

A Reflection on US Elections

Thirty-one years ago, I had the opportunity to study Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire under the Fulbright Program for Central American Students. In fact, it was a great privilege to live and study in Wisconsin, a US state reputed by its high educational standards, with a white population mostly descendants from Germans, Polish, Scandinavians, among other European groups.

During the time I lived in Wisconsin, I found a very friendly and open-minded people, with a strong middle class and a good standard of living. Indeed, the university life in Wisconsin opened for me a new intellectual world, where I spent long hours in the library, reading the classics of political theory from early morning till late night. Classes were academically rigorous, and professors were quite open to further discussions during their office hours. I truly appreciated the intellectual tolerance and open discussion of ideas, without ideological bias.

As student of Political Science, I delved into the history and the philosophical foundation of the United States government, keeping in mind that memorable sentence written in the Preamble of the US Declaration of Independence, which reads:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and pursuit of Happiness.”

However, from the very birth of the United States, the reality got in conflict with the above foundational principle since slavery was an accepted institution in many places of the world during the time of US independence. So, from the beginning, the Founding Fathers and succeeding US leaders had to cope with this contradiction until President Abraham Lincoln and his Republican Party carried out a frontal battle against slavery, abolishing it in 1865 after a lengthy civil war.

Interestingly, Wisconsin had an active role not only in the civil war, supplying troops to President Lincoln, but it was also the birthplace of the Republican Party in 1854, whose progressive political platform denounced the intentions of the southern states to enforce slavery in the western territories as the US government was expanding its frontiers and incorporating new states to the Union.

Although slavery was abolished through the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in the final year of the civil war, and further rights were recognized to black people in the Fourteenth (1866) and Fifteenth (1869) Amendments, the psychological wounds of the civil war were never closed but persisted throughout the Nineteen and Twentieth Centuries through the Jim Crow Laws.

The Jim Crow Laws were local and states laws enacted to create racial segregation in public facilities in the southern states mostly controlled by Democrats. This racial segregation was enforced in schools, public transport, public bathrooms, and other public spaces. Not even the US Army escaped from the reach of these racist laws.

As a natural reaction to this institutional racism, a civil rights movement emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to end racial segregation. In fact, the Jim Crow Laws were enforced until 1965, that is, a century after the end of the civil war.

Yet, in the Twenty-First Century, we can still observe instances of systemic racism in US society, and it is aggravated by the fact that President Donald J. Trump has avoided to denounce white supremacy groups, while using derogatory terms against other non-white ethnic groups.

The irony of this time is that the Republican Party, led by President Trump, has transformed itself from the anti-slavery party to the party of xenophobia while the Democratic party, long ago the racist party of the southern states, became the champion of multiculturalism.

It is important to point out that both parties began with a white population base. However, after the Great Depression of 1929, and ensuing election of Franklin D. Roosevelt from the Democratic Party in 1932, the United States experienced a profound government reform under President Roosevelt's New Deal program, which in turn, generated a big change in the electoral base and policy agenda of the Democratic Party until today.

Designed to bring the US out of a deep economic crisis, the New Deal program introduced strong government intervention in different areas of the economy such as regulation on finances and banking, promotion of labor union, federal spending in large infrastructure projects to stimulate the economy, subsidies for the unemployed and distressed farmers, among others. This measures transformed the Democratic Party into a progressive liberal party while the Republican Party maintained the conservative mindset by opposing the government intervention in the economy.

Later on, under the Democrat Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the Democratic Party continued the expansion of his progressive policies through spending in social programs to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of millions of Americans.

In addition, the administration of President Johnson managed to pass the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) in Congress attracting black people to the democratic camp, and thus deepening the shift in the electoral base of both parties with the Northeastern, Midwestern and Western states leaning to the Democratic Party while the Southern states became strongholds of the Republican party.

Nowadays, the Republican Party maintains a large white and evangelical Christians base from the hinterland and southern states (and about 17% of non-white) while the Democratic Party is composed of a more diverse base which include white, black, Hispanic, Asians and other ethnic groups with different religious belief as well as non-religious people.

On national issues, the Republican Party is anti-immigration, limited government intervention in the economy, strong law enforcement, private health care, little concern for environmental protection, among others, while the Democratic Party is immigration friendly but regulated, active government intervention in the economy, elimination of racial inequality and promotion of social justice, universal health care with public and private options, strong concern on the environment, among others.

Before Donald J. Trump became president, both parties faced each other in fair elections with generally low voter turnout compared with member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). However, the presidential election of 2020 where President Trump ran for reelection generated a historic voter turnout on both parties.

In addition to the high voter turnout, this year's election showed a historical political polarization in both parties to the degree that the majority of voters for Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden said in a recent survey of Pew Research Center that "a victory by the other candidate would lead to a lasting harm to the nation". Yet, to add more concern about the future governance of the US, the same survey showed that supporters of both candidates not only disagree over politics and policies, but that they also disagree over "core American values and goals".

Probably most people will blame Trump for this political polarization, but I believe he is the symptom of a deeper illness in the US social body. The reality is that standard of living of US citizens has experienced a downward trend in recent decades, and one important casualty has been the middle class, which according to Pew Research Center, has fallen from 61% in 1971 to 50% in 2015.

I just remember when I returned to the US 18 years later, in 2009, to receive an alumni award from the University of Wisconsin. I was happy to see my professors, host families and friends. Although it was a memorable occasion, I could feel that the prosperous Wisconsin I left at the beginning of the 1990s was no longer the same. I could observe a notable deterioration of living standards, which was aggravated by the Great Recession of 2008-2009.

Wisconsin as well as other Rust Belt states has suffered the loss of better-paid manufacturing jobs and experienced the hollowing out of industries, without any of both parties offering remedies for a shrinking middle class. This economic deterioration provided the fertile ground for the emergence of Donald J. Trump and his false rhetoric to bring the manufacturing jobs back to the people, something we have not seen so far.

However, now we know Trump doesn't care about anybody but himself. The trade war with China has increased the costs in the US economy, and internationally, Trump has alienated US allies causing a tremendous harm to the US leadership in the world. But, even worst, he has deepened the divide in the mind of the US citizens, pitting one against the other.

For him, life is a zero-sum game where he is the sole winner and cannot lose. Therefore, he has managed to test the strength of the US institutions by challenging the results of the elections, which he clearly lost. It is the first time in US history that a sitting president not only questions the legitimacy of the US electoral system, but also incites his followers to reject the results with baseless claim of fraud.

In addition to challenging the elections, Trump has defied facts, science, and the rationality upon which the Founding Fathers built the country. He even repeatedly challenged the truth by telling more than 20,000 lies throughout his presidency, according to the counting of the Washington Post. Still worst, he neglected to tackle the coronavirus pandemic, making a political issue on the wearing of masks, which has resulted in the death of more of 250,000 US citizens.

I just hope the Republican leaders realize the importance of stopping the dangerous and blind cult of Trump, which has intoxicated the Republican Party. I believe they will gradually recognize the victory of Joe Biden, who will have to put all his energies to bring the US back into the right path. Biden will have to pay attention to those over 70 millions who voted for Trump. They have grievances that cannot be ignored. Washington must pay attention to the hinterland and the southern states to avoid a repetition of another bloody internal conflict.

I don't wish that the prediction of my history professor at the University of Tsukuba becomes true someday. In 2000, my history professor told the master course students that by 2050 the United States would be divided in three or four countries due to the increasingly extremists views and beliefs of distinct ethnics groups populating the US. As we all know, the US Constitution, the rule of law and solid institutions keep the US together, but in time of profound crisis there is no Queen like in the United Kingdom or Emperor in Japan, who can calm conflictive political passions and unite all parties under the same banner.

In a nutshell, I wish that Biden receives a great illumination that allows him to forge a robust domestic balance, rebuilds the economy and put the coronavirus pandemic under control while restoring the US leadership in the world.

Dr. Ritter Diaz
International Consultant
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