

## **A Semester in Washington, D.C. by Santos Vazquez**

The fellowship offered to me by the Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement for the UCDC program gave me the opportunity to grow as a person, an academic, and an American. I had many experiences while I lived in the historically rich city of D.C. and as I interned for the House Democratic Leader, Nancy Pelosi. One experience in particular provided me with the ability to witness, learn, and reflect on the democratic engagement of a large and diverse society.

I spent the Fall of 2016 in the capital of our country under the governance of arguably one of the greatest presidents of the United States. Sometime towards the end of my experience, I witnessed the political consequences of one of the most shocking elections in modern history. Barack Hussein Obama, an eloquent symbol of inclusiveness, respect, and leadership, was to be succeeded by Donald John Trump, a person who struggled to denounce a Ku Klux Klan endorsement, who was the defendant in hundreds of lawsuits, and who has leadership experience that can be summarized by the firing of dozens of people.

The night of the election, I stood in front of the White House and asked myself, how is it that after electing Barack Obama, the voters have now chosen Donald Trump to represent the American people? I had gone out to celebrate what was sure to be a victory for the Democratic Party and returned to my D.C. home trying to wrap my mind around the consequences of a completely Republican government. I said goodbye to the Affordable Care Act, to sanctuary cities and to potentially dozens of other public policies that Republicans have condemned over the past eight years.

It was easy to consider half of the nation as part of the infamous “basket of deplorables” that former Secretary Hillary Clinton suggested. However, as my professors theorized, my internship exemplified, and as Hillary later rephrased, Americans had their own equally valid reasons to reject a continuance of the status quo (one which former Secretary Clinton was arguably a part of). Our government was not working the way it should. Millions of people had their own economic, social, and/or political complaints that the current system was not addressing. The American government is one of the people, by the people, and for the people and it was the people who had to change it when something was not working – thus, they did.

I was disillusioned and bothered, then energized. Did the people vote against the status quo or did they vote for Donald Trump? I dedicated the rest of my time in D.C. to understand how, when, and why an average citizen decides to reclaim his or her voice from the complex political system. I was fortunate enough to have been interning in a leadership office that provided a continuous influx of diverse perspectives, and I tried to learn from them all. One question arose: could the cities have progressed too far ahead of the rest of the country and caused the entire system to pull back? The answer is never simple and my experience taught me that the reality of politics is exponentially more difficult than what we learn in the classroom. Nevertheless, the ability to analyze and learn from such an election – with the resources that UCDC provided – encouraged me to continue pursuing my education in learning better ways to accurately represent and serve my community.