

[Election 2010 and US Drug Policy in Latin America](#) [\[FEATURE\]](#)

By *psmith*

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Will US drug policy in Latin America change for the better or the worse after the 2010 elections? Or will it stay the same? We ask the analysts.

This month's election returns, which resulted in the Republican Party taking back control of the US House of Representatives, have serious, if cloudy, ramifications for progress on drug policy on the domestic front. Similarly, when we look south of the border, where a cash-strapped US has been throwing billions of dollars, mainly at the governments of Colombia and Mexico in a quixotic bid to thwart the drug trade, the Republican return to control in the House could mean a more unfriendly atmosphere for efforts to reform our Latin American drug policy.

[America](#) [17]. "You'll see Venezuela portrayed more and more as the drug bad guy, but neither Ros-Lehtinen or Mack can see much beyond Cuba," he said.

"If you bought the premise that the drug war was an extension of the Cold War, you could have a brand new Cold War framework here," said Isaacson. "They won't be able to buy a lot of Blackhawks, but they can use it as another way to beat up on the Obama administration."

"I think not much is going to change," said Bill Piper, national affairs director for the [Drug Policy Alliance](#) [18]. "To the extent the need is to cut money, Republicans might want less funding for these programs, but that's a big if. But this is a different sort of Republican, and so there may be the possibility of a left-right coalition to quit funding Plan Colombia. I'm not sure the Republicans can keep their people in line on Mexico and Colombia."

"Obama has been unyielding when it comes to maintaining the status quo on hemispheric drug policy," said Larry Birns, executive director of the [Council on Hemispheric Affairs](#) [19]. "He hasn't come up with any new programs or expressed any sympathy for the progressive drug policy initiatives coming out of Latin America. He is not going to allow himself to be accused of being soft on drugs. All hope for reform is gone, and there is little likelihood that the administration will come up with any drug-related initiative that will cost more money than we're spending now or that would challenge the pro-drug war lobby that now exists. I don't think we will see much activity on this front," he predicted.

Nor did Birns look to Tea Party-style incoming Republicans to break with drug war orthodoxy. He cited campaign season attacks from Tea Party candidates that Washington was "soft on drugs" and suggested that despite the occasional articulation of anti-drug war themes from some candidates, "the decision makers in the Tea Party are not going to sanction a softening on drugs in any way."

"I'm not aware of a single reference to the prospective drug policy of the new class of representatives," said Birns. "It seems to have become *desaparecido* when it comes to hemispheric policy."

"The Tea Partiers are very vague on foreign policy in general, and we're seeing things like John McCain coming out and attacking Rand Paul for not being interventionist enough," noted Tree.

Despite calls from conservatives for vigorous budget cutting, Tree was skeptical that the Latin American drug war budget would be cut. "In the Heritage Foundation budget cut report, for example, they killed ONDCP's funding and foreign assistance, but nothing from the military budget," he noted. "Maybe they can find some common ground on the drug war, but I'm not holding my breath."

"We haven't heard them say too much yet," said Isaacson, disagreeing with Tree. "But they don't have any money. The Tea party wants to cut the budget and the foreign aid budget is most vulnerable. Even the Merida Initiative could be in play," he said.

But, Isaacson said, the old-school hard-liners are already at work. He cited a Wednesday conference on Capitol Hill called [Danger in the Andes](#) [20], which explores the "threat" from Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba.

"A lot of these new guys went," he said. "John Walters, Roger Noriega, and Otto Reich were there. Good to see some new faces," he laughed painfully.

"We still don't know much about the Tea Party when it comes to foreign policy," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo of the libertarian-leaning [Cato Institute](#) [21]. "Whether these guys will follow their budget-cutting instincts and look to reduce foreign aid and the military presence abroad, or whether they will follow the neoconservative wing of the party that believes in empire and strong defense and pursuing interventionist policies all over the

world is the question," he said.

"I expect more of the same under the Republicans," said Hidalgo. "I don't foresee big changes. This Tea Party is going to play conservative when it comes to the war on drugs," he predicted. "But I haven't seen a single Tea Partier say what they believe on this issue. We have to give them six months to a year to show their colors."



Mexican Marines being trained by US Marines

The Tea Party movement has already shown conflicting tendencies within it when it comes to foreign policy in general and US drug policy in Latin America in particular, Hidalgo argued. "Some part of it is militaristic and interventionist, like Sarah Palin. On the other hand, there are people like Rand Paul, who stands for a non-interventionist foreign policy and who thinks drug policy should be reassessed," he said. "We don't know how that is going to play out."

But Hidalgo strongly suggested he thought that it wasn't going to be in a reformist direction. "Even though the Tea Partiers believe in smaller government, the movement has been hijacked by the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party," he said. "Its biggest names are Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck, both of whom are ultraconservative Republicans. I would be pleasantly surprised to see Tea Party representatives come into office and say the war on drugs is a failure, a big waste of money that has failed miserably. They claim they will look at every single budget item, and what better way to cut spending? I'll believe it when I see it," he said.

One thing that managed to win reluctant Democratic votes for funding the drug wars in Colombia and Mexico was human rights conditionality, meaning that -- in theory, at least -- US assistance could be pared back if those countries did not address identified human rights concerns. With tens of thousands dead in both Mexico and Colombia in the drug war, with widespread allegations of torture and abuses in both countries, the issue should be on the front burner.

In reality, human rights concerns always took a back seat to the imperatives of *realpolitik*. That's likely to be even more the case with Republicans in control of the House.

"There is not going to be much sympathy to human rights as a driver of US policy," said Birns. "The Republicans initially used human rights as an anti-communist vehicle; it was never meant to be used against rightists. Given that the Obama administration has been conspicuously silent on Latin America, human rights, like drug policy reform, is an issue that has largely disappeared from the public debate. If anything, the noise level of things to come on drug policy will be significantly lowered. Whatever was in the air about new approaches has pretty much been put to bed for the winter."

"On Plan Merida, the Democrats attached human rights conditions because of concerns the Mexican army was committing human rights abuses," said Hidalgo. "It's an open question whether a Republican House will

be less concerned about human rights when it comes to helping Mexico, or will they say we should cut spending there?"

For Hidalgo, the big election news in 2010 was not the change in the House of Representatives, but the defeat of Proposition 19 in California.

"Before the vote, several Latin American leaders, including Colombian President Santos, said that if it were to pass, that would force Colombia to reconsider its drug policy and the war on drugs and bring this issue to international forums like the United Nations," he said. "That gave many of us hope that Colombia would precipitate an international discussion on whether to continue the current approach or to adopt a more sensible approach like Portugal or the Netherlands," he said. "Now, that is not going to happen."

Washington, DC

United States

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- [3] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/10>
- [4] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/119>
- [5] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/150>
- [6] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/44>
- [7] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/77>
- [8] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/139>
- [9] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/155>
- [10] <http://stopthedrugwar.org/taxonomy/term/130>
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