

What the caucuses and primaries have to do with Canada

COLIN ROBERTSON

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Canadians often think that we know all about America, while Americans think that they know all they need to know about us. As U.S. Ambassador David Jacobson has observed, we are both wrong.

Ties of history, culture and geographic propinquity, which facilitate trade and investment, mean that the U.S. will always be primordial to Canadian interests. We always have an agenda with the United States and because of the asymmetries in our relative interests and global positioning, the responsibility for initiative and action lies with us.

When we get it right we advance not only our own interests, but we gain additional leverage from our ability to explain America to the rest of the world and, when we properly manage our international diplomatic network, the rest of the world to America.

The 2012 American election has already provided both entertainment and an education in the politics of our southern neighbour.

The occupant of the Oval Office is still the most powerful leader in the world and the person who will take the oath in January 2013 matters to Canada. We need to know all about that person and their administration.

The issue matrix is different depending on who controls the agenda. Democrats tend to be more protectionist and emphasize environmental issues (e.g., Waxman-Markey would have potentially assessed a surcharge on oil sands products) while the Republicans put a higher priority on security, (e.g., Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative which obliges a passport or a 'smart' driver's licence for cross-border travel.)

In the 2008 primaries, both major Democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, promised to renegotiate NAFTA because of labour and environmental concerns. The subsequent leak of a Canadian diplomatic dispatch reporting that Obama campaign adviser Austan Goolsbee suggested this was mere electioneering on the part of candidate Obama caused considerable embarrassment. Goolsbee later became chair of President Obama's Economic Advisory Council,

Deepening economic integration, including the new border initiative and ongoing regulatory reform means that more and more of the decisions that count take place at the state level, underlining the need for a Canadian 50 state strategy to complement our congressional outreach. Most of our trade disputes (e.g., lumber, beef) originated at the local level or have a local dimension (e.g., the XL pipeline and the original route through the Nebraska Sandhills) before they developed into issues on Capitol Hill.

Another example of how a local interest can stymie a bilateral issue is the long-planned second crossing between Detroit and Windsor. The business owner of the Ambassador Bridge has blocked approval of the second crossing in the Michigan state legislature, notwithstanding the strong support of Governor Rick Snyder and the continuing efforts of Ontario and federal government authorities who have offered to fund Michigan's \$550-million share of the new bridge (with the money to be paid back through subsequent tolls). The thousands of trucks that cross the Ambassador Bridge each day carry about 25 percent of the annual merchandise trade between Canada and the United States.

The success of the new border initiative will require the collaborative efforts of the federal, state and province and municipal authorities on both sides of the border. The bailout and restructuring of Chrysler

and General Motors, making possible the subsequent recovery of our auto industry, is a good example of tri-level and cross-border collaboration on the auto trade that dates back to the 1965 Autopact.

In pursuit of Canadian interests in the U.S., the presidency is our main entry point into the American system, itself a spaghetti bowl of competing interests and factions.

These include the members of Congress and their staff, the administration and its agencies, the lobbyists (there are now more than 33,000 in Washington), the lawyers, the think-tanks, the media and the other special interests that are constantly shifting, aligning and realigning on and around Capitol Hill. The internet and the rise of YouTube, blogs, and tweets have further “democratized” and “atomized” the political process.

The American political process has become polarized and even more partisan. “It’s not just a tug of war between left and right”, writes New York Times columnist Charles Blow, “It’s a struggle between the mind and the heart, between evidence and emotions, between reason and anger, between what we know and what we believe.” American politics, observes the National Journal’s Ron Brownstein “increasingly resembles a kind of total war in which each party mobilizes every conceivable asset at its disposal against the other. Most Governors were once conscientious objectors in that struggle. No more.” Or Newt Gingrich told ABC News on the weekend before the Iowa caucuses, “Politics has become a really nasty, vicious, negative business and I think it’s disgusting and I think it’s dishonest.”

Within this fractious and often confusing context, a foreign power is just another special interest and, without the tools of money or votes, not particularly special. Working this system has become even more complicated because of the continuing dispersal of power in the U.S. and the legions of special interests armed with cheque books.

It makes it more difficult to build the necessary coalitions of cross-party support that we usually require to either prevent passage of legislation contrary to our interests or support for an initiative. But it starts with an appreciation of the American system. The excitement and passion of this latest exercise in their democratic process provides an ideal daily education to learn and understand better the country that continues to matter the most to Canadians.

This column draws from the CDFAI’s “A Canadian Primer to the 2012 U.S. Primaries and Caucuses”.