
The Gap: United States and the Legitimacy Crisis in the 2024 Electoral Context

By: Jorge Hernández Martínez / Special for CubaSi

04/04/2024



The electoral process in the United States is advancing by leaps and bounds during the first three months in 2024, as a result of the presidential campaign, which began earlier than usual. This would confirm a recurrent pattern that's being observed for approximately two decades: processes of this type, in fact, begin - formalities aside - increasingly earlier in that country. It's common to hear or read that, in reality, from the very moment in which an elected president begins his term of government, he takes the first steps towards his re-election, thinking more about the image he projects in the face of propaganda with a view to his candidacy for the next presidential campaign, four years later. There's some truth in that.

To a certain extent, it's a kind of paradox, since such factual anticipation expresses a high interest of political circles - involved from the government and the party represented in it or from the one that's in the opposition -, in the organization of the process, attracting national and even international attention. The fact contrasts with the tendency towards highlighted abstentionism, palpable in the low levels of voting, which as a rule has not left the scene, which speaks of disinterest and even citizen apathy. The exception, however, was the striking rise in popular attendance to the polls on election day in 2020. It was understandable, given the high level of confrontation between the rivals, and given the real possibility of Donald Trump's re-election. The shock caused by the assault on the Capitol still lingers in memory, as a supreme expression of disorder the North American society is experiencing. The political system reflected like never before a dysfunctionality that questions the traditional place of sacrosanct democracy in that country, whose pillars seemed bankrupt. The crisis of legitimacy that took shape then has not been, nor will it be, solved within the scope of the current institutional framework. It unfolds at the very foundations of the system, which has continued to crack. Joseph Biden, now in the last year of his first or only term, is unable to consolidate an image of presidential strength, while Trump exhibits overwhelming strength that arouses growing sympathy.

At this stage of the complicated sequence of elections in the United States, primary elections are held regularly during the first months of the year, following an ancient calendar, in certain states and regions of the country, where the preferences of the population towards one figure or another, which receives careful coverage by the media. But, this time something unusual has happened. The initial and symbolic events of the election season have

been carried out - the caucus or assembly of voters in Iowa, the primaries in New Hampshire, and the great election day known as Super Tuesday, in which 15 states voted, established by an old tradition, where competitors have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to attract support and set the course for future presidential elections--, the candidates of the two parties facing each other have practically been defined.

Usually, uncertainty prevails until midyear, when in the summer months, between July, August and at the latest, September, the National Conventions of both are held, as decisive meetings in which the nomination of the candidates is formally approved- until then, pre-candidates - who will face each other in the elections that take place in November.

As can be read in the vast majority of analyses, they swept as pre-candidates for both parties in the aforementioned events, which was expected, in the sense that they far surpassed their rivals, ruling out almost all contenders from the game. The president won the Democratic Party and the former president led the results in the Republican Party, with the exception of Vermont, where his competitor, Nikki Haley, won a victory. Although quantitatively neither Biden nor Trump have yet reached the total number of delegates needed to win the corresponding party nomination, the result is quite eloquent.

In short, it could be stated that, on this occasion, the mystery that, in previous situations, has kept the expectation and tension in the audiences until the aforementioned conventions has already been solved. Trump and Biden appear - after the decantations of other rivals and the objections they encountered, in each case - as the viable options, despite the questions to which each one was subject. This has been the case, despite the fact that, on the one hand, there was the disenchantment generated by Biden's advanced age and dissatisfaction in public opinion regarding his presidential performance, branded as weak and ambiguous; and on the other hand, the legal limits that Trump could encounter were evident, due to the judicial cases he is involved and the fear that his unpredictable behavior instills in many. Although the process must still take place along formal paths, in the coming months, the image is drawn today with fairly firm lines. It seems, subject to some surprising, unusual outcome, that the counterpoint of 2020 will have a rematch, although under different conditions, between both contenders.

I'd like to take the above as an analytical assessment, which weighs the situation in its context and places it in perspective, not as a forecast. The author of these notes believes that it's still too early to make conclusive judgments on the possible results, and prefers to avoid the temptation of delving into the examining of specificities of the developments taking place at state level, the data disclosed by opinion polls and the reflections of the debate in the media, which frequently turn the North American elections into true spectacles or media shows. Often, such analytical exercises, rather than providing tools for objective analysis, encourage superficial and even misleading views. In a previous article, entitled "United States: between crisis and elections", published in Cubasí early on last February, the complexity and functioning of the electoral processes in that country was generally explained, although no reference was made to the current process. Its reading (or rereading) could complement or clarify what's now being said.

Perhaps it's more useful to contextualize the environment in which 2024 elections take place - instead of predicting their results -, retaining the most immediate antecedents and drawing the background trends that are more clearly visualized, which show that the aforementioned crisis of legitimacy, whose superlative visibility was recorded in 2020, today forms a political and ideological articulation, in a fertile cultural soil, that deepens and widens the gap in the system. In this regards, it's convenient to go back in the analysis, briefly, two decades ago.

At the crossroads that intertwines the end of the 20th century and the beginning of this one, the United States was the scene of decisive events for its contemporary history, as processes of profound significance for its development were unleashed during the time gone by since then. This conditioned the North American dynamism at all levels until the current decade, the 2020s, leading to a recurring multiple crisis, with implications for the remaining years of this decade, and even beyond.

On the one hand, a unique presidential election process took place, marked by such irregularity, prolongation and fraudulence, that it would be the Supreme Court - faced with the difficulty of determining which of the candidates had been the winner in the 2000 electoral contest - which would appoint Republican George W. Bush as the new president, resorting to a legal resource with few precedents in that nation. The double Democratic Administration of William Clinton was left behind, with its ups and downs, without articulating a project that would truly renew the liberal political tradition and discard from the domestic scene the influential conservative legacy, contributed by the repeated presidency of Ronald Reagan and the sole George H. Bush mandate. On the other hand, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 would shake American society, leading to transformations in the political system

and promoting a culture of fear that persistently permeated civil society and was steadily reflected in public opinion.

Thus, a climate that recalled the times of McCarthyism - the repressive spiral of the 1950s - took hold, and there was a shift in the image of questioning, of a president without a mandate, that accompanied W. Bush since his establishment in the White House on January that year, upon receiving the support, just eight months later, that would provide him with leadership based on his phrase "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" and the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism. The COVID-19 pandemic added complexity to the environment, catalyzing an already prefigured economic shock, fostering citizen insecurity and a broad context of health crisis, which revealed the system's inability to articulate effective public policies.

As the 21st century unfolds, the results of six presidential mandates have piled up in that country (including that of 2000, which, strictly speaking, was the last of the preceding century, but whose outcome occurred, as is known, in 2001), accompanied by the corresponding mid-term elections. Before the end of the current decade, there will be another two general elections, in 2024 and 2028. From the political and ideological point of view, contradictory trends that overlap and mutually exclude have been revealed, with recent expressions. Three years after the assault on the Capitol, both the division and distance from the consensus and the disturbing symbolic consequences for the legitimacy of the democratic system that survives in the national psychology and North American political culture are corroborated. Such a situation is inserted in a broader framework of domestic political-legal, institutional and economic processes, along with others related to foreign projection of the United States, which are part of a changing and changed multidimensional framework.

With this, the partisan and ideological dynamics would acquire further dimensions, since the opposition for and against Joseph Biden, as the new ruler, revealed intense progressive and reactionary attitudes, which revived the conflict, often latent, if not manifest, derived from radical right-wing political extremism, and the rejection it spawned. A climate of increasing violence, racism, nativism and xenophobia was thus revealed, calling into question again, as in the 1980s, the myth of the United States as a paradigm of the liberal political tradition, in the face of the rise of the conservative spiral. The 2016 electoral process would show the depth of an unfinished commotion, which projected the silhouette of a shifting society, based on other unusual events, such as the appearance of a woman, Hillary Clinton, and a showbiz magnate, Donald Trump, among presidential candidates. Such contradictions have been recorded, since then, as an extended pattern, between the parties and within them, with notable visibility in the aforementioned electoral situations and beyond them.

Let's just recall the differences between the candidates who, until the last minute, at each electoral juncture, were leading the race: Bush/Gore, in 2000; Obama/McCain, in 2008; Obama/Romney, in 2012; Trump/Clinton, in 2016; Biden/Trump, in 2020. The rivalries between the Democratic and Republican candidates during the presidential campaigns and during the previous process, between the pre-candidates in the competition to obtain the nomination in the respective national conventions, are clear examples of partisan contradictions, as well as the counterpoints between the trends that coexist within the parties, distinguishing a range of positions: from the most progressive, through the moderate and centrist, to the most reactionary. In this framework, approaches have been recurrently recorded, both liberal and conservative, traditional and innovative, which, strictly speaking, are not antagonistic, but rather differ in the topics or agendas they prioritize and in the ways to achieve their goals, to establish themselves in government. Do not lose sight of the fact that they are parties with a similar class background, that of the ruling class, that differ more in form than in content; more in the means than in the ends.

The first decade of the 21st century was filled with symbolism for civil society and American culture that carried over, with specific features, to the next two. The questioning of the functionality of the political system based on the difficulties in deciding who would occupy the presidency since the unusual electoral process of 2000 anticipated the crisis of legitimacy that the 2020 election and the assault on the Capitol in 2021 would decisively entail. As this two-decade period passes, an arc of crisis is evident in which legitimacy stands out as a fundamental dimension. Its outcome cannot be seen through a conclusive narrative, although a political crisis runs through civil society and culture as a constant. Hence it's a crisis of legitimacy of the system.

The analysis of the process that unfolds throughout the named presidencies, from W. Bush to Biden, 2000-2024, suggests that changes have taken place in that society that tend to perpetuate the shift to the right of the political culture that began in the 1980s, with the double Republican government of Ronald Reagan, with the so-called Conservative Revolution, and that after a certain contraction, under the repeated Democratic mandate of William Clinton, was consolidated starting in 2001, under the first W. Bush Administration.

It would not be out of place to remember that the 2016 elections showed that popular participation was

extraordinarily low, with abstentionism reaching a very high level, contrasting this with the complete opposite in 2020, when the highest participation in that vote was recorded for almost a century. This data does not provide a definitive measurement for the characterization of the subjective atmosphere in which the government establishes, but it's a visible indication of the degree to which routine and lack of motivation make up the social imagination in the United States, in the face of a relevant process as to decide who's going to govern the nation. In this regard, the Trump Administration was born, developed and ends without a broad consensus in ideological terms, although with the consistent endorsement of the class diversity of the electoral base that supported it with its vote - made up of sectors of workers, middle class, from corporate circles in spheres such as construction, real estate, energy, the military-industrial complex and high finance--, whose loyalty was not absolute, but was sufficiently functional to "Trumpism", which still enjoys good health.

For more than twenty years now, since the 2000 elections, readjustments have occurred in American society, palpable when contrasting the expressions of support that W. Bush enjoyed, starting with the terrorist attacks of 2001, when public opinion spoke in favor of a strong, determined president, and the demonstrations of general fatigue or rejection of his worn-out far-right government management, which demanded change, which Obama capitalized on, through the slogan Change! (Change!), from the primary elections to his victory in 2008 elections and his re-election in 2012. However, at the end of his second term, in 2016, the division within the Democratic ranks was tangible, as the reformist and renewing proposal of a new candidate, Bernie Sanders, with popular roots, gained presence, although his electoral option would be frustrated, in the face of the leading agenda within that party, symbolized by a traditional political figure, such as Hillary Clinton, who would obtain the nomination at the Democratic National Convention, being defeated by Trump at the polls.

Then, the gap in political legitimacy - with its most complete expression in the contempt for legality that the president expressed as he was ending his mandate, refusing to accept the results of the Electoral College, arguing actions of fraud and inciting violence leading to the assault on the Capitol, proposing the creation of a third party--, constituted just the symptom of a cracking of the political system, which would shake it as a whole, cracking its three subsystems: the government, the partisan and the electoral. Today, the domestic North American climate shows a degree of tensions and conflicts that allows us to think, even as a hypothesis, of the possibility that the gap, regardless of the results of the next presidential election, may grow deeper.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSí Translation Staff
