



Mukulika Banerjee

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Donald Trump's election victory shows how the US is becoming a 'checklist' democracy



*On November 6th, 2024, Donald Trump was re-elected for a second term as President of the United States. Ahead of the LSE Phelan US Centre event, "[The 2024 US election: turning point for America?](#)", **Mukulika Banerjee** writes on the election results with a view outside of the Euro-American world. She writes that like the democracy it has exported and imposed on the world, Trump's election win shows how the US itself is at risk of becoming a 'checklist' democracy, one which is reduced to institutions alone with no active citizenship and cultivation of democratic values.*

- *Professor Mukulika Banerjee discussed the 2024 US election and its domestic and international implications as part of a panel of experts in the LSE Phelan US Centre event, "[The 2024 US election: turning point for America?](#)" on Wednesday 6 November 2024. [Watch the event recording and listen to the podcast.](#)*

There is a track record of outsiders being keen observers of the US. The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville set a standard with his landmark book *[Democracy in America](#)* in the 1830s and the rest of us have followed in its wake. But Tocqueville studied America as an anthropologist would, by spending months travelling through it, talking to people from different parts of society, studying institutions, and also observing how social interactions take place, how commitments to egalitarian life are not just enshrined in words, but practiced in daily lives.

My reflections on America come from a different vantage. From a point that is in Latin America, Africa or Asia. If you have encountered the US from these places, you have already witnessed the underbelly of that great beast. Today, that underbelly has been exposed to the Euro-American world.

The dark side to America's shining beacon

I hear many Americans say today “I thought we were better than this”. But, if you stand where most of the world’s population lives, there was always a cognitive dissonance about America. On the one hand, it promised a dream, a place where innovation and entrepreneurship were rewarded, its institutions worked, there was respect for the Constitution, and where creativity flourished. But there was always, always a dark side to this shining beacon. One that toppled democratically elected governments (think Algeria 1992), or supported dictators (think Pinochet in Chile), or looked the other way at extra judicial killings (think journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder by US best friend Saudi Arabia), or propped up and even encouraged extreme Islamisation if it served their purpose (think Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan who allowed the Americans in to fight the Russians in Afghanistan, in return for radically changing Pakistani society), wiped out entire populations in service of their Cold War (think nuclear tests in the Pacific) – the list goes on and on. The world has lived with this dissonance for nearly a century. The anger today over its aiding and abetting of the genocide in Gaza is not sudden, it has a long, long shadow.

And then there is the story of democracy. America has been the world’s self-appointed policeman of Democracy for decades. And in some ways, it has indeed been a shining beacon, providing an example of how to overcome a dark history of slavery and the dispossession of First Nation peoples to imagine a new kind of politics. For coining the phrase ‘We the People’ and then preparing for the struggle to create a genuine ‘we-ness’. But that was not the democracy that was exported and imposed on the world. That democracy was defined by a checklist of attributes, all of them institutional. Democracy was reduced to a set of institutional arrangements, of free and fair elections, of a free media, of a separation of powers between the judiciary, executive and legislature. The US monitor went around the world, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with their clip board ticking off what they did and did not find and dividing countries into Us and Them columns.



“Take America Back” (CC BY-NC 2.0) by SHYCITYNikon

Democracy needs democratic culture

Well, there were two problems with that. First, it failed to recognise that democracy is not just a set of institutions, it is the way a society chooses to live. It is 'associated living' as the American philosopher John Dewey **called it**. Democratic institutions exist to create a democratic society, a democratic culture that makes a commitment to a common good, aspires to egalitarianism, holds representatives to account, creates freedoms. Without such a democratic culture there is no Democracy. The checklist on the clipboard is meaningless.

Let's take the example of the economy and what kind of American society it created. While experts agree that the US economy is doing very well indeed many who voted for Donald Trump, said they did because they were worried about it. So, what happened? Wages did indeed rise, but they rose from a low of four years ago. The economy grew, but did people's life chances get no better than a generation ago? The benefits of economic growth went largely to those at the top, and white and blue-collar workers remained where they were a generation ago as their wages have flatlined. So there have been high economic growth rates but also a simultaneous rise in social inequality, leaving the bulk of the population out of the economic success story. That is not a democratic society.

The second problem with checklist democracy is that for the institutions of democracy to survive, we need to cultivate democracy. It takes hard work, patience, vigilance and hope. The agrarian democrats such as Thomas Jefferson and Thoreau wrote about this eloquently, having learnt their lesson from the practice of cultivation. They were both farmers. They warned that without a republicanism that is about active citizenship and cultivation, democracy by itself is simply mobocracy. Instead, cultivation and active citizenship protects the very institutions on that checklist and to create a better democratic society.

Democracy must be constantly cultivated and recreated

After the 2020 election victory Vice President elect Kamala Harris started her **acceptance speech** with the words 'Democracy is not a state, it is an act' quoting Congressmen and civil rights activist, John Lewis, to draw attention to democracy as a process, not a thing.

President Obama made the same point when **congratulating** Harris and the then President-elect Joe Biden, reminding their jubilant supporters to not forget this important lesson. While voting is the first and most basic act of the citizen in a democracy, he reminded everyone that it had to be more than that. 'Your efforts made a difference. Enjoy this moment.' But he went on, 'Then stay engaged. I know it can be exhausting. But for this democracy to endure, it requires our active citizenship and sustained focus on the issues – not just in election season, but all the days in between'.

We have just witnessed an election where nearly \$15 billion was spent – and most of it went back to media houses and owners of digital and physical space that a US campaign is so reliant on. We have witnessed a smoothly run democratic election, but the outcome is likely to be a thoroughly

undemocratic society that ostracises its minorities, threatens the rights of women who make up half the population, calls for the murder of opponents with impunity, thumbs the nose at rule of law, and rewards the rich with even greater riches. This is what a checklist democracy looks like – a democracy reduced to institutions, but where those who populate them do not subscribe to democratic values.

Active participation and international solidarity to address economic and social inequality

So, maybe it is time for those grieving in America today to listen to the world, to hear what their beloved country looks like to others, and to learn how to fight and rebuild and cultivate. A robust democratic culture learns to build solidarities. But the last four years have also seen an elected US government take seriously its responsibility to grow the incomes and wages of lower class. **Wages grew** for the first time at the bottom and most of the gains of growth went to below median wage workers. But these changes need time to show up (remember cultivation is about patience!) and for that just institutional changes are not sufficient. It requires active participation (the hard work of cultivation!). What is the point of union rights if workers don't unite?

The story of rising social inequality is not special to America, but Americans need to understand that fact and create solidarities with their counterparts in other countries. Costly foreign (mis)adventures of a *Pax America* ambition could be better spent on the health and opportunities of American citizens and better wages can be negotiated only collectively. Globalisation and its consequences need to be heeded, not just in America but across the world. The economic concerns of the citizens of most of Asia, Africa and Latin America are the same as their American counterparts, but Americans need to see that for themselves.

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About the author



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