Talking Over the Wall

A Contact Theory Analysis of Mexicans’ Opinions of The U.S.A.

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**Abstract**: Mexican opinions of Americans can be influenced by many factors including increased social contact with Americans, but previous literature shows that not all forms of social contact are created equal. This study supports that more social contact increases Mexicans’ favorability towards Americans; however, personal contact (ex. having American friends) is not as strong as the influence of general cultural contact (ex. tourism and watching American t.v. shows). Given current US - Mexican relations, this study suggests increasing consumption of American culture as a way to increase foreign perceptions of Americans and US international influence.

# Introduction

Public opinion is a tricky phenomenon to predict. From presidential approval ratings to propensities to vote, polling companies frequently and often estimate what populations think of ideas and why they think as such. As the world has become more interconnected via globalization and especially the internet, one key measurement that has multiple implications for international relations is public opinion of foreign countries. How do people think of foreigners living beyond their borders, and why do they create such opinions? Among other explanations, many scholars believe that contact between foreign countries and populations has a direct influence on domestic perceptions. In our ever-globalizing world, this begs the question: can increased interaction with a foreign country and its people change one’s opinions of it?

Social contact theory predicts that people who have more contact with a foreign country should hold higher positive opinions of those foreigners. This theory holds even more importance for countries which share borders and have the potential to have a higher level of contact simply due to closeness. The USA and Mexico share such a border, and there seems to be much potential for contact to change the public opinions of each country given such close proximities and trading connections. This research will specifically look into how Mexican public opinion of Americans can be changed through increased social contact.

The main research question of this paper is “will Mexicans who have increased contact with the USA and its people hold more favorable opinions about Americans?” Increased contact is hypothesized to have a significant and positive effect on Mexicans’ favorable opinions of Americans. Contact can occur in many different circumstances, and there are numerous ways in which Americans and Mexicans can interact. Different forms of contact can range in their intensities of quality and closeness with an outside group. Separating contact into two forms (general cultural and personal contact), this study hypothesizes that both forms of contact will have significant and positive effects on Mexicans’ attitudes towards Americans. Although former research has found that personal contact between these two countries has a more significant effect than other less personal forms of contact, this research will attempt to strengthen the argument that forms other than personal contact can in fact increase favorable views towards outgroups. Given the increased public debate on immigration and relations with Mexico, this research can help inform policies in both countries that could lead to more peaceful interactions instead of increased prejudice.

If increased contact with Americans is shown to increase favorability towards them, this can support international policies that increase contact between the two nations such as Peace Corps, study abroad scholarships, and work visas. If one form of contact shows greater positive effects than the other, politicians can increase funding to programs that increase favorability between the two countries. In light of Donald Trump’s inflammatory comments about Mexico including numerous racial epithets and rhetoric of building a wall, this area of research is highly relevant and needed in our current political climate. Optimistically, contact with Americans can counteract the negative rhetoric which many politicians like Mr. Trump have been using, and fortunately, there is a large body of literature demonstrating the many potential benefits to intergroup contact.

# Literature Review

## Intergroup Contact Theory

Seen as the founding work on Contact Theory, Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice* established how ingroup and outgroups form their attitudes towards each other. Allport (1954) theorized that intergroup contact has a positive effect on the relationship between groups when four conditions of the contact situation were present: shared common goals, intergroup cooperation, equal group status within the situation, and support of authorities, laws or customs. When one of these conditions is not present, the prejudice between groups has the potential to increase with more contact. However, some argue that not only these conditions of contact need be present to increase intergroup favorability.

Others proposed more conditions that were necessary to increase favorability via contact. Cook (1962) believed that the type of contact situation, representatives of the outgroups, and the characteristics of specific subjects could affect the ways in which intergroup prejudice is reduced. Simply having intergroup contact is sometimes not seen as enough; more personalized, intimate, and participatory contact between members of different groups has been shown to reduce prejudice (Cook, 1962; Schild, 1962; Wilner et al., 1955). Also when group membership is salient and known between the groups, more positive outcomes from intergroup contact are likely (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). In a sense, predicting the effect of contact on reducing prejudice is a difficult task to undertake because of the many contingencies inherent in intergroup interactions, and there are many processes through which intergroup contact can have an effect on attitudes towards outgroups.

Pettigrew (1998) stated that there are four interrelated processes of contact which mediate attitude change: learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal. Evidence that goes against stereotypes of outgroups can only change attitudes if 1) the outgroup’s behavior does not match with the previous stereotype, 2) the evidence occurs in many situations, and 3) the outgroup members are seen as typical (Rothbart & John, 1985). This behavior change of an individual including outgroup members more in activities creates more favorable intergroup attitudes, and repeating such interactions can consolidate this attitude change (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997). Although much anxiety occurs in these initial encounters between groups (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), continued encounters can reduce anxiety and increase positive emotions like empathy which lead to increased positive attitudes and affective ties with the outgroup (Pettigrew, 1998). In addition, ingroup reappraisal occurs when the individual begins to take less pride of in his/her ingroup and creates more positive attitudes towards the outgroup (Pettigrew, 1997). Through these processes, individuals begin to change their previously formed attitudes of outgroups. Additionally as predicted by integrated threat theory, contact can reduce prejudice when it reduces the perceived threats by the outgroup (Stephan et al., 1999). Using these processes, many intergroup relations have been studied through contact theory.

## History of Contact Theory on Intergroup Relations

Much ink has been spilled on hypothesizing and testing contact theory in the last two centuries, but how much support has it garnered when applied to real world intergroup relations? Ford (1986) reviewed 53 papers on contact theory and found that although there was some support of contact leading to positive intergroup outcomes, the research did not accurately represent contact situations from daily life. Not satisfied with this result, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reviewed 515 studies and concluded that intergroup contact does reduce intergroup prejudice. Even when all of Allport’s four conditions are not present, most studies report positive contact effects (Pettigrew, 1998). The interactions between many different groups have been studied throughout history.

Before contact theory was even established, studies were being conducted in the early 1900s in the United States mostly dealing with race relations. During this time of Jim Crow laws and the popularity of eugenics, the initial social inquiries did not hold many positive views of intergroup contact. Baker (1934) believed that interracial contact would only create negative outcomes by furthering resentment between races, and Sims & Patrick (1936) found that attitudes of white northerners towards blacks decreased after they moved to the more racially diverse south. Although the initial outcomes of intergroup contact looked bleak, more studies were conducted after WWII with some showing more promise.

Brophy (1946) found that the more voyages that white seamen shared with black seamen, the more positive these white seamen’s attitudes would become about blacks. Not only were the benefits of intergroup contact seen on the high seas; as more whites and blacks began to live together in public housing neighborhoods in the United States, studies began to support that increased contact via living in shared housing with blacks increased whites’ positive racial views of blacks (Deutsch & Collins, 1951; Wilner et al., 1955). These interracial studies were the first to come after Allport’s formal founding of Contact Theory in 1954, and they showed mostly positive results (Amir, 1969; Works, 1961; Wilner et al., 1955).

Wilner et al. (1955) studied interracial public housing and found that multiple interactions and engaging in conversations with black neighbors increased whites’ opinions of blacks, but merely living with blacks and engaging in casual greetings did not have as much power at increasing favorable opinions. It seemed that personal contact was more important than impersonal to reduce prejudice. Although many interracial studies showed positive results, other interracial housing studies did not show as much potential for intergroup contact to reduce racial prejudice (Bradburn et al., 1971; Meer & Freedman, 1966). After these interracial contact studies, more intergroup relations have been studied such as people with and without disabilities (Harper et al., 1985), young and elderly (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010), gay and straight (Herek & Capitanio 1996), and different religions (Craig et al., 2002). In addition to the above groups, intergroup contact between nations and ethnic groups has been heavily studied due to its importance for international affairs between states.

## Contact Theory Between Nations

Some of the biggest ingroups that can be imagined are the pooled citizens of a country gathered around an identity of a nation. Sometimes these ties to national identities can be stronger or weaker depending on many different aspects of the individual, but one could say that national identity is a strong ingroup for most people. There are many ways for a citizenry to have contact with foreigners from different nations. Study abroad experiences, tourist vacations, learning foreign languages, working-abroad experiences, foreign media consumption, and intercultural programs are just some of the ways that one can have contact with different countries. According to contact theory, the potential for this contact to reduce intergroup prejudice between nations is immense.

In a study about the impact of study abroad on individuals, Paige et al. (2009) found that levels of international civic engagement increased as a result of study abroad experiences. The authors explained that this increased civic engagement is only possible due to the reduction in prejudice that occurs when students interact with an outgroup culture. In another study by Thomlison (1991), study abroad experiences were shown to create substantial and positive changes in attitudes and general appreciation of other cultures. Semester at Sea experiences, programs in which students take courses while travelling to many countries via ship, have also been shown to increase attitudes towards other cultures because of their more personal contact via situations like cultural events and local home visits (Welds & Dukes, 1985). Because study abroad is an interactive and long term experience with a culture, this intuitively makes sense, but what if the individual is only in another country for a short time?

Tourism has also shown positive results on reducing prejudice, and tourism has an important role in creating peaceful relations even between hostile nations (Kim & Prideaux, 2006). Tourism creates the opportunity for enhanced intercultural contact which mostly promotes positive intergroup attitudes (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005); however, not all agree that tourism can induce such positive attitude changes. In a study of Jewish-Israeli tourists visiting Egypt, Amir and Ben-Ari (1985) found that tourism did increase tourists’ views of Egyptians’ social dimensions, but it created negative opinions about Egyptians’ intellectual dimensions. Also, in a study of US students who toured the USSR, Americans’ attitudes did not change from the tour (Pizam et al., 1991). Therefore, it seems that more than just sheer contact influences attitudinal change, and specific nuances between groups should be researched more to understand how intergroup contact functions in certain contexts (Amir & Ben-Ari, 1985). Extending this study to the international relationship between the USA and Mexico begs the question: how has contact between these two nations changed people’s attitudes?

## Contact theory - Mexico and the United States

Mexico and the United States, although close neighbors, have not had the most friendly relationship throughout history. Wars, trade disputes, and political domination by the United States have kept the relations between the two countries strained and sometimes hostile (Stephan et al., 2000). Referring back to Allport’s four conditions, it seems that because of their large differences in economic power and goals, there is not much potential for contact to reduce prejudice between them (Eller & Abrams, 2004). Although these two countries share a troubled history and large sociopolitical differences, scholars have found that contact between Mexicans and Americans does have positive effects on increasing their favorability of each other.

Due to the near impossibility of controlling for all variables and the fact that experimental forcing of contact would be hard to generalize to real-world situations, scholars have mostly utilized surveys to capture the impact of intergroup contact on Mexicans’ and Americans’ opinions of each other (Stephan et al., 2000; Eller & Abrams, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Personal contact such as friendships between Mexicans and Americans has been shown to increase the positive attitudes of the outgroup country (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2000; Eller & Abrams, 2004; Ellison et al., 2001), but the quantity of interactions and non-personal forms of contact have shown little to no effect creating positive evaluations of the other country (Eller & Abrams, 2004; Stephan et al., 2000). This research goes in line with previous research done on other intergroup relations stating that sheer frequency of contact between groups is not enough to reduce prejudice (Wilner et al., 1955). The studies between Mexico and the United States are quite congruent and consistent in their findings, but there is still further room for research which this study will attempt.

Few studies have been conducted which solely focus on the causes of Mexicans’ opinions of Americans, and many discuss this topic from the viewpoint of Americans’ opinions of Mexicans. Of the few studies which focus on Mexicans’ opinions, most studies utilize convenience samples with small numbers of participants. Although these studies can be generalized towards the entire nation of Mexico, nationwide survey data studies should be conducted to support these convenience sample studies’ potential problems with locality and small numbers of participants. Also, studies have been too quick to dismiss the potential of other non-personal forms of contact that impact public opinion of other countries. To fill in these gaps in the literature, this study will use a nationwide sample to bolster previous studies’ results, and it will attempt to show how personal contact and general cultural contact positively and significantly affect favorability towards Americans.

# Methodology

Due to numerous variables that can affect favorability towards Americans, a non-experimental statistical control design will be implemented to test the following three hypotheses of favorability towards Americans: **1)** Total contact will have a positive and significant effect on favorability, **2)** personal contact will have a significant and positive effect on favorability, and **3)** general cultural contact will have a significant and positive effect on favorability. In congruence with past literature, the effect of personal contact should be stronger than non-personal forms like general cultural contact, but nonetheless, both are hypothesized to show positive and significant effects. Of course, contact is not the only factor which can influence Mexicans’ attitudes towards Americans.

This study will control for numerous demographic variables to indicate the true effects of contact and other factors which can change favorability towards Americans. All variables will be collected from the Pew Research Center’s “Global Attitudes Project Spring 2013” survey which collected attitudinal information of various aspects from thirty nine countries including Mexico[[1]](#footnote-1). The Mexican survey was conducted face-to-face, in Spanish, and on adults over 18 years old living in Mexico. There are 1,000 Mexican respondents in the survey providing a more than sufficient base to run statistical tests. Multiple ordinal logit regression models using two-tailed tests and 95 percent confidence intervals will be utilized to test the three hypotheses using the following variables as discussed below.

## Variables

### Favorability Towards Americans

The dependent variable of favorability towards Americans will be taken from Mexicans’ responses to the following question in the Pew Research Center survey: “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of Americans.” The question was translated into Spanish and asked to all the respondents in the same manner. The answer option of “don’t know” was also available with six percent of Mexican respondents choosing it. Although there are many ways to measure favorability towards Americans including thermometer scales, this four-point Likert scale allows for the respondent to not only indicate their feeling towards Americans, but also the strength of that feeling. Another measure in the survey asks respondents’ opinion of the United States which seems to also be a good measure; however, answers to the “Americans” and “United States” questions are correlated at a .68 level making them not perfect images of each other. Because this research is interested in contact between people, it will opt to use the question about Americans because this answer better reflects attitudes created from interpersonal contact. The variance of favorability towards Americans will be mainly explained by the independent variables of total contact, personal contact, and general cultural contact.

### Contact Variables

Contact theory literature states that not all interactions between groups lead to increased favorable intergroup opinions. More specifically, personal contact has more potential to increase intergroup favorability than other forms of contact. These previous findings in the literature support the use of three contact variables: **1)** personal contact, **2)** general cultural contact, and **3)** total contact.

The personal contact variable will be an interval scale with scores ranging from zero to two depending on answers to questions from the Pew Research Center survey. The following questions and scores added to the personal contact variable (listed in bold) are as follows:

Question #1 - Do any of the friends or relatives you write to, telephone or visit regularly

live in the U.S.? **“yes” adds one point to the variable and “no” adds zero points**.

Question #2 - Do you receive money from relatives living in another country regularly,

once in a while, or don’t you receive money? **“regularly” and “once in a while” add one point to the variable and “don’t receive money” adds zero points**.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Personal Contact** | | | | |
|  | Scores -> | 0 | 1 | 2 | Total |
| **Views Towards Americans** | Very Unfavorable | 10% | 13% | 8% | 100 |
| Unfavorable | 23% | 30% | 27% | 241 |
| Favorable | 51% | 43% | 45% | 437 |
| Very favorable | 16% | 14% | 20% | 149 |
|  | Total | 486 | 327 | 114 | 927 |

Note: % indicates within personal contact scores the percent of each view against the total views in that contact score. Total numbers indicate number of respondents.

These two questions express contact which is more than just simple interactions with Americans. Having friends and relatives who live in the United States creates an intimate form of contact which goes beyond simple forms of contact such as watching an American movie. Even more personal contact is represented by Mexicans who receive money from those in the United States because this remittance relationship requires a very amicable friendship between the two parties. There are two points which must be addressed to justify the use of these questions to measure personal contact.

First, one might say that determining the difference between American friends and Mexican relatives creates a problem with proving contact with Americans, but this research will assume that both American friends and Mexican relatives who live in the US will both provide equally personal contact with Americans for the respondent. Mexicans who live in the US are more likely to represent American values and culture than if they were living in Mexico. Although they are not technically defined as Americans and do not provide the opportunity for “perfect” personal contact with Americans, this study will assume that Mexican relatives living in the US will adequately provide sufficient personal American contact for the Mexican respondents. Second, Question #2 does not define from which country the money is coming; however in 2014, 98.1 percent of all of Mexico’s remittances came from the US (World Bank, 2015). Therefore when Mexicans receive this money from relatives in the US, it is creating a close tie and high levels of personal contact with people living in America. Even if these relatives are not citizens of the US, because they are living and working in the United States, they will be considered Americans for the purposes of this study. Because Question #2 is less direct than Question #1 in asking about personal contact, a separate regression will be conducted to show solely the effects of having American friends and relatives living in the US on favorability towards Americans. In contrast to the personal contact variable, the general cultural contact variable will show many varied ways in which Mexicans can interact with Americans without personally knowing an American.

The general cultural contact variable will be an interval scale with scores ranging from zero to four depending on answers to questions from the Pew Research Center survey. The sum of the scores below are added together to equal an individual’s level of general cultural contact with higher scores meaning increased general cultural contact. The following questions and attributable scores (in bold) added to the general cultural contact variable are as follows:

Question #3 - Which is closer to describing your view—I like American music, movies

and television, OR I dislike American music, movies and television? **“like” adds one point to the variable, and “dislike” and “don’t know” add zero points.**

Question #4 - Do you use the internet, at least occasionally? **“yes” adds one point to the**

**variable, and “no” and “don’t know” adds zero points.**

Question #5 - Some cell phones are called “smartphones” because they can access the

internet and apps. Is your cell phone a smartphone, such as an iPhone, a Blackberry? **“yes, smartphone” adds one point to the variable, and “no, not a smartphone” and “don’t know” adds zero points.**

Question #6 - Have you ever traveled to the U.S.? **“yes” adds one point to the variable,**

**and “no” adds zero points.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **General Cultural Contact** | | | | | | |
|  | Scores **** | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Total |
| **Views Towards Americans** | Very unfavorable | 18% | 11% | 10% | 4% | 2% | 100 |
| Unfavorable | 34% | 21% | 23% | 30% | 21% | 241 |
| Favorable | 39% | 52% | 49% | 46% | 50% | 437 |
| Very Favorable | 9% | 16% | 18% | 20% | 26% | 149 |
|  | Total | 203 | 297 | 229 | 156 | 42 | 927 |

Note: % indicates within general cultural contact scores the percent of each view against the total views in that contact score. Total numbers indicate number of respondents.

Each question is describing different forms of general cultural contact that Mexicans can have with Americans, although each question indicates contact in a different form. When participants answer “like” on Question #3, not only are they admitting they like watching Tom Hanks and listening to Justin Bieber; they are indicating that they frequently consume American culture and have increased interactions with it. Answering “yes” to Questions #5 and #4 also indicate higher contact with Americans; there is a high likelihood of respondents engaging with Americans via the internet and smartphone apps since there is an abundance of American hosted content online and in apps and because Mexicans frequent many American-based websites (Alexa Internet Inc., 2016). Question #6 is clearly the most straightforward and ideal characteristic of general cultural contact, and those who have traveled to the U.S. should clearly have increased cultural contact with Americans. This travel contact, however, is not considered personal because it does not show emotional connection with Americans. Personal and general cultural contact will make up the third independent variable, total contact.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total Contact | | | | | | | | |
|  | Scores -> | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Total |
| Views Towards Americans | Very Unfavorable | 20% | 10% | 11% | 11% | 6% | 2% | 0% | 100 |
| Unfavorable | 32% | 24% | 27% | 17% | 37% | 33% | 11% | 241 |
| Favorable | 40% | 53% | 45% | 50% | 41% | 52% | 33% | 437 |
| Very Favorable | 9% | 14% | 17% | 22% | 16% | 13% | 56% | 149 |
|  | Total | 128 | 229 | 221 | 187 | 105 | 48 | 9 | 927 |

Note: % indicates within each total contact score the percent of each view against the total views in that contact score. Total numbers indicate number of respondents.

The total contact variable will simply be the addition of the general cultural contact and personal contact scores. It has a range from “zero” which indicates no total contact to “six” which indicates very high total contact. This variable will show how increased frequency of contact, as opposed to its various types, can increase Mexicans’ favorability towards Americans. The effects of all these three contact variables will be controlled for by typical demographic variables as listed below.

### Control Variables

Age, male, education, income, political party, and Catholicism are hypothesized to have some effects on favorability towards Americans. Age will be indicated as how old respondents were on their last birthday. The male variable will be coded as “zero” for female and “one” for male. The education variable consists of five ordered levels of education from “none” to “university”. Income is the monthly income in pesos categorized in increasing levels, and an increase in income should have a positive effect on favorability. The three main political parties, PRD, PRI, and PAN each represent different political ideologies from leftist, centrist, and conservative respectively. Each political party will be a dummy variable coded “one” for being “very” or “somewhat” tied to a political party and “zero” if not of that political party or gave no response. It is hypothesized that politically liberal respondents, being with the PRD party, will hold more favorable views of Americans than PAN and PRI respondents who can be described as conservatives. The Catholic variable will be a dummy variable coded for “zero” for non-Catholic and “one” for Catholic due to Catholicism being the dominant religion of Mexico and comprising 77 percent of the survey respondents. These control variables will provide statistical support to the significance of the three independent variables if contact is found to have significant effects on favorability towards Americans. Various ordinal logit models using combinations of these variables will help test the three main hypotheses of this study.

# Results

As presented in Table 1, the results provide evidence for the hypothesis that total social contact has a significant and positive effect on Mexicans’ favorability towards Americans. As Mexicans increase their total contact with Americans, they generally like Americans more. Viewing Table 2, as a Mexican goes from no contact to high levels of total contact, their probability to have a “very favorable” view increases by more than fifty percent. This positive relationship maintains even when controlled for many variables such as income, education, and religion. When political ideology is included, the effects of total contact are not significant until income and education are removed. Had a one-tailed test been used, total contact would have been statistically significant in all the models; however, a two-tailed test was used to test for potential negative effects of contact as well. This finding points to an intricate relationship between individual ideology, levels of contact, and opinions of Americans which will be further discussed in the discussion section. The results support previous contact theory literature stating the strong positive effects of total contact. When total contact is separated into two forms of personal and general cultural contact, some unexpected results are seen.

Contrasting the original hypothesis, Table 3 shows that Mexicans with increased personal contact have less favorable views of Americans. Also, having an American friend shows a strong and significant negative effect on favorability. General cultural contact however has a very strong effect on favorability towards Americans. Going from none to much general cultural contact more than triples the probability of a Mexican having a “very favorable” view of Americans; however, the same intensity change for personal contact decreases “very favorable” views by four percent. Ideology also shows counterintuitive results.

## ***Table 1***: Effect of Total Contact on Favorability Towards Americans

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Model 1  Favorability | | Model 2  Favorability | | Model 3  Favorability | | |
|  | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% change) | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% change) | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% change) | |
| Total Contact | .102 (.054) | 1.107 (10.7%) | **.118\* (.053)** | 1.125 (12.5%) | **.107\* (.045)** | | 1.113 (11.3%) |
| PAN | **.642\*\* (.216)** | 1.902 (90.2%) |  |  | **.580\*\* (.186)** | | 1.785 (78.5%) |
| PRI | **.451\*\* (.165)** | 1.570 (57.0%) |  |  | **.416\*\* (.149)** | | 1.516 (51.6%) |
| PRD | .158 (.241) | 1.171 (17.1%) |  |  | -.033 (.186) | | .968 (-3.2%) |
| Income | .070 (.081) | 1.073 (7.3%) | .119 (.080) | 1.127 (12.7%) |  | |  |
| Education | -.041 (.082) | .960 (-4.0%) | -.083 (.081) | .920 (-8.0%) |  | |  |
| Male | .133 (.137) | 1.142 (14.2%) | .118 (.137) | 1.125 (12.5%) | .134 (.123) | | 1.144 (14.4%) |
| Catholic | -.163 (.162) | .849 (-15.1%) | -.124 (.160) | .883 -11.7%) | -.100 (.147) | | .905 (-9.5%) |
| Age | -.007 (.005) | .993 (-0.7%) | -.008 (.005) | .992 (-0.8%) | **-.008\* (.004)** | | .992 (-0.8%) |
| N | 738 | | 738 | | 927 | | |
| Note[[2]](#footnote-2): Coef is the ordinal logit coefficient. (S.E.) standard error. O.R. is odds ratio. All models use a two-tailed test. Significance levels \*<.05, \*\*<.01 \*\*\*<.001. | | | | | | | |

## ***Table 2***: Profiles Determining Favorability Towards Americans

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mexican Profile | Probability of  “Very Unfavorable” View | Probability of  “Very Favorable” View |
| No General Cultural Contact | .16 | .12 |
| High General Cultural Contact | .04 | .38 |
| No Personal Contact | .10 | .18 |
| High Personal Contact | .14 | .14 |
| No Total Contact | .14 | .14 |
| High Total Contact | .08 | .22 |
| Conservative Ideology | .08 | .22 |
| No American Friends | .10 | .19 |
| Has American Friends | .14 | .14 |
| Note: Profiles are done when all other variables are held at their means. Profiles are from Table 3 – Model 1 except for the Total Contact (Table 1 – Model 1) and American friends (Table 3 – Model 4). | | |

PRD which is the most liberal party was hypothesized to have a positive and significant effect on favorable views, yet this study supports that only the conservative and centrist parties of PRI and PAN create positive views of Americans. Other than ideology, only age shows a statistically significant effect on favorability. As respondents increased in age, their favorability towards Americans decreases, but this relationship only holds when education and income are not considered. The results of this study are very interesting given the current literature of contact theory on Mexican and Americans intergroup favorability, and there are many interesting points to discuss.

## **Table 3**: Forms of Contact on Favorability Towards Americans

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Model 1  Favorability | | Model 2  Favorability | | Model 3  Favorability | | Model 4  Favorability | |
|  | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% Change) | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% Change) | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% Change) | Coef (S.E.) | O.R. (% Change) |
| Personal Contact | -.173 (.099) | .842 (-15.8%) | -.140 (.098) | .869 (-13.1%) | **-.202\* (.091)** | .817 (-18.3%) |  |  |
| General Cultural Contact | **.263\*\*\* (.073)** | 1.300 (30.0%) | **0.271\*\*\* (.073)** | 1.311 (31.1%) | **.256\*\*\* (.059)** | 1.291 (29.1%) | **.286\*\*\* (.074)** | 1.331 (33.1%) |
| PAN | **.679\*\* (.217)** | 1.971 (97.1%) |  |  | **.629\*\*\* (.187)** | 1.876 (87.6%) | **.629\*\* (.216)** | 1.876 (87.6%) |
| PRI | **.461\*\* (.165)** | 1.586 (58.6%) |  |  | **.460\*\* (.149)** | 1.584 (58.4%) | **.430\*\* (.165)** | 1.537 (53.7%) |
| PRD | .135 (.241) | 1.144 (14.4%) |  |  | .033 (.221) | .967 (-3.3%) | .116 (.242) | 1.123 (12.3%) |
| Income | .069 (.082) | 1.072 (7.2%) | .121 (.081) | 1.128 (12.8%) |  |  | .071 (.082) | 1.074 (7.4%) |
| Education | -.103 (.085) | .902 (-9.8%) | -.145 (.084) | .865 (-13.5%) |  |  | -.095 (.085) | .909 (-9.1) |
| Male | .109 (.138) | 1.115 (11.5%) | .096 (.137) | 1.100 (10.0%) | .094 (.124) | 1.098 (9.8%) | .096 (.138) | 1.101 (10.1%) |
| Catholic | -.144 (.162) | .866 (-13.4%) | -.103 (.161) | .902 (-9.8%) | -.099 (.148) | .915 (-8.5%) | -.147 (.162) | .864 (-13.6%) |
| Age | -.005 (.005) | .995 (-0.5%) | -.006 (.005) | .994 (-0.6%) | -.005 (.004) | .995 (-0.5%) | -.004 (.005) | .996 (-0.4%) |
| American friends |  |  |  |  |  |  | **-.381\*\* (.146)** | .683 (-31.7%) |
| N | 738 | | 738 | | 927 | | 738 | |
| Note: Coef is the ordinal logit coefficient. (S.E.) standard error. O.R. is odds ratio. All models use a two-tailed test. Significance levels \*<.05, \*\*<.01 \*\*\*<.001. | | | | | | | | |

# Discussion

Total contact between Mexicans and Americans does seem to increase attitudes towards Americans, but not all contact is created equal. Although this has been shown by many previous studies done on multiple intergroup attitudes, this study does not support the notion that personal contact with Americans is a good thing for perceptions of Americans. General cultural contact such as watching American television shows and checking on the Kardashians via Twitter seems to trump the effects of personal contact, but why is this so? Why are friendships with real Americans less impactful than listening to American pop music and visiting New York?

There is little counterevidence of the dominance of American culture in the world. Previous literature shows that Hollywood and blue jeans have increased the influence and positive perceptions of Americans abroad (Nye, 2004). From Beijing to London, American culture is consumed in various forms such as viewing television shows like *Friends* and eating out at McDonalds. These forms of entertainment are exciting and engaging, and it could be that these forms of cultural consumption are more engaging and powerful than personal contact with Americans. This power of American media and the superficial contact of tourism is clearly more impactful than what individual Americans could ever be, and fortunately for the United States, these forms of contact seem to be quite more successful at increasing opinions of Americans than their individual citizens. Although this could explain the difference between general cultural and personal contact, it does not explain why personal contact has a negative effect on favorability. For this, we can look into the original four conditions of contact theory (Allport, 1954) to see if Mexican and American personal interaction violates one of these conditions.

It could be that personal interactions between these two groups could violate the essential condition of “equal status between groups” as formulated by Allport (1954). Just to name some of the general socioeconomic differences, Americans have higher incomes, life expectancies, and overall life satisfaction than Mexicans (OECD Better Life Index, 2016). Personal contact could bring these unequal characteristics to more salient levels than general cultural contact because of the more direct and in-person realizations of these differences. General cultural contact gives no immediate figure to whom one can attribute the intergroup differences, and therefore general cultural contact could cause a glamorization of Americans instead of a direct jealously towards a friend. This leads to the most impactful conclusion of these results: American friends perhaps do not live up to the perceptions of American culture as portrayed in the media.

When Mexicans make American friends, Americans cannot be as likeable as the actors in the movies. This could potentially lead Mexicans to see through the glamour and unreal expectations they were perhaps expecting. This disconnect between expected and real only means that making American friends will decrease Mexicans’ favorability towards them. Mexicans almost certainly have general cultural contact before they personally meet Americans. The nostalgia created by these portrayals in the media, in this case, seems to be broken once a personal connection is made with a person and not a pop star. In addition to contact, ideology seems to play a large role into determining favorability towards Americans, however it was not congruent with the author’s understanding of traditional liberalism.

The results of non-liberal parties creating more favorability towards Americans could be due to the complexities of Mexican politics which cannot be simply categorized into a scale of conservative to liberal. Although each party can be categorized based around a scale of conservative to liberal values, it could be the case that each political party has a different evaluation of the United States and its people based around different political goals. Although it seems more plausible that liberal parties would consist of people more open to experiences and willing to engage with Americans, this does not seem to be the case according to this study. Because this study does not intend to thoroughly discuss characteristics of individual Mexican political parties, the results point to a more complex view of the implications of ideology on international politics that could be better explained with a measure solely indicating political ideology on a scale from conservative to liberal. These findings of the powers different forms of contact make a case for a new kind of international foreign policy between the US and Mexico.

# Implications for International Policy

There are two main and straightforward recommendations for policy makers who want to increase the perceptions of Americans and perhaps reduce tensions on both sides of the border. First, the United States and Mexico should reduce the number of opportunities that Mexicans have to make personal connections with Americans. Policies as such would include reducing the number of work visas to the United States, cutting off funding for Peace Corps projects in Mexico, and limiting the amount of Americans who can come into Mexico for long periods of time. Although these policies seem quite draconian and restrictive of international travel and understanding, reducing the potential for meeting Americans at a quality and personal level would actually increase the attitudes that Mexicans hold of Americans. Although the potential for personal contact should be reduced, tourism and cultural interactions should not be decreased between the two countries. In fact, this leads to the second recommendation.

Second, the United States should increase its marketing of tourism, media, and internet sites to Mexico and its people. Ran in a separate regression using all control variables, simply travelling to the US increases the probability of a “very favorable” by ten percent. Clearly, not all contact should be cut off, but the US should only incentivize superficial and highly entertaining general cultural contact. Some policies that could accomplish this are subsidizing international airline flights from Mexico to US tourist destination spots, increasing advertising of American music and movies towards Mexicans, and giving foreign aid to Mexico that is earmarked for increasing internet connectivity. These policies would not be easy due to the multiple parties involved and the billions of dollars this would require, nor would it be popular. In fact, the American public would probably vote out congressmen who give cheaper round-trip tickets to Mexicans to go tour the Eiffel Tower in New York City; however, one must ask if these methods would be more influential and economical than other current US foreign policies implemented around the world.

The United States spends around one percent of its budget on foreign aid, and this money is distributed to many parties including foreign militaries, dictatorships, and tiny islands in the Pacific Ocean. Although there are many goals of US foreign aid including democracy promotion and poverty reduction, the US should include a healthy budget for distributing the latest blockbusters and cheapest flights to Washington D.C. which could enhance their other foreign aid goals. These policies would enhance the soft power of the US which would make these big foreign policy goals and hard power much easier to be approved by foreign counterparts. Instead of speaking softly and carrying a big stick, perhaps we should be blasting the newest boy band album and signing more international agreements.

# Conclusion

This study finds that although total contact between Mexicans and Americans does in fact increase the favorability of Americans, general cultural contact trumps personal contact in its ability to positively change opinions. Comically and quite accurately, an analogy of these findings can be made to a zoo. Mexicans will really enjoy Americans if they stay behind the glass looking into the exhibit that is American culture and society, yet once they hop the fence and interact with the once friendly looking Americans, they start to realize that it is not such a good idea. Both the Mexican and US Governments should attempt to maintain these “fences” to personal contact in order to increase positive opinions of Americans and in turn to create increased cooperation between the two nations. Because the results of this study are quite opposite of what was originally hypothesized, there is much room for future research on this topic.

There exists the potential for a large endogeneity problem between favorability and contact because those who hold more favorable views of Americans are probably more willing to engage in more contact with Americans. Because this study is not able to test for this endogeneity problem, future studies should do more experimental and non-experimental methods such as time series analyses which look into the effects of increased contact on future favorability towards Americans. This time-series analysis will help strengthen the causal path between favorability and contact. Also, more studies should look into why personal contact with Americans is shown to decrease favorability.

The personal contact results could be because of the two questions’ wordings from the survey that did not indicate much about the relationship with the American or relative other than location. The author acknowledges this problem as potentially problematic, but the use of these questions to gauge personal contact is still supported as argued in the methods section. To test this more, future studies should ask more direct questions about having American friends and their effects on favorability. Finally, we must discuss these results of this study in the light of Mr. Trump’s plans to build a wall.

Considering Trump’s plans to build a wall, this study must counter his plan with two other policy proposals. With the billions of dollars used to make that wall, Hollywood should instead make the best movie ever about a sweet southern American town full of cheery-eyed folks eating apple pie. Also, an internet super highway should be built to connect millions more Mexicans to high speed internet. After Mexican politicians watch that movie online in streaming HD on their free USAID provided Netflix accounts, they would probably like Americans so much that they would do whatever potential president Trump would want. Think less fire“wall” and more bandwidth. Now that’s a deal we should all strive for.

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1. This study greatly appreciates the openness of the Pew Research Center in sharing its data, and this research would have been impossible without their assistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A VIF test showed no signs of multicollinearity. The parallel regression assumption was not violated providing support for an ordinal logit function. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)