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Conference notes flaws in North American democracy

BY MATT GETTY

On Sunday the world looked to elections in Iraq to provide insight into democracy's future in the Middle East. Four days earlier, the Council for a Community of Democracies (CCD) looked to a conference at AU to do the same in a region where democracy's future is much more rarely considered—North America.

Uniting scholars, dignitaries, and former politicians from Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the CCD cosponsored "The North American Perspective: Democratic Deficits at Home and Abroad" on campus last Wednesday to evaluate challenges to democracy in the three North American nations. Founded in Warsaw, Poland, in 2000, the CCD, which is made up of 107 democracies, has held six similar regional conferences throughout the world. At this conference council "rapporteurs" gathered findings from such participants as Joe Clark, former Canadian prime minister and a current senior fellow at AU's Center for North American Studies, to share with representatives from the six other regions when the CCD convenes as a whole in Chile this April.



Photo by Jeff Watts

"Democratic Deficits" panelists debate the future of democracy in Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

In Canada's case, the largest threat to democracy, the conferees noted, comes from a decline in civic engagement stemming from either voter apathy or skepticism. Pointing to such indicators as a recent study that showed four out of five Canadians would fail the test immigrants currently take to win citizenry, two Canadian panelists called for increased civic education. However, Duff Conacher, coordinator of Canada's Democracy Watch, put the blame for low voter turnout on the politicians themselves. "Canadians are opting out of elections because they are disgusted with the ethics of their public officials," he said, calling for an honesty in government law to boost democratic participation. "Current polls show that 86 percent of Canadians believe that politicians lie to get into office, because politicians lie to get into office."

Reporting on the state of democracy in the United States, Nkechi Taifa, Open Society Institute senior policy analyst, argued that racial inequities in the criminal justice system pose the largest threat to the political system. “We can’t address our country’s democratic deficits without an examination of a system in which black men are imprisoned at five times the rate that they were in apartheid Africa,” she argued.

AU’s vice president of international affairs Robert Pastor then added electoral problems to the challenges facing U.S. democracy. Comparing his experience observing the 2004 presidential election at local polling places to election observations in some 30 other countries, including Nicaragua and Palestine, Pastor argued that our practices don’t compare favorably. “We’ve gotten sloppy,” he said. “We’re more concerned with error rates for washing machines than error rates for voting machines.”

Rounding out the survey of North American nations, panelists from Mexico praised much of their country’s democratic progress on the national level, but noted that crime and corruption in the states could easily erode that progress. “In many of the cities it’s the drug lords who have the real power, not the elected mayors” argued Carlos Heredia, advisor to governor Lazaro Cardena of Michoacan. “This is very worrisome for democracy.”

While threats to democracy dominated discussion at the conference, participants remained hopeful that the honest exchange would steer all the countries toward improvements. “To continue to improve and promote democracy throughout the world, we have to take a hard look at ourselves and judge how democracy is doing and what are some of its shortcomings,” said Richard Rowson, president of the CCD. “I’m particularly grateful to American University for taking the lead . . . and putting together this program.”

In addition to the CCD, conference cosponsors included AU’s Center for Democracy and Election Management, the Center for American Progress, the Democracy Coalition Project, Elections Canada, Rights and Democracy, and Alianza Civica.