

Democracy under Assault

By Michelle Chávez

The cornerstone of a democratic society is free and fair elections that result in an orderly and peaceful change of government and transfer of power. But democracy goes beyond elections. It is a socio-political system with certain cherished values. In a democratic society, distinct norms, values and principles such as freedom, equality, justice, respect, tolerance, pluralism and participation are not only recognized and held in high regard, but are also promoted and advanced by its government and authorities.

On January 6th, we saw images that resembled scenes out of a Hollywood movie. Supporters of Donald Trump broke into the Capitol building in Washington D.C. and not only interrupted the Congress session that was supposed to officially certify Joe Biden's election victory, but also vandalized and damaged property worth millions¹ and even led to the death of 5 people.

I am puzzling why Trump's supporters believed they had the authority to forcefully enter the Capitol building. In my view they felt supported and motivated, first by a president who, made fraud allegations questioning the integrity and transparency of the elections before they even took place; second by a president who urged them to protest and walk down to the Capitol, and third because they appeared to know the privileges they enjoy as predominantly white male Americans. It seems they thought that by "protesting", they can do whatever they want as white people in a white-dominated and unequal society, without the threat of facing any direct consequences, a trend that has escalated during the years of the Trump presidency, without facing the consequences.

To better understand what happened in the U.S. both on January 6th this year and in the past years since Donald Trump came to power, I decided to interview 3 people, so as to contrast possible different points of view. First, I interviewed Fabian Könings, a PhD student at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, - Chair of Finance Faculty. I talked to Fabian about his view as a German and a European. Also, I wanted to find out if people in the U.S. had perceived a change in American democratic values since Donald Trump ascended to power. Therefore, I had a conversation with Amanda Weitekamp, a lawyer, who works as public defender for the State of Minnesota in the U.S. Finally, in order to find a perspective that would enable the weaving together of both the German and American points of view, I interviewed Katja Greeson. She is an American political scientist who has lived in Germany for the last two years and recently finished her research fellowship "Fortifying Democracy through Transatlantic Civic Education," a fellowship supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the host institute, Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten e.V. (AdB).

Interview with Fabian Könings

Michelle: Why is the political situation in the USA an issue that should concern the rest of the world, especially Europe?

Fabian: For Europe and also for Germany, the USA is one of the largest trading partners. This is an economic argument, it is simply extremely important for us what happens there, that is why we are dependent on them. We all want to earn money and have prosperity. The laws that are introduced there

¹ According to the U.S. Capitol Architect, repairing the damages caused on January 6th will cost more than 30 million US Dollars (Kaplan 2021).

affect us a lot. And what Donald Trump has done there is more of the so-called protectionism. He has introduced tariffs on certain products from the EU and has railed against German cars, etc. That's why we're concerned about what's happening there and who's elected there.

The other story, of course, is that the U.S. has a longer democratic history than we do (in Germany). Our democracy was established only 70 years ago with the Basic Law and in the United States the 46th president has already been elected. So, in the USA, the democratic history goes back much longer. If something is good, it lasts a long time. I would say that's one of the greatest strengths of the United States. So, again, it's important for us. And of course, from a European perspective, the U.S. has always been the one that has defended democracy from other countries, or at least used it as a pretext to be able to intervene militarily. Theoretically, the U.S. has long been responsible for speaking out when a regime oppressing its people was in power in a country and, if necessary, intervening militarily— even if the people did not agree with it. The U.S. completely lost this role under Trump.

Now, also under Joe Biden, this continues to concern us very much, since Biden will first have to take care of domestic politics and will not be able to primarily hold up the democratic flag in the world. So far, the U.S. has held its protective hand over many, so to speak, and said that we defend this liberal world against others. If the U.S. now struggles itself, then it can no longer hold this protective hand over others. On the one hand, because it would no longer be credible, because it doesn't work for them. And on the other hand, when the country is so divided, they lack the power.

Michelle: What position should the European Union take towards the United States after the Capitol storming?

Fabian: It is difficult when a country or an association of countries, here the EU, interferes in certain political processes of other countries. I just said that the U.S. did that, and I also believe that in some cases it was reasonable and in other cases it was not, but that should always be as a last resort.

Actually, processing the events and coping should come from their own people and take place in their own country, so it is difficult for the EU to intervene more than to express regret for what happened. What I find very important, which also fills me with pride, is that in Germany (I also heard it from Ursula von der Leyen at the EU), there was a very clear condemnation and regret for what happened in the USA. I think that is very important and essential at this time.

In the long term, the EU must work towards being able to defend these liberal and democratic values independent of the U.S. That won't be easy, and I don't have a precise idea for that either; it's difficult. It is also necessary to maintain a certain distance, and this must come from its own people, because otherwise it will not be well accepted and will not last in the long term.

Interview with Amanda Weitekamp

Michelle: Did the election of Donald Trump have something to do with the 8 years of Obama's Administration?

Amanda: I think that we had started to make some actual progress. And I think Barack Obama wasn't perfect. None is going to be perfect, but I do think just generally how we treat people is important. And

Obama seems to be a person who talked to people with respect. And having that kind of humanity trickles down. You could tell there wasn't a high hierarchy really with him.

I think the people who were feeling at risk were mostly white men. Some people figured out where people are more vulnerable and used that to elevate their game. You have individuals who feel that women, Afro-Americans particularly are becoming stronger, rising up and getting emancipated. And they think that when someone is getting something, I must be losing something. And I think that's kind of the perfect storm. Even Donald Trump said things like he won this election because people were responding to Barack Obama in the White House. That sounds to me like a race-based reason. And also the immigration policy was used to manipulate.

Michelle: I have seen many videos and also read on the news, that the people who did not agree with a diverse U.S. were suddenly all over and they also felt that they had the right to make all kinds of racist comments after Donald Trump came to power, did you notice that?

Amanda: Exactly, I remember the day I had court, I think it was within the week Donald Trump was elected. I had a young person who said that he started to receive racist comments right away. This kid was like eleven years old, born in the USA and he is not white and somebody told him things like: *"...yeap...now that Donald Trump is the president...you know you are going back to your country..."* and that kind of verbiage. There was an immediate shift, the way people started treating people. That was towards the end of the elections and then once he won, people just continued with it. And if we do not treat people as humans first, then all the other bad things happen from that. This happened in Minnesota which is a state that is pretty progressive. I just cannot even imagine been in one of the southern states. I would be interested to know if in the southern states, did anything ever change? Did people experience any true change under Obama? And did Trump do anything to make it any worse?

Michelle: Some people said that what happened on January 6th 2021 was one of the darkest chapters of democracy in America's history, would you agree with such a statement?

Amanda: I do agree. It is crazy to see people saying that what happened on January 6th was not so bad and they compare it to the protests of BLM. They say it was nothing compared to what BLM-people did in Minneapolis. And I cannot believe it because people were trying to destroy democracy.

We have had many dark days in the history of our country. This country is supposed to be based on democracy and I believe that. And if the very people who are supposed to be protecting the sanctity of democracy are either trying to subvert democracy directly or indirectly, then we have nothing that this country is supposed to stand for. That said, we had many dark days in the history of this country, no doubt about it, but at least in all of those dark days we had democracy.

Michelle: What was the message conveyed by the Impeachment trial of Trump?

Amanda: This impeachment process meant nothing else other than to say that the country stood up and said that whether this doesn't have any direct impact on Donald Trump's future we still are taking a stand. And I think that is important for this country itself. Many countries watch what happens in the USA, and many markets are going up and down based on what is happening here. I am not sure if it should be that way but it is. But I think this country has a duty to itself and just as well as to the whole planet.

Interview with Katja Greeson

Michelle: What do you think about what happened in the U.S. Capitol on January 6th?

Katja: I was in the U.S. at that time and I was watching the news. We all knew that there was going to be this protest, but I think because it's so unprecedented, we really didn't have the idea that this could be happening. And even while watching the news, I think a video that was an unofficial video that they used to film proceedings in Congress (C-Span), which showed a little, it was really hard to tell what was going. It has been really interesting seeing the videos that protesters themselves posted on social media in the days after just because it paints a better picture. So in the moment it was certainly shocking and I think it just continues to get kind of worse and worse as the time goes on and we learn more about it who is involved and you know, why the capitol police were not prepared to deal with this situation even though we knew about the threats beforehand. It's an obvious attack on democracy. I think Donald Trump didn't come into his presidency thinking: Yes, I am going to ruin democracy. I have this big goal to change the democratic system. I think for him it's really about preserving himself and that has just turned into this bigger movement, almost a call, in my opinion, to people that support him. It's scary, I do worry a lot about how it moves forward because I think there's still a ton of people behind that movement.

Michelle: Do you somehow feel that what happens in the U.S. is important to the rest of the world?

Katja: Yes. Definitely. I think it's fascinating and saddening how much people know about U.S. politics vs what Americans know about the rest of the world. I hadn't been in the States for two and a half years before I went back recently, and watching the news there is shocking. I looked intentionally at German news when I was there or BBC- but if you watch U.S. cable news all day long, you will never hear anything about any place in the world, not even allies that are important to the U.S. I think that's just shocking. And you know the U.S. plays a major role in the politics of the rest of the world. I get why people pay attention and why people are so shocked by this attack on democracy itself.

Michelle: The U.S. has been a democratic and political reference for Germany. Now that you have been researching about civic education in Germany, what do you think the U.S. could learn from Germany regarding this area?

Katja: You're right, the U.S. is the oldest democracy and until then has been held up as an example. I don't want to say that is not the case anymore and I think it is a big mission of Joe Biden going into his term to show again that democratic systems are effective, that it is the form of government most capable of confronting the challenges of today and tomorrow equitably and effectively. As Biden has said, it is about using the power of our example, not the example of our power. So I think that's one point that is not to say that the U.S. is over on this kind of role model for democracy, but I do definitely think that U.S.-Americans themselves should look beyond the U.S. and that there's a lot of room for learning from other places. I think we are moving in that direction again with the election of Joe Biden and we are working in partnerships with other Countries. There needs to be close collaboration and an intentional focus on

preserving democratic systems of governance in an internationally collaborative way. Specifically because of my interest in civic education, I think in Germany there's a real investment in it and I think that comes from the experience of World War II, the Holocaust and having seen how vulnerable the democratic system is. We also need to take that lesson. I think it is impressive the monetary investments that are made in civic education or in social welfare. We certainly could learn from that.

Michelle: And during Trump's administration, did you perceive or notice the undermining of democratic values or something similar taking place?

Katja: Definitely, I think we have seen him continuously attack things like media freedom and the rule of law. He used his executive power in ways that previous presidents have not. He has absolutely threatened democracy. We are now facing much more polarization than before. I think even 7 in 10 republicans still believe that the election was stolen in a poll that I saw recently.

Findings and Conclusions

According to a surveys conducted by the Washington Post in 2011 and the Pew Research Center on the perception of racism as a problem in America, in November 2011, 28 % of respondents perceived racism to be a big problem in contrast to a survey conducted in August 2017, in which almost twice as many respondents (58%) perceived racism to be a big problem.

In another poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019, 56% of adults said President Trump had made race relations worse since taking office, while only 15% of the interviewees said he had made progress toward improving race relations. In the same survey, around two-thirds of adults (65%) said it had become more common for people in the U.S. to express racist or racially insensitive views since since Trump was elected.

An analysis done by the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization "The 19th" showed that the 2020 gender pay gap in the White House was worse than the national gender pay gap. Women working for Trump's administration made around 69 cents for every dollar their male counterparts earned (the national gender pay gap was 82 cents on the dollar). Beyond this, many of the public policies implemented or suspended during President Trump's government had a direct effect on women's sexual and reproductive rights (including US aid for the UN Population Fund) and also eliminated and restricted initiatives that protected the LGBTQ+ community.

The interviews and the data of the surveys conducted, show that there were two specific issues that played a major role during the administration of Donald Trump: race and gender. These issues eventually led to heightened polarization of the American society. On one side, a considerable segment of the society felt more marginalized and excluded, and this led to more people supporting social movements such as BLM and the #MeToo campaign. On the other side, another segment of the society seemed to have experienced a lot of fear of changing demographics, as well as the inclusion and integration of more minority groups across the country. These were arguably key catalysts that enabled the unexpected chaotic events of January 6th during the storming of the U.S. capitol to become a reality.

As a citizen of Nicaragua, which is currently a country ruled by a dictator, I can affirm, in view of my personal experience, that it takes a long period of time and a lot of work to build a democratic system. If such a governance system and its institutions are however not strong enough, it takes just a little push to change or transform a democracy to an autocracy or even a dictatorship. For that reason, a democratic system of government cannot be taken for granted.

The worst that can happen is to stop caring about politics, and whether we like it or not, politics affects everybody and everyday life. It affects the taxes we pay, the quality of the education we receive, the health care system, public transportation and even our safety. An indifferent and uniformed society is the perfect target for an undemocratic regime, because through ignorance and fear, people can be easily manipulated.

What happened on January 6th was a wake-up call that shows that no country is immune to anti-democratic movements, and that democracy must be actively protected and defended.

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