



**El Congreso de Estados Unidos:
pragmatismo y pluralismo**

(The U.S. Congress: Pragmatism and Pluralism)

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The U.S. Congress is a paradigmatic institution, an example and seedbed for modern political systems. It is undoubtedly a key deliberative, decision-making, and legislative body for its nation and is important internationally, particularly for our Americas due to the effects beyond its borders of its positions, decisions, faculties, and actions. However, the works of political science produced in Spanish have reflected little about the processes, actors, guiding principles, and other variables that nourish its well-known “exceptionality,” an adjective that in the different analyses about the Congress is applauded but also questioned.

In this universe of approaches, research, and studies, César Pérez Espinosa offers an interesting critical, multi-dimensional reflection in his work *El Congreso de Estados Unidos: pragmatismo y pluralismo* (The U.S. Congress: Pragmatism and Pluralism), published by the UNAM Center for Research on North America in 2014. The author presents it as different from that of the a-critical, functionalist liberalism that has dominated the analysis of our neighbor’s Congress. His greatest contribution is having analyzed legislative representation based on the paradigms of pragmatism and pluralism, which, although it sounds complicated, turns out to be an appropriate theoretical framework.

The first section briefly sketches the historical processes that molded the U.S. political representation system, which Pérez Espinosa describes as a polyarchy with the pragmatic flexibility to govern an even more complex society. Outstanding here is his accent on the human nature of the Founding Fathers together with the political experience of an elite with founded, very specific interests. This led to a representative government grounded in minorities organized through different interest groups, which prevented the formation of a tumultuous dictatorship of the majorities.

This “exceptional” republic conceived of Congress as a space for plural political negotiation that would avert the secessionist pretensions of the colonies. Documents like *The Federalist Papers*, which attempted to convince readers of “the benefits of the Union,” reflected the national project as outlined by the founding elites, who maintained that government was “a necessary evil.”¹ This context resulted in a political design based on the exercise of power through a schema of representation and distribution backed up by mechanisms of checks and balances, sealed with a pact that guaranteed the fundamental freedoms and protection of property. Its aim, they said, would be prosperity and the construction of political system of its own that would act as a “nation on a hill,” a beacon

that would send out rays of the values underpinning the U.S. American socio-political pact: equal opportunities, freedom, and property.

Pérez Espinosa emphasizes that Congress's pragmatism can be explained, among other factors, by the representative nature of its institutions, its plural actors, and the construction of spaces for negotiation by the different sectors of society. The argumentation for the political machinery and its procedures is based on what they consider the common good, a concept, in this case, nourished by a pluralist aspiration that brings together the different though convergent interests present in its collective imaginary.

The author underlines that Congress is not fully an institution. Its nature can be better understood if it is seen as a deliberative body and a space for intermediation. Its work is not restricted to creating laws and passing budgets: it is the third branch of U.S. government, with faculties like those derived from working in committees, the trade clause, the veto, and impeachment of the president. Its powers go beyond those conferred by the Constitution: its members are political mediators who in the Senate represent the states of the Union, and in the House of Representatives personify the citizenry, interest groups, and even companies, reminding us how, from its very inception, the United States has operated as a corporate state.

The relationship of legislators to citizens can be best understood as a continual process of negotiation of interests fostered by both sides through concrete demands and mediated by the representative's experience and tenure. In this sense, when the author analyzes the institution's machinery, he underlines the processes of successive reelection to retain that experience and to explain the controversial process of gerrymandering to determine district boundaries in order to thin down the representation of some social sectors. He also narrates how professional lobbyists represent corporations and sometimes civil society organizations, becoming emissaries of interests as they simultaneously offer professional consulting services.

In this particular scenario of interests and groups, the representative is a unique agent since he/she must possess all the following characteristics: agile adaptability to changes in context; the capacity to coexist and coincide with plural, divergent, and sometimes conflicting points of view; having access to timely, strategic information sources; being open to lobbying; being aware of the practical value of an action; and having the capacity to navigate different milieus, from

the most formal and protocol-laden, to those closest to their constituencies.

The author reminds his readers that U.S. political reasonability is based on the complex articulation of interests and capacities for political negotiation of the plurality of its social sectors and on the difference in the demands and interests with the supposition of equal opportunities for all its citizens, and that this is the dynamic Latino legislators must use to conduct themselves as a group in expansion with leadership inside Congress.

Pérez Espinosa also states that "Hispanic" or "Latino" are labels difficult to pin down since they do not refer to homogeneous groups, but to a plural group. At the same time, he describes how the Latino caucus is characterized by having to bring together factors like the ethnic interests they represent and to construct and maintain a leadership of their sub-culture. The representatives also have to deal with configuring and reconfiguring their own ideology as well as that of the social sector they represent, the country they live in, and today's world, a context which in general can be summed up as a dialectic of conciliation, adaptation, and transaction.

With all of this, the Latino caucus has consolidated certain expertise; there are even figures among them who have been in Congress for decades and more than one has been a presidential hopeful. Therefore, Latino political leadership is a key issue and, given the rapid demographic growth of this ethnic minority, it will continue to be fundamental. The author thinks that this congressional group must strategically link up the acceptance of the political game they are part of with the negotiation of spaces for their concrete demands.

Pérez Espinosa argues his thinking solidly with examples that mark congressional history and that reformulated and reformed its dynamics and processes. These simultaneously invite the reader to extrapolate this thinking to recent events such as the 2013 debate about raising the debt ceiling, congressional approval of the Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative, today's immigration debate, and deferred deportation for "dreamers."

He also encourages debate about the political game as played in the U.S. legislature, putting forward questions about the way in which public and private interests are articulated in a corporate state where business is fundamental to understanding it. The depth of his analysis of the influence of actors exogenous to politics like social sectors and interest groups that influence decision-making is particularly noteworthy. He analyzes the different levels of capitalization of social

sectors, organized in pressure groups, lobbies, and caucuses. And he reflects upon lobbying and its influence on today's decisive issues, among other topics that, without being the central theme of the book, are touched on indirectly and will certainly give rise to fruitful academic discussions.

Thus, this book represents a necessary compact but reflexive analysis of the historical and contemporary processes that have influenced the make-up of the U.S. Congress. Presumably "the most complete democracy," its political mandate was outlined to protect above all fundamental freedoms and property as values that were the glue of society at a time when the population was diverse in its ethnic identity, socio-economic level, and interests. This spirit has endured and, despite its intrinsic pragmatism and the endogenous pluralism of its society, it continues to have formal mechanisms to incorporate new demands through processes that, although sometimes slow, tend to be repeatedly analyzed.

Finally, it should be underlined that this book is a fundamental resource for anyone interested in the U.S. political system and the study of political representation in the legislative branch that inspired the representative republics that are the generalized form of political organization today. It is also a must for anyone who wants to understand how politics are done in the United States and will be a well-founded reference for later studies in this area. **MM**

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NOTES

¹ See <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1786-1800/the-federalist-papers/>. [Editor's Note.]