

The future of US democracy

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The democracy in the United States is the oldest of the modern democracies and an essential model for the different democratic efforts in Latin America and many other countries. Although the US democracy has faced different challenges and difficult times, all have been fundamentally overcome. It can be said that the most recent challenge was the administration of George W. Bush (2001–2009). Barack Obama's election marks the opportunity to recover lost ground. This is for several reasons.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE 2000 ELECTION

First, there are well-founded doubts about the authenticity of Bush's victory in the 2000 presidential election. The problem was not, as many suppose, that his opponent, Al Gore, had won the popular vote by about half a million ballots, while Bush had an official four-electoral-vote advantage out of the total of 538. This eventuality is built into the US electoral system and by no means lessens the victor's legitimacy. The problem lay, rather, in the fact that Bush obtained the 25 electoral votes from the key state of Florida, governed by his brother Jeb, in very tenuous circumstances. The first count gave Gore a 229-vote advantage, but absentee ballots gave Bush a slim advantage of a little over 1,700 votes. The count of these votes was clearly biased in favour of the Republicans, at a rate of three to one.

The Gore team applied for new recounts to the Florida Supreme Court, which ordered a review of a large part of the dubious ballots. Before concluding this recount, the US Supreme Court, with a majority of Republican judges, ordered that it be halted to hear the arguments of both parties. Its final decision validated the Democrats' arguments by stipulating that all the votes in question should be recounted, but also added that the recount could not continue because the

BY JOSÉ ANTONIO CRESPO

José Antonio Crespo is a researcher and professor of history at Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas/Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE).

[T]he only things that will be able to put a brake on the abuse of power internationally are the internal mechanisms of democracy themselves, of checks and balances, of accountability.

time limit for the recount was up (a time limit that the court itself had eliminated by its stay). At that point, Bush had only a 158-vote advantage. Later recounts done by several media organizations showed that, if a full recount had been carried out, Gore would have beaten Bush, although also by a very small margin.

In addition, it would also come out that Florida's secretary of state, Republican Katherine Harris, had ordered the names of at least 20,000 Democratic voters struck from voter registration rolls. This authentic case of fraud evidenced to the world the weaknesses of the US electoral system and called into question the judiciary's impartiality. All this put a president in the White House without a clear mandate from the citizenry: 40 percent of the public did not believe Bush's victory was valid.

Although during the 2008 elections both parties made accusations of fraud, Obama's easy win makes it possible to

be certain about what the majority of the electorate wanted and for the outcome to be fully respected. This result will allow for a recovery of confidence in the US electoral system.

THE WAR IN IRAQ

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Bush declared war not only on Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was hiding, but also on Iraq, without United Nations sanction. He used arguments that turned out to be false, such as the alleged links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, or the existence of weapons of mass destruction. That is, he flagrantly deceived the public and the Congress of the United States, embarking on a war that has been extremely expensive in human terms, as well as diplomatically and economically. More than 5,000 US soldiers have lost their lives in this reckless adventure; the United States has projected the image of being arbitrary and disrespectful of the international order and international law; and more than US\$700 billion has been spent. The demands of the war against terrorism in general, and in Iraq in particular, have limited some democratic spaces and freedoms domestically in the United States, both with regard to individuals' privacy (with the introduction of the *Patriot Act*) and with regard to freedom of expression.

Senator Obama did not back the invasion of Iraq, in contrast to many of his Democratic Party colleagues. He made that very clear during the Democratic primaries when he was running against Hillary Clinton, who did vote in favour of war. Obama's opponent in the presidential elections, the Vietnam veteran John McCain, offered to prolong US military presence in Iraq 100 years if necessary in order to win. By then, however, the public was no longer clear on how rational that strategy was, or exactly what it would mean to "win." Obama promised,

The future of US democracy, page 70

by contrast, to implement measures to begin a gradual withdrawal from Iraq, without considering this a defeat, but rather an essentially rational, pragmatic decision given the mistake that the invasion had been in the first place.


ACCOUNTABILITY

Although US democracy will be able to recover certain ground with the new president in office, the strength of the mechanism of accountability, a crucial element in a democracy, will continue to be put to the test. Fundamental in any democratic country, accountability becomes particularly important in a military power like the United States. If these powers can ignore international norms and limits to, for example, invade another country without foundation (as clearly occurred in the case of Iraq), the only things that will be able to put a brake on the abuse of power internationally are the internal mechanisms of democracy

Although US democracy will be able to recover certain ground with the new president in office, the strength of the mechanism of accountability, a crucial element in a democracy, will continue to be put to the test.

themselves, of checks and balances, of accountability.

At the international level, there is no country or international body capable of bringing to the carpet abusive rulers of these powers—for example, the United States has excused itself from complying with the international regime of respect for human rights. The political cost domestically can be electoral, as happened in Spain, when the ruling Popular Party lost power, and in the United States itself, with the Republican Party losing

the presidency. Even though in 2004 Bush was re-elected, the legitimacy of his victory was questioned in the swing state of Ohio. But a democracy should also have the ability to call anyone to account—anyone who has used his or her power to hide or invent official information, deceiving both the citizenry and the Congress, to justify an essentially arbitrary act, like the invasion of Iraq, which has been detrimental even to the invading country itself. This is where the weakest link in US democracy can be detected. 

The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies Mandate

The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies supports interdisciplinary and discipline-specific research pertinent to the study of Canada and “Canada in the World.” In practice, this has meant an orientation toward broader Canadian and international scholarly and policy-making communities, inquiries into comparative perspectives on the Canadian mosaic, and assistance to York scholars in working with their counterparts in other countries.

Faculty at the Robarts Centre, including the Director, the Robarts Chair, and other Robarts researchers, regularly teach courses and contribute to curriculum development in areas pertaining to Canadian, North American, and comparative studies. The Robarts Centre also provides supervised research and writing opportunities for graduate students from a wide range of York graduate programs.

The Robarts Centre offers a strong program of high-level seminars, workshops, and conferences on major issues, focusing on Canadian perspectives on Communications, Culture, the Fine Arts, History, Political Economy, Public Policy, and International Relations. Participants include York faculty and students, Canadian and international scholars, and the larger community of Metropolitan Toronto.

Current, ongoing work at the Centre includes research initiatives on the public domains and international standards, Canadian cinema, and issues pertaining to media perspectives on Canada. The Centre acts as a research arm for the Joint Program in Communication and Culture and its work on the Canadian Internet Project. The Centre also housed the Toronto offices of the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Tom Thomson project. ■