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Dreamers visit the UNAM.

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Chronicles of a Universe with Multiple Rules and Moving Pieces

U.S. Domestic Politics

The study of U.S. domestic politics can be a labyrinthine, uphill effort plagued with contradictions. Faced with that, many tend to reduce it to simplistic or redundant arguments. However, for a large number of political scientists, U.S. politics is a living, enthralling story written in different colors of ink in multiple sizes. It is a story that makes us think profoundly to be able to untangle processes, interactions, and behavior that make it more intelligible for those who might have to look into what is going on in Washington, D.C.

One of Barack Obama's most celebrated phrases explains, "The change we need doesn't come from Washing-

ton. Change comes to Washington."¹ That is exactly my job: explaining how and why parsimony or political change on the different agendas revolutionize U.S. politics, and, from there, global politics. Although in the fifth century before our era Plato explained that we all carry a political animal within us, and even though in our time the U.S. television series *House of Cards* has made many viewers think they are experts in U.S. politics, reality is stranger than fiction.² The complexity of U.S. politics requires profound analyses that mean we have to refer to and dialogue with classical and contemporary theoreticians to try to explain political behavior and processes, some of which follow patterns while others transform paradigms.

In a 1946 interview that would later be immortalized in a *New York Times* column, Nobel Prize laureate and

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physicist, founder of the theory of relativity, Albert Einstein was asked by a journalist, “Dr. Einstein, why is it that when the mind of man has stretched so far as to discover the structure of the atom, we have been unable to devise the political means to keep the atom from destroying us?”³ Aware of what his work had meant as the basis for scientific revolutions, some with effects as terrible as the atomic bomb and others as praiseworthy as its application in biomedical research, Einstein responded, “That is simple, my friend. It is because politics is more difficult than physics.”⁴ Politics and society truly do defy logic and rationality; they have a greater degree of entropy, complexity, and dynamism.

Political science demands that political scientists know how to navigate the oceans of theory, be rigorously methodical, but above all, constantly observe reality. In the face of so much information, scales of enquiry into this science have been defined (local, national, regional, and global), as well as levels (micro, meso, and macro). However, we researchers of U.S. politics frequently have to move across scales and play with levels of analysis to be able to find our research niche and even find in that discipline universe a space appropriate for developing our knowledge concerns.

This process takes many years and is in an ongoing state of construction. It flowers better when it happens in a university of world-class excellence, with a humanist mission, and that cultivates critical thinking within its walls. It thrives better in a specialized, interdisciplinary research center that fosters creativity and has steadily become central to its field. That is why the hermeneutics school blossomed at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and political ecology flowered at the University of Chicago.

The UNAM Center for Research on North America (CISAN) has been pivotal for my interest in understanding and explaining U.S. society and government. It is a space where, since my time as a graduate student, I found fo-

rums for listening to and dialoguing with my teachers, whom today I proudly call colleagues and friends. The CISAN has been one of my best schools, where I started out as a researcher and began to learn how to make discerning socio-political analyses. In addition to being my workplace, it is an incubator for my critical thinking and a source of motivation for increasing the quality of my research.

Curiously, I published my first academic article in the CISAN’s *Norteamérica. Revista Académica* in 2016.⁵ It was a piece that analyzed how the Dreamer movement had politicized a considerable sector of U.S. youth. Those massive mobilizations, imbued with symbolism, had given the Latino collective organizational capital and greater visibility in U.S. politics. My article concludes that young Latinos will only be leaders if they manage to understand and take advantage of a political scenario in which changes are slow but possible. Based on that research, I began to look more deeply into migratory policy and Latino politics in the United States.

Those aims led me to do field work in Chicago, a city that was my political school, just as it has been for many Mexicans who have their feet firmly planted there despite having left part of their heart in Mexico. Chicago was the main sociological and political laboratory for the twentieth century. The city hosts one of the largest political machines in history, and therefore, has developed very interesting co-ethnic political dynamics. It is not by chance that the first Afro-American to become president of the United States also had his political schooling there, first as a community organizer and later as senator. Added to this, the largest mass mobilizations in the history of the United States, the so-called Immigrant Spring of 2006, were organized out of Chicago’s Latino neighborhoods.

My work about Chicago led me to specialize in political sociology and, more concretely, in the political incorporation of minorities in the United States. From then on, I worked on an explanatory model based on political opportunity structure theory. This model elucidated three tensions in contemporary Latino politics.

The first involves ethnic organizations that deploy a dual dynamic of mainstreaming vs. autonomy: simply put, Latino organizations align with the establishment in institutional activities motivated by maximizing political channels and resources, but simultaneously maintain autonomy in their internal structuring, their decision-making mechanisms, and their plan of action. The sec-

ond involves mobilization: Latinos have learned that the protest mechanisms that work in the streets are not always effective in political institutions. Finally, the third tension is related to how a critical mass of Latino leaders deploy ongoing politization strategies for the collective to avoid the de-politization of their ethnic agenda inside institutions.

I had the good fortune of carrying out this research in the United States, Spain, Switzerland, France, and Mexico. In each of these places, I presented my initial findings and received feedback from internationally renowned academics. That was where I had the opportunity to put my academic training to the test and compare the quality of the work done in Mexico. These positive experiences motivated me to return to Mexico, and my main dream was to rejoin the CISAN, but now as an academic.

Another piece of work that has given me great academic satisfaction has been an article in which I propose a classification to differentiate sanctuary policies in the United States.⁶ Through the analysis of ordinances, laws, public policies, and my own fieldwork with political organizations in Illinois, California, Denver, New York, Philadelphia, and Texas, I explain the differences in design and implementation between a rhetorical sanctuary ordinance and the new horizons such as the sanctuary states and the digital sanctuaries.

In this process of “getting to know the monster from the inside” —to copy the celebrated phrase from José Martí’s political testament—,⁷ through fieldwork and training in their advanced research institutes, I have been able to understand and explain U.S. society and politics better. If Chicago allowed me to understand the real political functioning of communities in the United States, if cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia allowed me to understand how the economic elites are fundamental interest groups, it was Washington, D.C. that made me understand the magnitude and degree of exceptionalism of the federal pact and governmental structure that make *E Pluribus Unum*, that is, that the many link up in a nation.

Outside the United States people have the mistaken idea that the White House and its occupant are practically the only protagonists in politics. However, the real political action is in the Capitol, which is even why it is the central and largest building on the District of Columbia’s National Mall. U.S. congressional politics is so im-

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portant that it is the object of the first article of the Constitution.

Studying U.S. domestic politics is ambitious and difficult. You have to understand national political conventions and the powers delegated to the states. You have to know in detail the way the mechanisms of checks and balances work. You have to be able to follow electoral processes and frequently get used to making wrong predictions.

You have to know many, many names because you have to situate posts and key political profiles. You have to know how to untangle the politics of money and its consequences. You have to precisely situate interest groups, caucuses, and political action committees. You have to understand how political redistribution and civil rights operate in the processes of political change. It is, in short, a universe with many rules and many moving pieces.

In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison wrote that the fundamental aim of the U.S. Constitution was to restrict the ability of majorities to suppress minorities.⁸ My main research project at the CISAN, “Minorities on the U.S. Legislative Agenda. Agents for Change or Political Disruption?” deals precisely with how these dynamics work. The main objective is to analyze the conventional, contentious mechanisms that political minorities are using to influence the design of the U.S. legislative agenda. It studies ethnic minorities, women, and also extreme right-wing groups to infer about the current political state of play, characterized by the divergences among the political elites in the legislative branch and the political perceptions of these social sectors, who are political outsiders.

The historic facts that a woman, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, presides over the House of Representatives, and that in 2018, a record number of women members of Congress were elected, who also come from very diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, indicate that there is a new distribution of power in U.S. politics; and in this

process, women are key agents. These dynamics led me to write my most recent article, “Establishment Women vs. ‘The Squad’: Styles of Women’s Political Representation in the U.S. Congress.”⁹ By chance, this article, like the first, was also published in the CISAN’s journal *Norteamérica, Revista Académica*.

This article led me to embark on a new research odyssey: learning the history of how U.S. women had developed four waves of a progressive movement to be part of politics in a country that has “Founding Fathers” and does not recognize any “Founding Mother.” The celebrated U.S. Supreme Court judge and liberal feminist activist Ruth Ginsburg wrote in her autobiography about U.S. politics, “As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we’ll all be better off for it.”¹⁰

In this research project, I use the spheres of political representation (objective, substantive, and symbolic) as well as the analysis of legislative behavior to contrast two profiles of congresswomen. One is of the senior group of congresswomen, from the Establishment, a group led by Nancy Pelosi, who is betting on the gradual incorporation of women into politics without abrupt political changes. The second profile is of the media-savvy, defiant “squad” made up of four congresswomen from more diverse backgrounds, led by Latina Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, the youngest congresswoman in history.

In this research, I analyzed public discourse, the bills they presented, their votes, and the funds they raised to see if there were contrasts in their legislative performance or if the differences are merely in discourse. I conclude that Alexandria Ocasio and Nancy Pelosi only represent two kinds of political leadership style, but with similar performance in Congress: “One fires up youth with their speeches and incorporates issues in their platform that impact inclusive social spheres; the other keeps Trump at bay and pushes through complicated legislative negotiations.”¹¹

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These interactions between two generations of congresswomen take place in the broader context of U.S. politics. The elections, the census and redistricting, the impeachment process, and the path that public policy will follow take over the time and mind of the specialist in U.S. politics. Fortunately, the university’s dynamism, through its lectures, workshops, seminars, its student community, and even its challenges, allows us to share our reflections, be questioned, and receive feedback.

One of the challenges of Mexican academia and academia the world over has been the need to incorporate new generations of researchers to revitalize research groups through more balance between youth and experience. We young researchers are very enthusiastic about learning and know that we are immersed in a training process. We’re more motivated to question and not waver when we make proposals, sometimes naively and without any experience; we’re more daring in our lines of research; and we stand by our methodological proposals more. However, in our work we also cite and discuss the classics and our teachers. So, the process of academic regeneration is not only an arithmetic one, but also one of progressive changes anchored in learning, un-learning, and re-learning together. This is the objective of the UNAM Sub-Program to Incorporate Young Academics, which I am fortunate enough to be a part of.

I have realized that some books on the shelves of the CISAN’s Rosa Cusminsky Library have been there longer than I have been on this Earth. The three decades of work that my colleagues have forged in studies about the North American region, in which they are pioneers in Mexico and who have become very prestigious in their lines of research, are admirable; and making a place of the kind that they have created in Mexican academia seems like a titanic job. As Vince Lombardi used to say in his speeches to beginners, “The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary.” That is why I have decided to turn what seem like challenges into examples, motivations, and opportunities.

As part of a new generation at the CISAN, I am very motivated for this research center to continue to be a very important reference point nationwide for North American studies. In the field of U.S. domestic politics, I have found the place from which I want to contribute my grain of sand to all the research, dissemination, and projects developed here. ■■■