

American Wealth, Power, Poverty and Inequality:

Glimpses of Election Day through the Eyes of a Visitor

On the evening of Tuesday, November 6, as I came down the elevator from my office in the Wilson Center heading towards the exit, I walked straight into a lavish party at the atrium of the Reagan Building. The Republican National Committee had booked the space to celebrate election night. Finishing touches were being applied to the decorations and the lighting, and elaborate food and beverage tables had been set up by uniformed servers. The sound system and other equipment to be used by the musicians and the speakers, that included House Speaker John Boehner, had been carefully arranged. Television monitors hung on the wall. It was an opulent sight, but not lacking in taste. Before long a stream of smartly dressed men and women in fashionable attire and stylish footwear began to come through the security doors and proceed towards the atrium, eventually filling the amphitheatre. The atmosphere was vibrant yet one of suppressed anticipation. Several people stopped to talk. One was a PBS reporter; another was a woman from Staten Island. As I walked past the registration desk, a tall and elegant young man said smilingly that he hoped I was getting ready to celebrate a Romney win. I told him that I was a visitor to the country, but I was looking forward to celebrating the election results no matter who the winner.

The part of Washington, DC where the US government is located symbolizes wealth and power like no other capital in the world. The government buildings, museums and memorials are stately, the architecture refined and the people going about their daily business confident and, for the most part, prosperous. There is no visible sign of the difficult fiscal and budgetary situation facing the country or of the crippling political polarization threatening further economic setbacks. It is an attractive place to go to work every day and enjoy the opportunity to walk on wide sidewalks around city blocks over the lunch hour.

As a Canadian on a nine-month research assignment in Washington, DC, the 2012 election was memorable. This was the first time I was in the United States on election day. The excitement was natural. The bruising campaign leading up to the election was exhausting, the ideological gulf between the two parties wide; hence the solutions put forward to address the nation's problems vastly different. Opinion polls were predicting a close election, which added to the excitement. Being a visitor, but one quite interested in American politics, I was determined to enjoy it to the full extent and celebrate the outcome no matter who the winners or losers. It would be yet another celebration of democracy in this great country with its rich democratic tradition and of the American people exercising their democratic right with enthusiasm. The storm of a week ago, however, that created such misery along much of the eastern seaboard

had dampened the mood somewhat, especially for those still without power. As a researcher in this country and a curious observer, I had the luxury of sitting back and watching the American people decide who they were going to vote for and why. Each had their own reason for choosing one party over another or one candidate over another. They were voting for candidates at the local, state and federal levels and for an eclectic collection of other issues ranging in some states from legalization of recreational marijuana to marriage equality. It was all very complicated, time-consuming and rather intense, a reflection not just of American democracy in action, but of decisions that were to be made by the electorate for a host of social and policy issues. One can only wish that a clever way could be devised to dodge the impending fiscal cliff through such a process!

After the usual Tuesday meeting with my research intern, I walked over to the Martin Luther King Library after lunch, a 15 to 20-minute walk from the Reagan Building. I wanted to see the actual polling and this was a polling center that was close by. At the entrance, I was asked if I had come to vote and when I said I was not a voter, the young man still let me through thinking that I probably wanted to use the library. I took advantage of this opportunity to get a library card and then waded through the polling lines of patient voters to read the daily newspapers at the far end of the library. The atmosphere was an entirely different one from where I work. Most of the people lined up to vote inside the library and the pedestrians walking around outside seemed visibly poor as did the street vendors selling an assortment of gloves, mittens and scarves. The appearance on their faces, their clothing, shoes, their whole demeanor revealed unambiguously their lower income level and social status. It is not that I had not seen poor people in such large numbers before. I grew up in a poor Asian country where conditions are a lot worse and where a majority of the people are desperately poor. But this is not a poor Asian country nor is it a community in a country in Central or South America, far away from the wealth and power of the American capital. It is just a stone's throw from the White House and the Capitol, symbols of America's power and influence that reach the farthest corners of the world. This is the city where decisions are made that affect not just the lives and wellbeing of Americans, but much of the rest of the world. It is the city where leaders of nations rich and poor, strong and weak, come to ask for favors or plead their case. And yet a large proportion of the American people living in the heart of the capital seem to be untouched by the wealth and glory of their own nation. The American pie is unquestionably large even in these difficult times, but the share received by some is pitifully small, casting a shadow on the wealth and grandeur that defines much of America. At that moment, the election results seemed irrelevant because no matter who won the presidency or which party controlled the House or the Senate, the lives of these people with their tiny share of the national pie was not about to change.

The election had been all but called anyway during the weekend. Networks, Fox TV excepted, analysts like the unerring Drew Linzer of Emory University, Sam Wang of Princeton and Nate Silver of the New York Times, and political pundits, save for the likes of George Will, were giving not just the electoral college, but also the popular vote to President Obama with the status quo extending to both the House and the Senate. Whatever the outcome, neither the lives of the Washington elite nor the rest of the population in the nation's capital were likely to change over the next four years. The people wrapped in blankets outside metro train stations on cool November nights seemingly oblivious of their surroundings as commuters return home will probably continue to live in much the same manner as well. Here again the status quo will likely remain as is!

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