

SHARING SPACE WITH OUR HEMISPHERIC PARTNERS:

A LATINO PERSPECTIVE ON
U.S. POLICY TOWARD LATIN AMERICA

Final Report of the Latino Leadership Task Force

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Latino Leadership Task Force

Task Force members join a consensus signifying that they endorse the general policy thrust and judgments contained in this report, though not necessarily every finding and recommendation. They do so as individuals. Institutional affiliations are listed for identification purposes only and do not represent endorsement of the report by a Task Force member's place of affiliation or any of its sponsors. Each Task Force member also has the option of putting forward an additional or dissenting view for inclusion in the final report.

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Foreword

We are grateful to the Pacific Council on International Policy for conceptualizing, convening and supporting this Task Force, and to the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute for its partnership throughout the duration of the project. Dr. Pamela K. Starr's work in distilling the group's consensus and drafting this written report was invaluable to the Task Force.

With this report, we urge policy makers to embrace the many positive changes taking place in our hemisphere, and to engage the Latino community as partners in the effort. It is our hope that the recommendations contained in the report will spur concrete policy action to enhance partnerships throughout the hemisphere, and additionally contribute to an ongoing policy dialogue that better reflects the changing demographics of the United States. In the current climate, as the United States seeks to create jobs for American workers and solve a myriad of economic challenges, this dialogue will be imperative, but it will only become more important in the future.

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Sharing Space with our
Hemispheric Partners:
A Latino Perspective
on U.S. Policy toward
Latin America

Executive Summary

Latin America matters greatly to the United States and to the everyday lives of its residents. Yet U.S. policy has generally treated the region as an afterthought and most Americans tend to see Latin America, if they think of it at all, as a source of problems for the United States rather than a region filled with opportunities. Most U.S. Hispanics, by contrast, for reasons of history, lan-

A Latino-inspired policy toward Latin America would actively engage the region's rising global actors to augment the weight and legitimacy of U.S. global diplomatic initiatives, and it would strengthen existing security cooperation based on "shared responsibility" without neglecting the economic dimension of the problems faced. And a Latino-inspired policy would take immediate steps to implement a sweeping overhaul of U.S. immigration policy that balances labor market efficiencies and social justice, moves immediately towards the full integration of all undocumented residents of the United States into the mainstream of U.S. society, and promotes ever more vibrant relations between sending and receiving communities.

The Latino Voice and Its Importance to U.S.-Latin American Relations

When Americans think about our neighbors to the south, they sometimes tend to conjure images of poverty and violence, or of uncontrolled waves of undocumented migrants, and of threats to U.S. national security. Yet Latin America today is dominated by healthy market economies generating rapid growth, declining poverty, growing middle classes, and increased technological sophistication. It is a place where the flow of illegal migration north has plummeted in recent years. It is a region dominated by stable democracies, despite a large and troubling increase in crime and violence, and by governments that are mostly friendly toward the United States, albeit accompanied by a handful of regional adversaries.

Latin America of the 21st century is a complex collection of countries that create significant economic and diplomatic opportunities for the United States alongside real security challenges. In this setting, the United States cannot lose sight of the opportunity by focusing excessively on the challenges. This is something that Latinos, for reasons of history, language, culture, and family ties, clearly understand. It is time for policymakers to take advantage of the informed wisdom of this increasingly important segment of the U.S. population.

The transformation of Latinos from a minority group to a weighty segment of the U.S. population is well underway. Today, Latinos make up 16% of the total population, and in 25 years they will comprise a quarter of Americans.¹ They were 7.5% of the electorate in 2008, a number that the National Association of Latino Elected Officials estimates will grow to 8.7% for the 2012 elections and continue to expand rapidly in the years ahead.² Latinos occupy a rapidly growing number of elected offices in the country – nearly 6,000 in 2011 – reflecting a 53% increase over 15 years.³

On the economic front, the U.S. Latino economy is valued at over \$1 trillion, a market larger than

A Latino-influenced policy would give higher priority to further integrating our foreign policy with many of our own domestic issues, such as protecting energy security through joint energy development in hemisphere, and strengthening the rule of law, law enforcement, and judicial institutions and administration. It would be more attuned to the role of economic integration and partnerships in stimulating economic development, and to how rising living standards in Latin America positively impact issues that directly affect the everyday lives of Americans, such as migration, drugs, crime, and jobs. And it would emphasize achieving comprehensive immigration reform in a way that not only mobilizes cross-border human capital flows, but also recognizes that labor mobility is an element of the complex economic interconnectedness between the United States and Latin America. As such, a successful immigration policy must be integrated into a comprehensive policy for regional security, growth, and development.

A Latino-influenced foreign policy would emphasize the new reality of the Americas – that we live in a shared space with our regional neighbors; that our future well-being depends increasingly on their well-being; that the solutions to many of our foreign and domestic policy challenges depend on working with regional partners; and that we need a 21st century policy that reflects the current policy context and its challenges at home and abroad.

New Hemispheric Opportunities and Challenges for the United States

Latin America matters to the United States. Latin America's proximity to the United States makes it inevitably important to U.S. national security. But the region also matters as an economic partner. Latin America matters to the dynamically United States

commerce in several countries, security no longer dominates Latin America's significance for the United States. Latin America instead matters mostly as a region full of potential economic partners that can enhance U.S. global competitiveness and job creation, prospective allies that can reinforce U.S. international influence, and fellow democracies that can strengthen the global image of democracy and human rights. In the early 21st century Latin America matters to the United States as much as Asia, a region on which U.S. policy-makers seem to be fixated. U.S. policy must reflect the large and growing significance of Latin America to U.S. economic and political interests.

Economic Opportunities in Our Neighborhood

Latin America's considerable and growing economic relevance to the United States is often overlooked amid daily news headlines dominated by "drugs and thugs". Latin America as a region weathered the 2008 global financial crisis better than most of the rest of the world. After a brief downturn in late 2008 and early 2009, Latin America experienced strong and steady growth in 2010 and 2011 – around 5.9% and 4.3% respectively – growth rates similar to the East Asian Tigers. The drivers of this recovery are the same factors responsible for a region-wide economic expansion of nearly 5 percent from 2003-2008 – strong export performances coupled with rising domestic demand.⁴

Steady growth and innovative social policies have helped lift an estimated 40 million Latin Americans out of poverty between 2002 and 2008.⁵ Although Latin America remains the second most unequal region in the world in terms of income distribution (and is home to some of the wealthiest individuals in the world), it now includes a vibrant and growing middle class that hungers for cars, cell phones, computers, flat screen TVs, and other luxuries of middle class living. This demand translates into a stable source of domestic economic growth, but in open market economies it also generates a market for a wide range of imported goods. At a time when export-driven job creation has become an increasingly important feature of the U.S. economy, the rise of the Latin American middle class presents an opportunity to expand U.S. exports and thereby create jobs.

The United States has begun to take advantage of this opportunity, but it needs to do more. In part due to having signed trade agreements with our most important Latin American trading partners, U.S. trade with Latin America grew by 82% between 1998 and 2009, faster than trade with any other region of the world, including Asia. Today, Latin America accounts for about one-fifth of total U.S. merchandise trade, and absorbs more U.S. exports than Europe. Mexico alone imports more goods from the United States than does China, accounting for more than 10% of total U.S. exports.⁶ But U.S. trade with Brazil, the world's sixth largest economy, continues to lag – China, not the United States, is Brazil's principal trading partner⁷ – and overall the United States has failed to promote trade opportunities in Latin America with the same vigor as in Asia.

Policy Recommendations

To more effectively engage politically with our Latin American neighbors, a Latino-inspired approach to regional diplomacy would:

1. Strengthen democratic institutions from the national to the local level (and in the United States as well as in Latin American countries) and ensure the protection of human rights throughout the hemisphere in close collaboration with our neighbors.
2. Aggressively promote educational and cultural exchanges by simplifying the U.S. visa application and review process required for cultural and educational exchanges, and by working in partnership with Latin American countries to develop new initiatives that support educational exchange.
3. Promulgate education policies at home that further language training in Spanish and Portuguese to encourage bilingualism.

New Security Challenges

If Latin America (particularly its northern tier) is not populated by stable and prosperous partners, U.S. security can never be fully assured. Although the direct threat to U.S. security emanating from Latin America is currently limited, the United States cannot ignore the alliances some countries have forged with Iran, or the dramatic expansion of Chinese influence in such a strategically significant region. Yet the growth of organized crime throughout Latin America is an even more

Mexico reached zero following the recession, meaning that the number of arriving migrants was matched by the number returning home.¹¹ These developments suggest that the United States is unlikely to see another immigrant surge of the proportions experienced at the turn of this century.

But the U.S. economy continues to attract migrant labor, both low-skilled and high-skilled, suggesting that a recovering U.S. economy is likely to be associated with a renewed inflow of job seekers from Latin America. Further, since the current U.S. immigration policy framework does not provide for an adequate, orderly inflow of either labor or family reunification migration, the result is undocumented migration. In other words, the currently reduced inflow of undocumented

the vibrant linkages that have been forged among individuals, families and communities in the United States and Latin America.

It is time for the U.S. government to openly acknowledge that, for now, the United States continues to rely on imported labor, most of it emanating from Latin America. It is time for the U.S. government to accept that deporting undocumented migrants in record numbers has produced troubling consequences, not only for the U.S. economy, but also for families that have been divided and U.S. citizen children who have departed with their parents and now live in a foreign land.

It is time for the U.S. government to admit that deportations and enhanced border security do not comprise an effective or fair enforcement strategy. More to the point, U.S. policy must recognize the fact that enforcement alone cannot compensate for the absence of legal channels for migration. There is a growing consensus that the border is more controlled today than at any time since large-scale illegal immigration began in the late 20th century, yet this is matched by clear evidence that managing migratory labor flows is impossible without balancing enforcement with legal paths for immigration. If there are job opportunities, job seekers will be motivated to migrate. Similarly, if separated family members face nightmarish waits and bureaucratic roadblocks in the immigration system, they will find other means to reunite.

Most of all, it is long past time that the U.S. government found a just and workable solution for the 11 million people currently residing in the United States without legal status. The Obama Administration's recent decision to defer deportation for some young people who were brought to this country as children is a significant beginning; but it is only a small, temporary and partial step forward. Until the entire unauthorized population has a path out of the shadows, pernicious effects will spread throughout our society. As workers, parents, tenants, consumers, and in many other roles, unauthorized migrants are denied basic protections or are afraid to exercise their rights. They suffer, but so does the rest of the U.S. population, and a Latino perspective on immigration sees legalization for the unauthorized as a benefit for all Americans. Moreover, the demonization of unauthorized immigrants causes harm to all Americans. It has coarsened our civic discourse and eroded the basic respect for all human beings on which our democracy is based. Latinos will not tolerate these circumstances as a matter of principle, but also because they well know that the demonization of a few often leads to discrimination against many.

The federal government's long failure to reform the immigration system has allowed dissatisfaction and suspicion to fester, and now we see the results in a rash of state and local efforts to regulate immigration. Deciding who is allowed to live in the country is quintessentially a federal function. That is what the U.S. Supreme Court forcefully declared in its decision last June striking

and undocumented migrants as well as Hispanic U.S. citizens, and have needlessly antagonized our neighbors to the south.

policy toward Latin America would naturally make reform of the U.S. immigration system a paramount concern. Such reform is essential to enhancing the efficiency of U.S. labor markets, to integrating undocumented residents into U.S. society, and to attesting to the U.S. willingness to partner with our Latin American neighbors by developing guest worker programs that respond to U.S. labor demands while protecting worker rights.

Enlightened self-interest demands that the United States engage with Latin America more actively and more effectively. This requires U.S. policymakers to place Latin America at the center of the U.S. foreign policy agenda, to focus sharply on regional opportunities while responding to problems, and to engage Latin American countries as partners with whom we share hemispheric space. It ultimately obliges policymakers to listen to the voice of U.S. Hispanics, as reflected in this report.

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