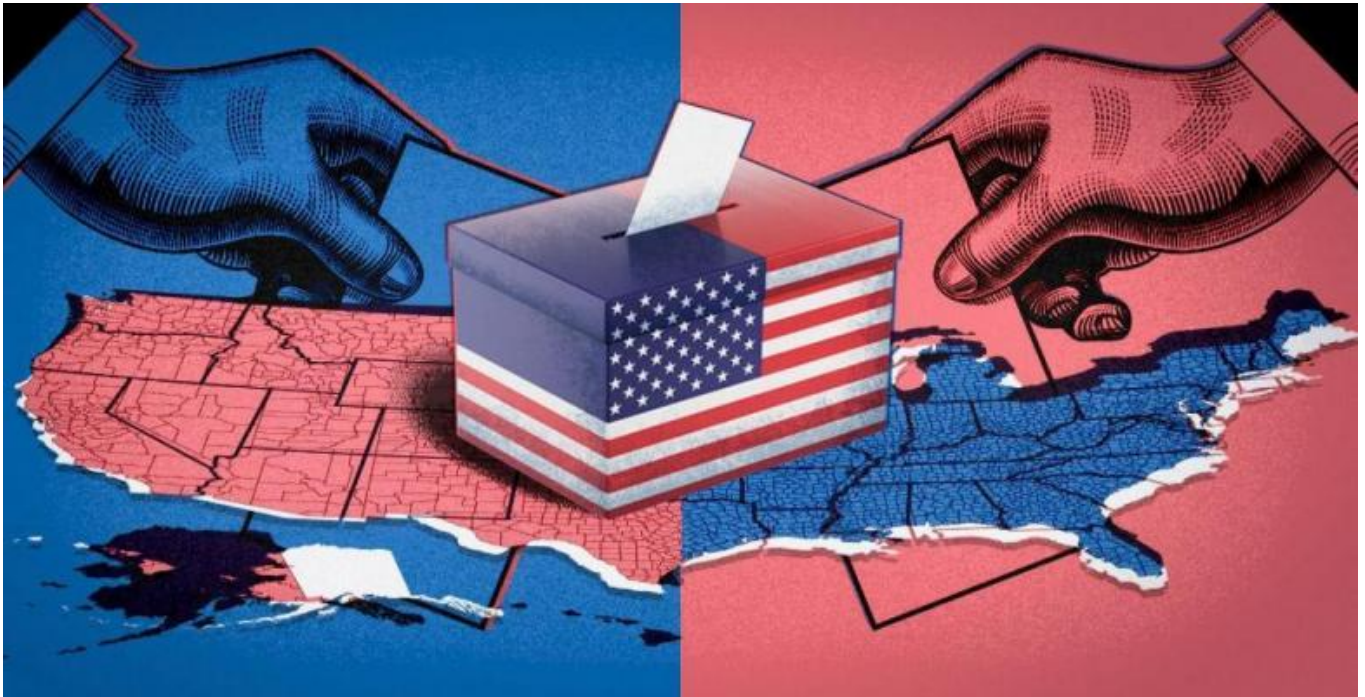

The jigsaw puzzle: The United States faced with crisis and elections

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Once again, the North American society is facing a decisive year. Like every four years, and increasingly earlier, the electoral campaign has recently begun, even in the aftermath of the deep crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, interspersed with a recession, and involving the country in a well-known geopolitical dispute between powers, with a global scope, fighting for international hegemony, which is aggravated by severe war conflicts, in full display today. These circumstances lead to the following thoughts.

Both the US crises and elections are usually the processes grabbing the headlines of mass media, social sciences, world's public opinion, and even art and literature. The fact that this country is the center of the international system of capitalist relations and the main geographical seat of contemporary imperialism makes it an inevitable focus of interest, as seen in the great boom of academic and journalistic writings, along with novels, films, cartoons and television series. The truth is that, in one way or another, everything happening in the US

affects elsewhere, almost all latitudes. Above all, when a crisis occurs in its economy, which is often intertwined with those seen at present in politics, ideology, and culture. Or when general elections take place, which include state, legislative and presidential elections. And all these is happening now.

In the case of the crises, in terms of expertise, as it may be familiar to readers, the economic crisis is described as a structural, systemic and cyclical crisis. Let's put it simpler, it is a shock that affects, beyond production and the market, the bases of the social totality, shakes its foundations and is repeated with certain periodicity. The others shake traditional thought, parties, daily life, provoke distrust towards the government, feelings of uncertainty and disbelief regarding leadership and political agendas, imply questioning and even denial of the founding values and myths of the nation.

Crises tend to be, generally, predictable and occurs cyclically. Their periodicity is variable, and they are the result of the intrinsic dynamism of the capitalist system, within the framework of which a recurring interaction occurs between domestic and international situations, with greater or lesser permanence. They can be predicted to a certain extent and controlled through the implementation of certain public policies, within specific historical contexts. Its objective nature sets a standard in its development, through a sequence that includes depression and recovery.

The elections are subject, however, to the regularity established by legality for the functioning of the political system and go through a series of stages according to the invariable scheme of bipartisan competition, from the formal beginning of the campaign with the primary elections, in which the pre-candidates of both parties, the Democrat and the Republican, are visualized, until the national conventions of these, where the candidates who will then compete in the final elections are defined. The electoral results are conditioned by the confluence of different factors, of an objective and subjective nature, among which the crises — including the alternatives offered by the people who aspire to the presidency — are decisive. Above all, when the coincidence of both processes is recorded. And this coexistence of elections and crises has

been frequent.

With an essentially economic dynamic, crises are multidimensional phenomena that impact the social fabric as a whole, even when this does not manifest with immediacy or with visible effects in the short and medium term. Sometimes, its scope is shown in a delayed manner, being appreciated in subsequent years or even decades, in areas such as those mentioned, concerning civic and political culture; that is, to the concerns, priorities, preferences, convictions, of citizens.

Thus, the electoral balance is encouraged to lean in one direction or another, favoring a certain candidate or expressing itself in abstentionism, which discourages the exercise of the right to vote. From this perspective, previous situations in the history of the United States could be recalled that illustrate, in this century, what had just been stated: the Republican and conservative governments of George W. Bush and Donald Trump. The first case, somewhat distant, that of a double mandate, between January 2001 and January 2008. The second, much closer, of a single period, started in 2016 and ended in 2020.

In both examples, under the conditioning of different critical environments, it was clear that the crises caused multiplier effects that went beyond the economic dimension, with sociopolitical implications, and were directly intertwined with the presidential campaigns and their final results. In the two electoral situations, discontent and rejection towards their governments were highlighted, especially in their last periods, since the population identified the evils of the moment with their performances and placed expectations of change in the promises of the Democratic partisan opposition. Along with the effects of crises in the socioeconomic field (such as those related to unemployment, decrease in income, inflation, increase in the cost of public services), other factors, such as the financial resources and image of leadership or charisma of the opponents and the effectiveness of propaganda, would influence the electoral processes of 2008, 2016 and 2020.

And, in the descriptions and predictions derived from both the constant surveys specialized in monitoring public opinion and the analysis

offered by the press, political and academic institutions, the vision of the crisis and the elections in the United States is powered with references to factors such as those mentioned. The image is built by resorting to numerous data, whose statistical and anecdotal abundance makes possible detailed monitoring that is very useful for calibrating findings and forecasts.

However, it often happens that excessive attention to specific figures and events leads to interpretations based on linear logic, which reduce analytical scrutiny to a mechanical summation or episodic serialization of data that ends up being overwhelming, with relative value. This approach often produces circular reasoning and cognitive reductions, which oscillate between the characterization of the macroeconomy, the biographies of the candidates and the ups and downs of their popularity ratings, the course of the primaries and the campaign as a whole.

Although they are essential links in the analytical chain that leads to rigorous scientific knowledge of North American politics, such reasoning and facts, although they constitute necessary steps, are not sufficient to understand the real, broader, deeper and more complex process. If they are not inserted creatively into a global interpretative framework, which interrelates history and the present, the isolated facts and the structures that condition them and in which they are projected, a biased, decontextualized vision can be fostered and, unintentionally, even deceptive.

In a figurative sense, it would be as if in the search and selection of the pieces in a fun attempt to complete a jigsaw puzzle, the visualization of each of the empty spaces in which they could fit, prevented us from seeing the whole picture that would result at the conclusion of the playful effort. In some way, when you review the analyzes of the crises and presidential elections held in the United States since the beginning of the current century, you can see some of that. And the urgency of having accurate diagnoses and precise predictions sometimes leads to excesses of immediacy or news rush that make it difficult to appreciate such whole picture.

In the aforementioned electoral processes, that of 2008, when W. Bush

was ending his second presidential period and in 2016, when Democrat Barack Obama concluded his second government term, the analyzes showed light and dark areas, but gloom prevailed. In the case of W. Bush, the exhaustion of a double republican government, extremely conservative and war-mongering, was quite notable, and the possibility of a black-skinned leader winning the presidential elections existed, but was really uncertain. Hence, Obama's victory was predicted in most predictions. In the second, the fatigue with the repeated and innovative Democratic Administration was not so clear and it was thought by many that, if the country was prepared to elect a president of African origin, then it would also be prepared for a woman to land in the White House. Thus, the prevailing prediction that Hillary Clinton would win was contrary to the fact that the social fabric was really bored and resentful.

The background that frames both processes is the transition process that has been developing for just over forty years in North American society. Since the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, with cumulative effects. It is an unfinished historical transition, understood as a sequence of changes, of diverse scope, with expressions in the economy, politics, society and culture. The United States has long ceased to be the country that Americans believe it is, or say it is, the country of the promised land or the American dream. The contradictions in which the US has lived and lives today, in ideological and partisan terms, can no longer be sustained or expressed by simple rhetoric. They escape traditional discursive manipulation and place the system before dilemmas that the parties and their presidential candidates, with their rivalries, are not able to confront with solutions for a nation in decline. Perhaps these reflections presented can contribute to the quiz of the jigsaw puzzle of 2024, looking beyond the counterpoint between Biden and Trump, in a framework in which the crisis never leaves the stage.

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