequences of pursuing unpopular policies in the world arena (Marra, Ostrom and Simon 1990). There is an interaction between the public and policy makers that forces leaders to react and lead public opinion (Russett, 1990). Whenever presidents fail to seriously contemplate public opinion or consider it too malleable, they cannot adequately advance their foreign agenda (Wittkopf, 1990; Holsti, 1992; Wittkopf and McCormick, 1993; Katz, 2000).

Jacobs and Shapiro suggest that politicians exploit public opinion to "craft" a discourse convincing enough for the public to support the politician's preferred policy. Politicians do not pander, instead they move public opinion in the direction they want in order to maintain their political base.

Other authors have argued that political actors do have the ability to constraint the beliefs of the public, even when they are very sophisticated

(Lau and Schlesinger, 2005). The main idea prevailing in this school of thought is that “[T]he implications for presidential leadership are that presidents should theoretically be able to motivate public opinion in a way most favorable to their own policy preferences. Specifically, by using public opinion polling and focus groups, presidents are able to locate the [...] “centrist opinion” on foreign policy matters. Presidents using “crafted talk” attempt to move majority public opinion to their own preferred location.” (Rottinghaus, 2007).

Rottinghaus, in his paper “Presidential Leadership on Foreign Policy, Opinion Polling and the Possible Limits of “Crafted Talk”” argues that “public opinion broadly constraints public relations strategies of presidents in leading public opinion on foreign policy” (p. 29).

The literature on public opinion and foreign policy for the Mexican case is pretty scarce. Recently, an article by Ortega analyzed the role of public opinion in the particular case of the Iraq war. Using polls from Ipsos-Bimsa, his empirical evidence is strong enough to question the relevance of the Almond-Lippmann consensus in the Mexican case: public opinion was pretty stable and coherent overtime, there was no evidence that indicates volatility, and the majority of Mexicans rejected the use of force by the United States. The author also concludes that:

[T]hese results appear to confirm the hypothesis that Mexican public opinion, as with US public opinion, is not volatile and unpredictable. On the contrary, it demonstrates a degree of sustained stability. In the same way, and against the arguments of Almond and Lippmann, in the case of the war in Iraq, the positions of the Mexican public were well-structured and presented a high degree of coherence about international affairs. Mexican public opinion evidences clear, stable, and well defined positions concerning the conflict. (Ortega, 2006, p. 657)

## ***2. The US-Mexican Bilateral Relationship***

From a historical perspective, the US-Mexican relationship has always been the most important international relationship for Mexico since its independence. In the late 1930s, the United States ceased to have any interest in physically modifying its Southern border due to the high cost of an armed intervention in Mexican territory on the one hand, and the establishment of a relative stable and legitimate political regime in Mexico on the other. Since then, US foreign policy toward Mexico was defined in terms of maintaining the security and stability of its Southern border. This priority has remained constant throughout the years (Schiavon 2004).

Since the 1940s, the dominant strategy in the relationship between Mexico and the United States has been cooperation. The US-Mexico relation has been

characterized by the common interest of minimizing frictions and preferring cooperation over conflict for the solution of bilateral affairs. This has established a “special relation” between both countries, which has allowed wide margins of autonomy for Mexico to manage its internal and external policies in moments of stability, but it has also required its tactful alignment and cooperation with the United States in moments of crisis.

This so called “special relation” has given place to an implicit agreement between the United States and Mexico in many areas. For instance, the US government supported the Mexican economy in times of crisis and promoted American foreign direct investment in the country. In other cases, the US accepted some economic policy choices, such as the implementation of the import substitution industrialization model in Mexico from the 1940s to the 1970s. The US also tolerated, in general terms, the Mexican political system, despite its authoritarian practices, electoral frauds, human rights violations and corruption. It also accepted Mexican disagreements with the US in international forums in non important issues. In exchange for this tolerance of Mexican challenges to the American strength, Mexico guaranteed its domestic stability and the safety of the US Southern border (Chabat, 2001).

Despite all the changes in the international system —namely the transition from bipolarity to American hegemony—, the political shifts at the domestic level in the United States between democratic and republican administrations, as well as the transition in Mexico from an authoritarian system to an incipient democracy, the foreign policies of both countries with regards to each other have remained stable. Since the 1930s, the Mexican government’s autonomy has been guaranteed as long as it can provide internal stability and the safety of the US Southern border. When a security crisis arises in the United States, Mexico has found the way to cooperate discreetly with its neighbor, generally by publicly creating a legalistic curtain of smoke, but attending privately to the request of support and cooperation.

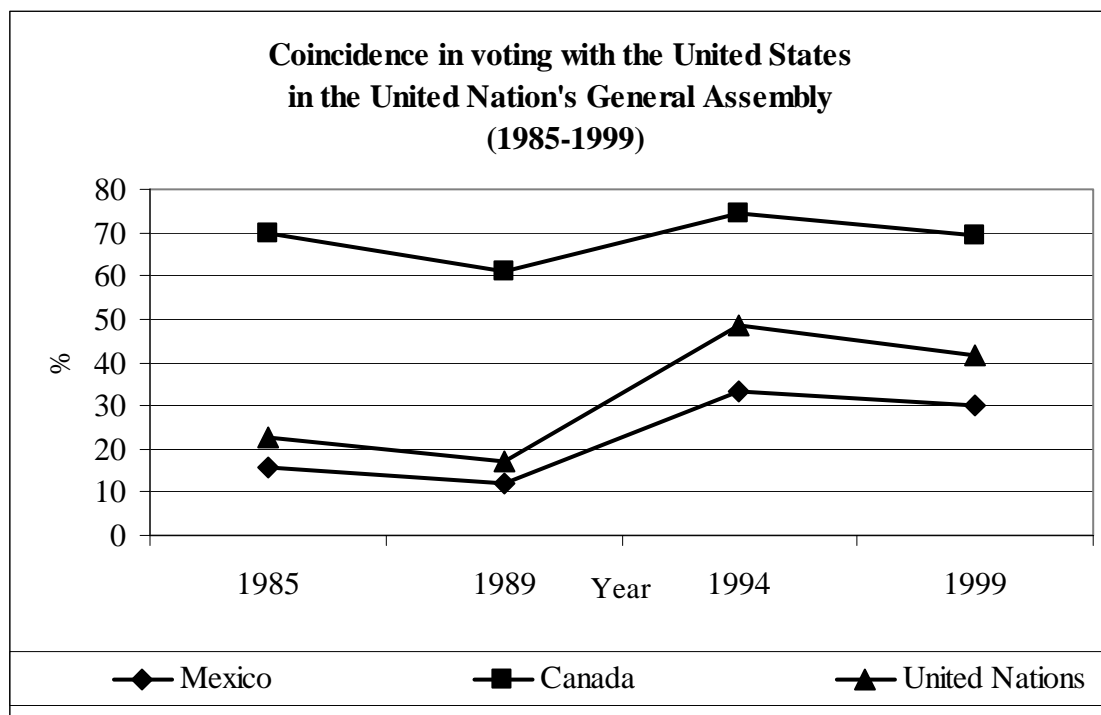
As a result, Mexico has been able to disagree with the US’ position in public —generally in minor issues of the international agenda—, while Mexican discreet cooperation has been the norm in those areas which impact directly the United States’ security. This public confrontation with the US’ in non relevant topics has made Mexican foreign policy serve as an element of internal legitimization of the government. This implicit “agreement to disagree” (Ojeda, 1976) in minor issues allowed, for example, Mexico’s diplomatic defense of Cuba when the latter was suspended from the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962. Similarly the US tolerated the third world rhetoric of the Luis Echeverría’s administration (1970-1976), and the authoritarian system for more than seven decades. However, the United States’ lenience was dramatically reduced during Ronald Reagan’s first administration (1981-1985), given the fact that Mexico was not being capable of guaranteeing internal stability nor the safety of the bilateral border,



especially given that repeated economic crisis led to massive migration and at the same time drug trafficking became significant.

As a result of this situation, the administration of Carlos Salinas (1988-1994), deepened the structural reform which was initiated by Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) and modified its strategy towards the United States, reinventing this country as a partner instead of a rival and reaching the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In exchange for cooperation on economic issues, Mexico regained its relative autonomy in international forums, which was kept throughout the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). This relative autonomy became particularly clear in the coincidence of votes between Mexico and the US in the United Nations' General Assembly (UNGA) during this period (see Graph 1). Clearly, between 1985 –where Mexico only agreed with the United States in less than 20% of the cases– and 1994, we can observe a significant change in the level of cooperation between the two countries (González, 2001). For instance, in 1994, in more than 30% of the cases Mexico's vote and the American vote were the same. It is interesting to note that Canada has been much more in synchrony with the United States during that period of time.

**GRAPH 1**



### 3. Mexican Public Opinion and the United States

#### 3.1. A Historical Approach

In order to have an idea of Mexican feelings towards different countries around the world, in the *México y el Mundo* surveys,<sup>1</sup> Mexicans were requested to express their affinity for a number of countries using a thermometric scale ranging from 0° to 100°, where 100° represents total affinity, 50° neutrality, and 0° total dislike. Despite the commonly assumed anti-Americanism of Mexicans, the country with which Mexicans felt the highest degree of affinity was the United States (68°), tied in first place with Japan. In the third place, Canada appeared with 65° (*México y el Mundo* 2004, p. 36). In 2006, Canada moved to the first place with 75°, the US was in a very near second place (74°) and Japan was in the third place (68°). It is worth noting the fact that the affinity with Canada and the US increased in 10° and 6° respectively in only two years (*México y el Mundo*, 2006, p. 44). In descending order, still inside the range of favorable feelings, Mexicans mentioned Spain and France (62°), China (59°), Brazil (53°), and South Korea (52°). Below the line of neutrality stated at 50° —in the level of unfavorable feelings— Mexicans rated countries such as Cuba (46°), Guatemala (45°), Israel (41°) and Iraq (38°) in the lowest position (*México y el Mundo* 2004, pp. 37-38). The media, as well as many academics, have long assumed that Mexicans do not feel close to the US and there exists generalized anti-Americanism in the country. These surveys reveal that this perception is wrong, and that the closeness between these two countries has increased in recent years.

Nevertheless, the affinity with the US is balanced by other feelings, like the lack of trust. Even though Mexicans feel more admiration (29% in 2004 and 34% in 2006) than scorn (20% in 2004 and 32% in 2006) for the US, twice as many Mexicans distrusted (43%) instead of trusted (20%) this country in 2004 (*México y el Mundo* 2004, pp. 39-41).<sup>2</sup> Specifically regarding the bilateral US-Mexico relationship, on average, on a 0 to 10 scale (where 0 depicts no cooperation and 10 means total cooperation), Mexicans think that there should be an important level of cooperation (rated 7) with the United States (*México y el Mundo*, 2004, pp. 40-41). This number reflects Mexican's pragmatism. Given their geographical situation, Mexicans consider it necessary to cooperate, though not wholly and unconditionally, to solve the joint problems with the US. According to the majority of Mexicans,

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted by the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) and the Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales (COMEXI) in 2004 and 2006. For the Mexico reports see: Guadalupe González, Susan Minushkin and Robert Y. Shapiro, eds., *México y el Mundo: Visiones Globales 2004. Opinión Pública y Política Exterior en México*, México, CIDE-COMEXI, 2004; Guadalupe González and Susan Minushkin, eds., *México y el Mundo 2006: Opinión Pública y Política Exterior en México*, México, CIDE-COMEXI, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Also, 33% were indifferent and 4% did not answer.

cooperation with the United States must reflect Mexican preferences and national interests. Thus, 54% does not agree that the country should take joint decisions with the United States if it implies taking a different course of action from the one that Mexico would have taken by itself (México y el Mundo 2004, pp. 40-41).

### *3.2. Mexico and the US in the Security Council*

Since the beginning of President Fox's administration—with the support of his first Foreign Affairs Secretary, Jorge G. Castañeda—there was a concerted effort to promote and obtain a seat as a non permanent member at the UNSC for the period 2002-2003. Mexico had only been a non permanent member of the Council in two occasions (1946 and 1980-1981). The country had traditionally kept away from the UNSC for several reasons. First, it considered that its norms and structure violated the principle of legal and sovereign equality between States. Second, it argued that the Council's effectiveness to guarantee international peace and security had been limited. Third, it thought that participating in it would not contribute to accomplishing the national interest; instead, it could put Mexico in a position of confrontation with the world powers, particularly with the United States (Centro Tepoztlán 2002).

With the Fox administration, Mexican foreign policy engaged in a more active participation in international organizations. At the same time, a deeper and strategic integration with the United States was defined as a priority. However, with the change in the US' foreign policy towards hegemonic preponderance, strengthened by the terrorist attacks of September 11 and prioritizing the war against terrorism, the traditional ample margin of autonomy of Mexico before the United States in international forums was substantially reduced. After the September 11 attacks, there were opinions in Mexico recommending that the country should abandon its expectations to become part of the UNSC to avoid direct confrontation with the US. However, Castañeda decided to continue an active and aggressive stand to obtain a seat as a non permanent member, which was won after only two rounds of voting in the UNGA.

As such, Mexico found itself in a major dilemma within the Security Council, given the two priorities of its new foreign policy: namely a strategic relationship with the United States and an active multilateral approach to foreign policy. On the one hand, it could give its unconditional support to the initiatives of the United States, generating high costs in terms of national and international politics, and on the other, it could oppose the resolutions proposed by the United States, giving place to a diplomatic confrontation with its most important economic partner. This dilemma was particularly evident with the war against Iraq.

Sending Mexican troops to Iraq was never even considered as an option in the country. Due to the enormous opposition of public opinion, neither the president nor Congress, political parties or the military discussed it as a real option. It is interesting to underline that public opinion polls did not, for the most part, even include questions regarding a possible military support. Politicians and the public at large did not conceive military support as a possibility. The internal discussion among political and economic actors was centered on the the vote of Mexico in the UNSC regarding the war against Iraq and the level of cooperation with the US to secure its borders and avoid a terrorist attack from the South.

Since its entrance to the UNSC, the Mexican vote differed in only three occasions from that of the United States: 1) S/RES/1435 (2002) on the cease of every act of violence and the retreat of Israeli armed forces from Palestinian cities, 2) S/RES/1497 (2003) on the establishment of a multinational force in Liberia; and, 3) S/RES/1506 (2003) on lifting international sanctions to Libya. In spite of the different positions defended by Mexico and the US, none of these cases generated any problems between both countries and the small discrepancies passed unnoticed in the international and domestic arenas (Schiavon, 2004).

The latter substantially contrasts with the case of Iraq. The unconditional disarmament of this country and the military intervention against it was the issue that generated the most friction in the relation between Mexico and the United States during 2002 and 2003. It was a topic in which the position of both countries was confronted in terms of the divergent positions on multilateralism under the auspices of the United Nations. From the American point of view of preponderant hegemony, Iraq was a threat to international peace and security by allegedly having weapons of mass destruction, supporting international terrorist groups and challenging the power and hegemony of the US. Based on this logic, Iraq should receive an exemplary punishment in case it did not disarm immediately and unconditionally. Even if the international community decided not to intervene in Iraq to guarantee this, the United States publicly declared, on several occasions, that it was willing to exert its right to act unilaterally outside the UN institutional framework.

Mexico, on the other hand, supported a negotiated multilateral action that would limit Iraq through contention, a strategy that had resulted successful until then, since Iraq had started a slow process of disarmament. Supporting France's position and giving place to a confrontation with the United States, during 2002, Mexico defended a two step strategy. First, there should be a deeper inspection on behalf of the UN and, in case that violations by Iraq were reported, there should be a new resolution to define which sanctions would be applied. After eight months of negotiations, in November 2002, the UNSC managed to agree on this two step strategy through resolution 1441,

which hardened the operative conditions of the inspections of the United Nations, and avoided that the United States used the automatic resource of war against Iraq. The extensive justification of the Mexican position on resolution 1441 made by Ambassador Aguilar Zinser within the UNSC generated the exasperation of the US Ambassador, who was heard commenting: “who cares what Mexico thinks”.

In 2002 and 2003, the dynamics within the UNSC was of fierce negotiation between its members to achieve resolutions that were approved unanimously. Out of the 125 resolutions approved between January 2002 and December 2003, all of them, except nine, were approved unanimously with 15 votes in favor. Following this logic, on March 2003, the United States did not present a resolution initiative to authorize the use of force against Iraq, given that it was not able to negotiate with two of the permanent members —France and Russia— to ensure that they would not use their veto. Similarly they were unable to negotiate a majority of the votes from the non permanent members (especially noteworthy was the reluctance of Mexico, Chile, and Germany to support the initiative). The US was not even able to achieve a “moral majority” —that is, to obtain a simple majority of votes in favor within the UNSC, without distinction between permanent and non permanent members— to justify, in some way, the war against Iraq before the American public opinion as an act supported by the international community (Schiavon, 2006).

### *3.3. Mexican Public Opinion and Political Discourse: The Internal Polls of Vicente Fox*

During the Fox administration, it became very common for the internal pollsters to regularly conduct surveys that could help measure the public’s perception. The US war with Iraq and the difficult position that Mexico had at the time was a very fertile environment for polling, especially considering that midterm elections were less than 6 months away. The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) had for the first time in history won the presidency and the midterm election was a very important occasion to prove its consolidated power. In that context, the president was constrained by a set of important considerations in his decisions. In the international arena there were: 1) the bilateral relationship with the United States and 2) the Mexican position in the UNSC. The domestic variables were mainly: 1) the popularity and approval rates of Vicente Fox, 2) the effect that the president’s performance in this conflict could have on the midterm elections, and 3) the need to weight the possible economic and social repercussions of not supporting the US *vis à vis* the people’s vote and public opinion overall.

In this section, we will retrace the changes and continuities in the results of the internal polls conducted by the Fox administration with regards to the Iraq war and in particular the position of the Mexican government in this

international conflict<sup>3</sup>. This study will help establish, as much as possible, a relationship between the executive's decisions and discourses, and the trends in public opinion. Several polls were conducted during the prelude to the US invasion. This working paper only considers those that were face-to-face, since phone polls are less reliable in Mexico. The polls will be examined along several lines, namely changes in the support for the war, the relevance of multilateralism in the Mexican public opinion, fears of US retaliation as a result of a Mexican opposition to the war, the approval rates regarding Fox's performance in this conflict and in general the approval rates of the president. These results will help further analyze some key discourses of the Mexican president as well as some interviews that dealt with the issues at stake.

In general terms, we can arguably conclude that Mexican public opinion at large was against the invasion to Iraq. For instance, in a February 20, 2003 poll, when asked: *From your perspective, what should be the Mexican position in this conflict?*, 80.52% of the public did not want to support the US while only 16.67% supported the US. This question was asked in several polls in the following months that lead to the invasion but the results varied only slightly. Public opinion was stable and coherent and the impact of the powerful American propaganda had little or no effect in Mexico.

The overwhelming opposition to the Iraq war gave Fox a very good indicator of what the government position should be in this case. Not only was the public perception coherent with the history of Mexican foreign policy, it was undeniably clear. Having said that, it is important to underline that there was still a small but consistent faction of Mexicans that wanted the government to support the US war, probably because of the fear of a US retaliation that would negatively impact the Mexican economy so dependent of its northern neighbor. In that context, it is interesting to note that the internal polls conducted at the time when the Mexican government was forced to clearly state its position included a repertoire of questions measuring the strength of the public's opinion once the "costs" of that position were included. The next table briefly summarizes the answers to these questions:

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<sup>3</sup> These polls were provided to the authors by CIDE who currently has all the Fox internal polls in their library.

QUESTION	ANSWER
Some specialists have argued that Mexico could be penalized in case of refusing to support the US in the war against Iraq. After knowing this, do you think Mexico should..?	Support the US 30.52% Not support the US 65.36%
The US announced that it will impose some commercial sanctions to France because of its opposition to the war. If Mexico's position NOT to support the US in a unilateral attack caused the boycott of some of our exports and the redraw of US investment in our country, then Mexico should..?	Support the US 35.58% Not support the US 60.86%
If Mexico's position NOT to support the US in a unilateral attack caused the menace to extradite undocumented Mexicans working over there, Mexico should...?	Support the US 33.71% Not support the US 62.73%

Source: CIDE.

The previous answers clearly reveal that once public opinion internalized the possible costs of US retaliation, then the percentage of supporters of the US increased substantially. Nonetheless, the majority of Mexicans opposed the war despite the possible resulting social and economic effects. It is noticeable that questions evaluating the position of the Mexicans towards the war, once the consequences were taken into account, were mostly prevalent in the surveys conducted in the early stages of the prelude to the invasion of Iraq.

The administration was trying to elucidate the boundaries of the public opinion before setting a clear cut position. However, despite the fact that throughout the process most Mexicans —73% of them— were convinced that the US would punish Mexico for its lack of support, public opinion regarding the position of Mexico stayed pretty stable. It is also worth mentioning that questions related to the need for multilateralism in this conflict were raised in the early surveys .

For instance, in February 20, 2003, the administration asked several questions regarding the importance of supporting the UN in this dispute. When asked: *Do you agree or disagree with the Mexican position to support whatever the UNSC decides?*, 55% of the Mexicans declared that they agreed with that decision. This position was made even clearer when the following was asked: *The Mexican position has been to exhaust all the possibilities offered through the UN to disarm Iraq and reject any unilateral action initiated by the US, do you agree or disagree with the Mexican position?* In that case, more than 76% of the public agreed with the position adopted by the government.

The Fox administration overall was very concerned with the impact of the executive decision in this conflict. Questions regarding the approval rate of the president in different scenarios were recurrent. In one case, Mexicans were asked to rate the performance of the president if he was to support the

US position and, in the other case, if he opposed it. The results of the March 6, 2003 survey reveal that less than 30% of the population would agree with the president's performance if he decided to support the US, while more than 82% would agree with his performance in case he decided to oppose. Interestingly, by March 13, more than 46% of the population would approve the president's performance in this conflict if he supported the US and 82% would agree with him if he opposed the war. Evidently this change in the percentage of people that would support Fox if he decided to go with the American position made it difficult to interpret the public's position. Still the faction of people who would approve Fox's rejection of the war remained intact even if more Mexicans were willing to agree with a US-Mexican cooperation.

The approval rates regarding Fox's handling of the Iraq war were usually very high. However, it is notorious that in early March, 68% of the public considered that the president was managing the situation conveniently, but as the war became more and more imminent, the public appeared to request a more clear cut position on part of the executive, which resulted in a substantial reduction of those who approved Fox's handling of the situation to 61% in the March 13 poll. On the night of March 12, just before the poll, Vicente Fox had given an interview in one of the most widely seen news programs. When asked about the Mexican position to oppose the war and favor peace, Fox mentioned that:

[W]e are definitely in that same position and certainly walking in that direction without a stated compromise about the vote that could contribute to a peaceful solution. When it is time, we will always side with peace, as I have mentioned to several heads of state from several countries, even to president Bush. Our position is against unilateral decisions, against an automatic war and always in support of the United Nations and the Security Council (Presidencia de la República, 2003).

The president's answer seemed vague and undefined. The public reacted rapidly and the approval rate of Fox regarding the conflict fell 7% in less than a week. This became arguably a crucial moment for the executive and although a clear cut definition was no longer necessary given that the vote requirement in the UNSC had been aborted, the presidency decided to send a short but insightful communiqué on March 20, in which it said:

The Presidency of the Republic informs that today President Vicente Fox lamented the beginning of the war in Iraq and the fact that the disarmament of this country was not achieved through peaceful means. The President expressed his wish that the negative consequences of the war be the less bloody possible. The President of Mexico offered to work actively with the international community on the humanitarian tasks that are necessary.



Similarly considering that our country will preside over the UNSC next April, the President called for union in the construction of a peaceful and safe Middle East (Presidencia de la República, 2003).

The position was still moderate but it softly condemned the war in Iraq. The president seemed to finally take a decision regarding the role of Mexico instead of just relying on international law principles such as the peaceful solution of disputes, non intervention, international cooperation, among others. Throughout the period analyzed in this working paper, Fox became more vocal about the government's opposition to a US led invasion to Iraq and the need to respect the multilateral agreements reached in the UN. In that same interlude his overall approval rate improved considerably as the following table reveals:

DATE	QUESTION	ANSWER
February 20, 2003	In general do you completely agree, agree, disagree or completely disagree with the performance of Vicente Fox as president of Mexico to this date?	Completely agree 19.10% Agree 46.25% Disagree 21.54% Completely disagree 8.05% Don't know/No answer 5.06%
March 06, 2003	In general do you completely agree, agree, disagree or completely disagree with the performance of Vicente Fox as president of Mexico to this date?	Completely agree 10.16% Agree 57.97% Disagree 20.32% Completely disagree 5.18% Don't know/No answer 6.37%
March 13, 2003	In general do you completely agree, agree, disagree or completely disagree with the performance of Vicente Fox as president of Mexico to this date?	Completely agree 9.76% Agree 60.96% Disagree 20.92% Completely disagree 1.99% Don't know/No answer 6.37%
April 03, 2003	In general do you completely agree, agree, disagree or completely disagree with the performance of Vicente Fox as president of Mexico to this date?	Completely agree 14.34% Agree 57.57% Disagree 17.33% Completely disagree 2.99% Don't know/No answer 7.77%

Source: CIDE.

The percentage of people surveyed that completely agreed and agreed with the president's performance in the months before the invasion to Iraq increased gradually from 65.35% in February to 68.13% and 70.72% respectively in the March 6 and 13 surveys, and finally reached 71.91% in April 2003, once the war had started and the president had taken a position against the unilateral intervention led by the US. Although it is impossible to attribute this increase to the foreign policy adopted by the executive, it does show that Fox's decisions regarding the war against Iraq and not supporting the US did not lead to a severe penalization on presidential performance. Unfortunately, the direct effect of these foreign policy decisions on the results of the July 2003 midterm elections are difficult to assess: PAN, the president's party, lost

28% of the seats it obtained in the 2000 election, dropping from 207 representatives (41% of the 500 member chamber) to 149 seats (30% of the chamber).

#### ***4. Discussion of the Results***

This study reveals the importance that Vicente Fox attributed to public opinion regarding the Mexican position towards the Iraq war. The amount of surveys and in particular the questions related to the topic were significant during the prelude of the US invasion. Early during the process, the surveys were aimed at mapping the general position of Mexicans, the willingness to risk some tension in the bilateral relation as well as the relevance attributed to multilateralism. In the surveys to follow, questions became increasingly about the role of the president, the approval rate related to his handling of the international conflict and the consequences of adopting different opposite positions.

President Fox seemed to have relied heavily on the multilateral preferences of the Mexicans to frame his discourse and actions. He repeatedly argued that Mexico was first and foremost compromised with the resolutions of the United Nations and softly opposed the unilateral approach that the US was willing to adopt. Later on, Mexicans appeared to be looking for a more compromised and strong position in the international arena instead of the moderate and sometime vague attitude that characterized the administration. Fox then decided to pronounce himself against the war once the invasion was already under way and the vote in the UNSC was no longer an option. Even in that case, the president did not announce his repudiation of the war in a special press conference. He just sent a brief communiqué previously mentioned and took advantage of a few forums such as the "Ceremony for the Establishment of the Consultive Council for the Institute of Mexicans living Abroad" to declare his opposition to the war. Nevertheless, his position remained moderated and adopted a non confrontational attitude.

According to a senior Mexican public official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mexican public opinion "immensely influenced the decision not to support the US in the war against Iraq". The central reason for not supporting the war was that the Fox administration perceived, based on the surveys, that in the eyes of the Mexican public, it meant "that Mexico was joining the US in an unjust war". Domestic public opinion established the limits within which the Mexican government could act, excluding the possibility of backing a war that was not supported multilaterally, especially within the UNSC. Supporting the war with troops was out of the question. Enormous pressures were received at all the levels of the Mexican government by their US counterparts, including several telephone calls from President Bush to President Fox. However, due to the limits imposed by the public opinion's preferences, and

thus the huge costs in terms of popularity in case Mexico supported the US position, particularly when the July 2003 intermediate elections were only a few months away, the position to only support a multilateral intervention under the UN was maintained publicly.<sup>4</sup>

The public frictions between Mexico and the United States were substantial during the development of the war. However, paradoxically, the beginning of the war against Iraq significantly increased the importance of Mexico for the United States, as the security of its Southern border became an even higher priority for the United States, and thus, Mexican cooperation to guarantee it became imperative. Mexico provided no troops or funding for the war in Iraq; however, it cooperated extensively with the US to secure its border and widely shared intelligence information about nationals from Arab countries entering Mexico. Also, a few hours after the war against Iraq initiated, Mexico moved more than 10,000 troops to its northern and southern borders and other ports of entry, in order to protect them from possible terrorist infiltrations towards the US through Mexico. When Mexico assumed the presidency of the UNSC during the month of April 2003, there was a paralysis of resolutions in the Security Council regarding the war on Iraq, and in late May 2003, Mexico voted in favor of the resolution 1483 —promoted mainly by the United States—, which lifted sanctions against Iraq and established that the economic and political control of the country was a responsibility of the intervening forces, specifically the United States and Great Britain.

The frictions derived by the public discourses of both governments did not lead to official sanctions or retaliation from the United States against Mexico, though in the short term, some symbolic actions were taken to signal the diplomatic distancing between the presidents. For example, there was a four day delay by President Bush to answer President Fox's phone call, the May 5<sup>th</sup> celebration in the White House was cancelled on 2003, and the US postponed an already scheduled bilateral meeting between both presidents for a few months.

In sum, the relation between Mexico and the United States during the months that followed the intervention against Iraq was characterized by some frictions in front of the spotlights —mainly due to the Mexican official position resulting from their reading of public opinion preferences—, and cooperation behind them —due to the “special relation” between the two countries—, even though this cooperation was mostly centered on the issue of US territorial security and not in supporting the US war effort in Iraq.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Juan Antonio Leclercq, Chief of Staff of the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs (2003-2006), conducted by Jorge A. Schiavon on June 24, 2008.

## *Conclusions*

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Mexican public opinion during the prelude of the US invasion to Iraq was overwhelmingly against supporting the war. Mexicans were convinced that Iraq needed to be disarmed (74%) but they wanted it done with the mediation of the United Nations. Despite common wisdom, the lack of support of the American position was not a result of anti-American feelings. Mexicans tended to have favorable impressions of admiration and closeness for their northern neighbor as shown in this working paper. In particular, Mexicans had become emphatic and sympathetic to the US after the September 11 terrorist attacks. It then became necessary for Vicente Fox to elucidate how these favorable feelings could affect the position with regards to the US-Iraq conflict and, in particular, how they would interact combined with other important variables such as the strong support of multilateralism and fears of economic retaliation.

The administration ran several surveys with a significant amount of questions related to the Iraq conflict and the role that Mexico had to play as an international actor and as a member of the UNSC, and how it needed to interact with its most important international partner. Vicente Fox was also quite concerned with his performance and how people rated his handling of the conflict. Overall the president clearly used the polls for two different purposes. First, to recognize the position of public opinion in relationship to the war to identify the extent of disapproval/support for the US position, to assess the fear that the public had of US retaliation in case Mexico decided to disagree with such an important partner, and to evaluate Mexicans' willingness to absorb some possible economic and social cost of confronting the American position. Second, the polls were useful to retrace the public's perception regarding Fox's handling of the conflict and maintain a thermometer of the overall approval rate.

In that context, Fox had to deal with two dimensions, as did most of the world leaders: the international context, especially the relation with the US, and the domestic arena. The public was clearly in disagreement with the unilateral approach adopted and very much in favor of resolving the conflict through the United Nations. The president perceived the importance of multilateralism early in the process and he recurrently mentioned it. Multilateralism became in that sense an important boundary for the Fox speech. As shown in this working paper, public opinion polls also helped the president to set the tone of his discourse. Whenever his "crafted talk" became too moderate or vague, polls reminded him that the public was firm with respect to their overwhelming rejection of the US position.

An important aspect that has to be underlined and that represents the main contribution of this working paper is our further understanding of the

reasons why Fox's discourse and overall approach became so restrained, even if the public's opinion was so clearly against the invasion of Iraq and the electoral stakes were quite considerable. This analysis helps show how Fox resorted to the public to figure out a way to make his moderate position more acceptable to Mexicans, while at the same time protecting his administration from the American downfalls of a clearly dissident position. The president crafted his talk around the concept of multilateralism, pacifism and the respect of international instances, in particular the United Nations. This way he avoided confronting the Mexican public and the American hegemony.

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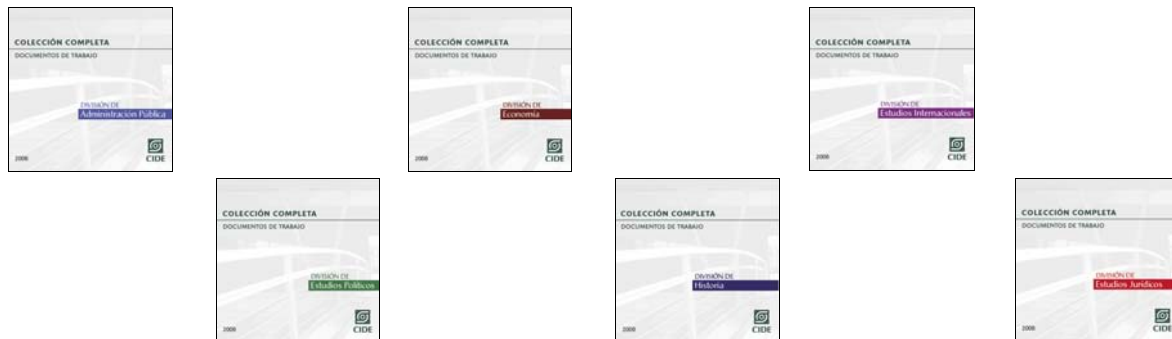
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