

## Report

### President-elect Donald Trump and Latin America

*Ramon Blanco\**

**29 November 2016**





Protesters rallied against Trump's immigration policies before his visit to Mexico prior to his election [Reuters]

## Abstract

Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States. In order to understand the importance of this event, one has to take into account not only US domestic issues, but also contextualize it into the international scenario. As a consequence of his campaign rhetoric and actions, and the fact that the United States is a major power in international politics, the world, in general, and Latin America, in particular, held its breath in anxiety with his victory. The discussion of these elements is precisely the point of this article.

## Introduction

Contradicting most opinion's polls, with the exception of the poll developed by the Los Angeles Times in collaboration with the University of Southern California Dornsife,<sup>(1)</sup> Donald Trump was elected the 45th President of the United States (US).<sup>(2)</sup> This occurred even though his adversary, Hillary Clinton, had more votes nationwide. In an election driven by an electoral college, where each state has a number of delegates, Trump obtained more than the 270 delegates necessary to win. He is not alone in this situation. In fact, Trump will be the fourth US President in the history to have lost the popular vote.<sup>(3)</sup>

In addition to winning the White House, Trump is expected to have a friendly Congress – his party maintained the majority of the seats in both the House of Representatives<sup>(4)</sup> and the Senate.<sup>(5)</sup> Whether this means that President Trump will actually be successful in passing his proposals in the Congress, it remains to be seen. However, since Donald Trump based his candidature on xenophobic, protectionist and fearful assertions, this scenario already made November 9th, 2016, a day when whole world held its breath in

anxiety. In order to comprehensively apprehend Trump's victory, one has to, in addition to perceiving its own US domestic elements, contextualize it into a wider international environment. When one does that, it clearly emerges that Trump's victory has a direct impact on Latin America.

### **Domestic Elements of Donald Trump's Victory**

When one takes into account the domestic sphere of Donald Trump's victory, perhaps the very first element that emerges is the role of the media. Trump was very successful in attracting the media attention, good or bad, towards him. He, a reality-show star, was a master in promoting his political views, even the most terrifying ones such as deporting thousands of migrants from the US, if elected, which sounded very palatable to the media. Even when the media was making fun of him as a viable candidate, Trump was constantly in the spotlight. Consequently, the so-called fourth power, which should in principle hold power accountable, provided the candidate Trump a wide and continuous media coverage. Nevertheless, even though the media coverage is a part of the picture, it only scratches the surface of the domestic elements that led Donald Trump to victory.

An important part of Donald Trump's victory, on the one hand, was related to his opponent Hillary Clinton. To different segments of the population, the former Secretary of State simply did not have any appeal at all. To those that had voted for Bernie Sanders during the Democrat primaries, she embodied a close link to Wall Street and big corporations. This represented everything that Sanders and his supporters campaigned against, which made her campaign something hard to be an enthusiast. Indeed, Wikileaks released a series of emails that exposed a discrepancy between her public and private positions on a number of issues, such as trade, which led Sanders' supporters to question whether someone so close to the financial elite, and who had received more than US\$26.1m in speaking fees, could ever check the power of Wall Street.<sup>(6)</sup> In addition, Hillary was not perceived by part of the population as trustworthy. In fact, she had lower trustworthiness' rates than Donald Trump.<sup>(7)</sup> One issue that collaborated for this was the fact that she had used her personal email server while she was Secretary of State and was investigated by the FBI<sup>(8)</sup> for this.<sup>(9)</sup> Therefore, the fact that the FBI reopened the investigation, a few days before the election,<sup>(10)</sup> only reinforced this perception.

On the other hand, Donald Trump managed to construe his campaign image as the voice of the voiceless working class. Consequently, he successfully performed a political oxymoron –a billionaire politically positioning himself as the vocal outlet for the average American dissatisfactions. Whether his supporters actually configure a working class, it is open for debate.<sup>(11)</sup> However, the most important part of his base, white men, had its

annual income nearly unchanged since the early 1970's. Concomitantly, whereas the annual income of white men has not substantially improved in decades, other segments, such as white women and black/white men, although still earning much less than white men, have an increasing tendency in their annual income.(12) Donald Trump's campaign efficaciously capitalized this opened political window.

The same thing happened with the workers of the manufacturing industry. This is a segment that suffered over the last decade. The segment, on the one hand, observed its jobs going abroad due to the outsourcing of manufacturing companies to lower-cost countries and, on the other hand, the jobs that remained were paying less than they were used to in the past.(13) Donald Trump's campaign understood it and reinforced his rhetoric of 'bringing-jobs-back' narrative. It worked. Not by coincidence, Donald Trump won in key states of the so-called 'Rust Belt'. Indeed, states that had conducted Barack Obama to the White House in 2008, and kept him there in 2012, voted for the republican. This was the case of Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. This, in addition to the change that also happened in Florida down South, was mortal to Hillary Clinton.

### **Trump's Victory as a Symptom of our Time**

The election of Trump – due to his xenophobic, chauvinist and nationalist rhetoric – evinces the darkest face of the most prominent economic and military power of the world. However, understanding this phenomenon as something strictly American is misleading. It is much more accurate to contextualize it in the current international zeitgeist and understand the victory of Donald Trump to the most powerful office in the world as a symptom of our time. His election is further evidence, of the failures of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in the international scenario.(14)

Observing international politics nowadays, it is quite hard to believe, and very easy to forget, that neoliberalism was not always the structuring force of life throughout the world. To remain in the recent past, right after the Great Depression in 1929, for instance, Keynesianism was the economic framework that shaped politics throughout the world(15) and remained so until the 1970's. It is true that one of the first countries to comprehensively apply neoliberal policies was Chile in South America. In fact, Augusto Pinochet's Chile functioned as a sort of a guinea pig for the 'Chicago Boys' – the graduates from the University of Chicago, which is the most important intellectual powerhouse of this economic framework. Nevertheless, neoliberalism started to take the global stage as a dominant ideology in the late 1970's with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (1979) and Ronald Reagan in the United States (1980).

They started to push for neoliberal policies in their countries and around the world. This was when, on the one hand, practices such as deregulation, massive tax reduction for the rich, privatization, outsourcing of companies, free-trade, austerity, dismantling of public services and so on were incentivised; and, on the other hand, practices such as taxes, state programmes, union activities, and so on were constantly blocked. In fact, in many countries the introduction of the neoliberal agenda was done with a great degree of violence.<sup>(16)</sup> As a result, apart from the rich, the world observed a rise in poverty, unemployment, concentration of income and wealth and inequality, after decades of decline. Moreover, economic growth under the neoliberal dominance was much slower than the preceding decades. This was especially hard for the middle class and the workers, including the ones from developed countries.

This scenario, in addition to producing a deep anger, opens the space for nationalist and xenophobic groups and individuals to galvanise supporters, channel a wide range of frustrations and consequently, benefit from this in different elections around the world. Therefore, it is myopic to dissociate the election of Donald Trump in the United States from the long-term process that led to the international financial crisis in 2008, the increasing of the extreme-right and nationalist populism across Europe, both in national and European Parliaments – as it is perceived, for instance, with the Freedom Party in Austria, Swiss People’s Party in Switzerland, The Finns in Finland, the Jobbik in Hungary, the Golden Dawn in Greece, Independence Party in the United Kingdom, and Marine Le Pen in France<sup>(17)</sup> – and more recently, the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union.

### **President Trump and Latin America**

The election of Donald Trump will have a profound impact in international politics. One can mention, for instance, the possibility of a trade war with China, the relations with Russia impacting directly the matters in Ukraine and Syria, or the threat made to US military allies at NATO,<sup>(18)</sup> leaving the countries of Eastern Europe apprehensive, if not vulnerable, of a muscle flexing from Russia. Nevertheless, due to the proximity and to some of the major issues vocalized during the campaign, one of the places that is most distressed with Trump’s victory is Latin America.

With regards to Latin America, there are two dimensions that should be considered – the region as a whole and the countries individually. In regards to the former, one has to observe the trading pattern of the region. Latin America is a major exporter of products – above all commodities such as oil, metals and food<sup>(19)</sup> – to many parts of the world. It is true that, in the recent past, China has been increasing its position, reaching the second or even the first position, as a trading partner of several Latin-American countries. Notwithstanding, the region still has the US as the major destination of most

of its products. Indeed, some countries export more than 70% of its products to the United States. Consequently, a protectionist United States, which it is expected from the presidency of Donald Trump, directly and negatively impacts the region.

With regards to the latter, considering countries individually, the case that perhaps most stands out is Mexico. A tense relationship between the United States and Mexico is expected, to say the least. The issues are plenty. To start with, Mexico exports 80% of its products to the US. Consequently, Trump's campaign promises of discouraging US companies of investing in the country, renegotiating NAFTA(20) and not advancing TPP(21) – something very in line with his political base in the US Rust Belt – will severely impact Mexico. Nevertheless, one should not forget that the latter, not advancing TPP, would also disturb, for instance, the economies of Peru and Chile, since they are highly invested on the TPP agreement.

Nevertheless, the major issues with Mexico I certainly about building a wall on the border – and making Mexico pay for its construction– and, the issue of migration. As a candidate, Donald Trump promised to deport millions of undocumented migrants and most of them are Mexicans. If both campaign promises are implemented, or even one of them, it will, for obvious reasons, profoundly jeopardise the US-Mexican relations. Notwithstanding, the issue of migration affects many other countries in the region. Many countries in Central America – for instance Haiti, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Cuba, and so on – have many of its people living, documented and undocumented, in the United States.

Another relationship that is expected to have a setback is the one with Cuba. It is true that the US is still far from restabilising a normal relationship with the country. This would necessarily entail interrupt immediately and completely the US embargo on Cuba. However, the normalization path was set when on December 17th 2014 President Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced that the United States and Cuba would restore full diplomatic relations,(22) a deal brokered by Pope Francis. After that, the US agreed to ease some restrictions regarding Cuba, such as travel and remittances. The process culminated with the reopening of embassies in both countries and the visit of President Obama to Cuba on March 2016, the first of a sitting President in over eighty-five years. All of this is in danger under the presidency of Donald Trump. It is highly plausible to believe that Trump will perform a reversal in this approximation process. He already hinted at this during the campaign and also an important part of his political base – the older generation of the Cuban-American community in Florida, an important state in the electoral math that gave Trump a win – are more hard-line towards Cuba and opposes this process. Since the relationship with Cuba is a fundamental issue in the international politics of the region, this is expected to poison the US relations with the whole of Latin

America and to put at risk the US position at major political issues in the region, such as the Peace Deal in Colombia.

In any normal election process, it is expected that the elected ones fulfil the promises made during the campaign. With Donald Trump, the opposite occurs. Due to those reasons aforementioned, the mere perception that he actually executes what was promised leaves a significant part of the world population continuing to hold its breath.

---

Copyright © 2016 Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.

\***Ramon Blanco** is a Researcher and Professor at the Federal University of Latin-American Integration (Brazil), where he coordinates the Peace Studies Research Group and also the Chair in Peace Studies.

## References

- (1) See <http://cesrusc.org/election/> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (2) See <http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/president> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (3) The other Presidents were: George W. Bush (2000), Benjamin Harrison (1888) and Rutherford B. Hayes (1876).
- (4) See <http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/house> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (5) See <http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/senate> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (6) See, for instance <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/email-leaks-show-hillary-clinton-pro-free-trade-161008132127028.html> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (7) See, for instance <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/06/politics-zone-injection/trump-vs-clinton-presidential-polls-election-2016/>
- (8) Acronym for Federal Bureau of Investigation.
- (9) See, for instance <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/hillary-clinton-private-email-160525154002928.html> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (10) See, for instance <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/fbi-clinton-emails-investigation-161028185242864.html> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (11) See, for instance <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-mythology-of-trumps-working-class-support/> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (12) See, for instance <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/05/13/what-we-mean-when-we-say-donald-trumps-supporters-are-struggling/> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (13) See, for instance <http://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trumps-promise-of-bringing-back-jobs-worked-with-many-michigan-voters-1478728229> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (14) For more regarding the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in the international scenario, see, for instance, D. Jones (2012) *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press).
- (15) For more regarding the thinking of John Maynard Keynes see, for instance, R. Skidelsky (2009) *Keynes: The Return of the Master* (London: Allen Lane).
- (16) See N. Klein (2007) *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Picador).

- (17) See, for instance <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006> (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (18) Acronym for North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
- (19) For a discussion about the Latin-American dependency on commodities, see for instance [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/otaviano-canuto/how-commodity-dependent-are-latin-american-economies\\_b\\_7547216.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/otaviano-canuto/how-commodity-dependent-are-latin-american-economies_b_7547216.html) (accessed November 15th 2016).
- (20) Acronym for North America Free Trade Agreement.
- (21) Acronym for Trans-Pacific Partnership.
- (22) For more on the relationship between the US and Cuba see for instance <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p11113> (accessed November 15th 2016).