

America, Beyond the Election. “Democracy, Equality and Privacy Rights are Decaying before our Eyes”

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The American people tend to view the Republican and Democratic parties as near polar opposites, but this is far from true. Indeed, they are clearly more united on the fundamentals underpinning U.S. society than they are at odds.

The heated legislative and political battles that characterize both parties, which are fought bitterly every two and four years in national elections and throughout the 50 states, are taking place within a much larger context of agreement between the right/far right Republicans and the center right Democrats.

We will touch upon this matter after discussing the recent trouncing of the Democratic Party in the Nov. 4 midterm elections, and posing this question: “Why are the Democrats so unpopular at a time when it was obvious that reactionary Republican obstructionism virtually paralyzed the political and legislative process?”

Compounding the GOP victory, a post-election Nov. 6-9 Gallup Poll revealed that the Democratic Party’s favorability rating among the American people was at its lowest point ever, 36%, compared to 51% just after the 2012 election that returned President Barack Obama to office for a second term. The Republican post-election tally was 42% this year compared to 28% — the lowest rating ever for either party — just a year ago in October after shutting down the Federal government for 16 days.

Fewer voters historically turn out for midterms, but this year that total was the lowest in 72 years — 36.6% of those eligible to vote at a time when the Democratic Party knew it was in trouble and made special efforts to get out the vote. It didn’t work. The result was not only that the Republicans gained control of the Senate and increased their large margin in the House but now also dominate over 60% of governorships and state legislatures.

Aside from the ideological right and left and those who closely follow politics, the great bulk of American voters — who far outnumber the ideologues and buffs — often possess little knowledge about politics, history, foreign affairs and the inner workings of national government, and are manipulated by the corporate mass media and political parties.

Those who control the levers of American society neglect to provide the masses of working people with a thorough understanding about the realities of American society because an enlightened citizenry would undoubtedly demand significant social change if the truth were known. The political parties are well aware of the consequences that might ensue if they heeded Thomas Jefferson’s famous words of 1820, and they will have none of it: “An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic. Self-

government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight.”

Far from educating, the contending parties invested billions of campaign dollars miseducating potential voters with endless stultifying, simplistic and deceptive negative attacks on the opposition.

Wall Street, the banking system, corporations and those who possess great wealth paid for this election and assuredly will be recompensed several fold in legislation, tax rebates, and favors from Congress and the White House. According to Demos, the liberal political policy organization:

Democracy has at its heart a basic promise: Citizens have an equal voice in deciding who represents them. This promise went unfulfilled again in 2014. Large donors accounted for the vast majority of all individual federal election contributions this cycle, just as they have in previous elections. Candidates alone got 84% of their individual contributions from large donors.... Just 50 individuals and their spouses accounted for more than a third of the total money raised by Super PACs this cycle. Many candidates, including some whose individual contribution totals reach into the millions, report receiving few or even no dollars in contributions from small donors.

Both parties received about the same amount of cash, with the Democrats slightly ahead on the national level. Many thought that the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision allowing virtually unlimited campaign contributions would principally harm the Democrats but that’s not the case. The two parties are thriving financially, while what’s left of democracy may have received a fatal wound.

The Democratic campaign was largely defensive, with most of its congressional candidates attempting to distance themselves from their own president. The apotheosis of this humiliating situation was when Democrat Alison L. Grimes, unsuccessfully running against Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell in Kentucky, declared she disagreed with Obama and wouldn’t admit to having voted for him.

Viewing the election results and the disinclination of Democratic candidates to make a show of support for President Obama, Stratfor’s George Friedman wrote Nov. 17: “The president is no longer battling for the center but is fighting to hold on to his own supporters — and is failing to do so.”

There are several reasons for the sharp drop in Democratic electoral support this year, but it is not a shift to the ideological right/far right. It primarily was far more a rejection of the center right unwillingness of Obama and the Democratic Party to mount a significant fight-back against the economic and social tribulations increasingly afflicting the American working class, middle class and of course the poor.

In recent years working families have experienced drastic unemployment, underemployment or the fear of job loss; wage stagnation; widespread foreclosure of homes; mounting inequality; family insecurity; fear that one’s children won’t make it to the middle class; continual wars; political gridlock; startling examples of brutality by militarized police forces; runaway climate change, and more. And today’s Democratic Party, as opposed to a few center left reform years in the 1930s and 1960s, is pathetically ill

equipped to defend these constituencies against the accelerating rampages of the U.S. neoliberal version of capitalism.

Combine this with the fact that voters are provided with only two viable (electable) parties, both right of center in varying degrees. Thus, the way for many people to register a serious protest is not to vote or to vote for the other party as punishment. The purpose of such a system is for power to change from one party to the other every several years so that over time a perfect equilibrium is achieved for the maintenance of capitalism.

A number of progressive and left commentators have noted the role the Democrats played in their own defeat, such as Robert Reich, former Labor Secretary in the Clinton Administration:

What the President and other Democrats failed to communicate wasn't their accomplishments. It was their understanding that the economy is failing most Americans and big money is overrunning our democracy. And they failed to convey their commitment to an economy and a democracy that serve the vast majority rather than a minority at the top. The midterm elections should have been about jobs and wages, and how to reform a system where nearly all the gains go to the top. It was an opportunity for Democrats to shine. Instead, they hid.

He suggested they should have "come out swinging. Not just for a higher minimum wage but also for better schools, paid family and medical leave, and childcare for working families. For resurrecting the Glass-Steagall Act and limiting the size of Wall Street banks. For saving Social Security by lifting the cap on income subject to payroll taxes. For rebuilding the nation's roads, bridges, and ports. For increasing taxes on corporations with high ratios of CEO pay to the pay of average workers. And for getting big money out of politics, and thereby saving our democracy."

Bill Fletcher, Jr., an educator, writer, unionist and board member of Black Commentator, declared: " The Obama Administration has not led in a progressive direction.... Though the economy has improved, the condition for the average working person has not. Yes, unemployment is down but we are still dealing with structural unemployment that is weighing on everyone. The damage from the foreclosure crisis is far from over. And the rich are the ones who are benefiting from the improved economy. To turn any of this around masses of working people need to be organized to fight for a division of the wealth. Yes, that means building and supporting labor unions. But when the President does not make that a clarion call-except when speaking with union members — he has no answer to the public that is asking for their share.... Race, as always, was a factor. The Republicans had sufficient codes to make it clear that race was an issue in the election.

Robert Borosage of the liberal Campaign for America's Future noted issues that should have been, but were not, on the Democratic campaign agenda:

There is a populist majority waiting to be forged. Majorities will rally for full-employment economics, for fair taxes on the rich and the corporations, investment in rebuilding the country and educating the children, strengthening retirement security, making college affordable, lifting the minimum wage, curbing CEO excess, empowering workers, guaranteed paid family leave, paid sick days and paid vacations, balanced trade to make things in America again, taking on the corruption of our politics by big money, investment in new

energy and innovation that will create jobs and more.

Peter Beinart, writing in The Atlantic blog, argued:

“For the most part, Democratic candidates shied away from [the issues that most Democrats think really matter] because they were too controversial. Instead they stuck to topics that were safe, familiar, and broadly popular: the minimum wage, outsourcing, and the “war on women.” The result, for the most part, was homogenized, inauthentic, forgettable campaigns.”

During the next two years the Republicans will block all progressive legislation, but given the paucity of anything progressive in the last almost six years that won't change much. During those years, as liberal economist and columnist Paul Krugman correctly observed, the Republicans engaged in “obstructionism bordering on sabotage.” The GOP will try to ram through reactionary bills but may not cause too much damage. The Democrats hold over 40 votes in the Senate, enough to block many bills, (except when there are defections by their conservative bloc), but Obama has a veto. At the same time Obama is expected to compromise on certain right wing bills, such as a tax cut for rich corporations, and possibly much worse.

The GOP will continue to support Obama's expansion of wars, not only in Afghanistan where the White House just intensified America's war commitment, but probably will work with the president to actively seek the military overthrow of the Syrian government, and to send larger numbers of U.S. troops to fight against the Islamic State. Professional warhawk Sen. John McCain is expected to assume the chairmanship of the Senate Armed Services Committee, giving much him greater authority over wars and the Pentagon budget. In foreign policy the Republicans will support moves to exacerbate America's new cold war with Russia and increase U.S. military arms and support to Ukraine.

Obama will spend part of the remainder of his term dwelling on his so-called legacy, trying to partially make up for the first six years with efforts to portray himself as something of a liberal now that he is a lame duck with considerably diminished powers. He routinely ignored or criticized party liberals and brushed aside the Congressional Progressive Caucus since taking office, much to the chagrin of millions of his voters who expected “change they could believe in” from what turned out to be a conservative presidency. Of a sudden he's issuing a few executive orders that he could have implemented five years ago and adopting more populist rhetoric.

Despite much political sound and fury and sharp differences between the two official parties they are clearly more united on the fundamentals underpinning U.S. society than they are at odds, as we suggested at the beginning of this article.

For one of many examples, both uphold an essentially failing model of capitalism that prevails in the United States — failing in the sense of fulfilling the needs of the great majority of people.

Noting that the United States is “home to the worst inequality among the advanced countries,” progressive pro-capitalist economist Joseph Stiglitz, a past recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics, recently described America's harsh form of capitalism as being “designed to create inequalities. This fact was made abundantly clear during the financial

crisis, when we socialized losses but allowed the banks to privatize profits, extended largesse to the victimizers but did little to help the victims who were losing their homes and jobs.” Earlier this year Stiglitz wrote, “an economic system that fails to deliver gains for most of its citizens, and in which a rising share of the population faces increasing insecurity, is, in a fundamental sense, a failed economic system.”

In this regard, liberal Robert Reich wrote Nov. 17: “Capitalism is a tough sport. If those at the top are winning big while the bottom 90% is losing — too bad. That’s the way the game is played.”

This “failed system” — where for instance 2.4 million children in the U.S. were homeless at some point last year — is the economic project of choice staunchly supported by both the Democratic and Republican parties, neither of which is prepared to propose graduating to the people-friendlier social democratic form of capitalism that prevails in much of Europe, much less building toward the considerably more egalitarian socialism.

Both parties are quite willing to tolerate the extreme class inequality for the masses of people that has been gathering momentum in the U.S. for nearly four decades — accelerating, it is useful to point out, during the eight years each of Democrat Bill Clinton and Republican George W. Bush and the nearly six years, so far, of Democrat Obama.

During these 22 bipartisan, post-Cold War years,

- (1) the military budget has skyrocketed in a series of unnecessary, stalemated or lost wars against far weaker opponents;
- (2) the two parties joined in deregulating key aspects of government controls on Wall Street, the banking system and corporations; and
- (3) the disproportion of wealth and poverty has reached and is exceeding Golden Age proportions, as you will see in the next paragraph:

The U.S. is the richest country in the world, but about half its population of 319 million people are low income or poor. These people generally have very little, if any, wealth (i.e., assets over liabilities). Indeed, the bottom 90% of the U.S. population, including the working class and the entire middle class as well as low income and poor, possess only 25.6% of private national assets. The top 10% own the rest, in these proportions: Those in the 90 to 99 percentile own 34.6% of the assets. The top 1% enjoys 39.8% of America’s assets. And within that 1%, the top 0.01% has grabbed 11.1% of the assets. This most powerful one hundredth of one percent includes 16,000 families who own \$6 trillion in assets — equal to the total wealth of the bottom two-thirds of American families combined.

Despite these realities, or more properly because of them, the Democratic and Republican parties still propagate the falsehood that America is a “classless” society of “opportunity for all.” They trumpet the glories of free market fundamentalism even as the economy and its benefits stagnate for the majority.

Regarding political donors, the top 0.01% was responsible for 40% of campaign contributions in the 2012 elections and at least that amount in 2014. All told, about \$4 billion, nearly all from big contributors, was spent on this year’s election and both parties received fairly equal amounts. All this money buys sufficient influence for the wealthy and corporate donors to basically control federal and state elections, thereby maintaining the

socio-political parameters established by the ruling elite within which the political game must be played. Even as they fight over various issues, the Democratic and Republican parties operate well within these constraints.

Here are a few of the rules guiding those parameters: The two contending and colluding parties are in basic concord on these key issues:

- Foreign policy, U.S. global hegemony, constant foreign military interventions and wars, enormous military budgets;
- Allegiance to an increasingly laissez-faire brand of capitalism, and neoliberal globalization;
- Servile loyalty to Wall Street, the banking system, and corporate power;
- Plutocratic rule (government controlled by the rich) in place of democracy, though this is concealed from the people;
- “Free” elections — so cherished in national myth and external propaganda — that are in fact dominated by the wealth of the 1% billionaires and their millionaire cohorts;
- The existence of massive privacy-destroying surveillance at home and abroad;
- Acceptance of economic and subsequently social inequality and a huge permanent underclass as the price multimillions of workers and their families must pay for the privilege of living within free market capitalism;
- Virtual elimination of major new social programs for the people.

What have the Republican and Democratic parties accomplished in recent decades to modify a type of capitalism that has particularly abused the working class, lower middle class and portions of the middle class?

They have only made things worse because each has moved further to the political right over the last four decades. A few decades ago the Republican Party included a substantial moderate wing and was considered a right/right-center party, and the Democrats had a strong liberal sector and were a center/center left party, but those days are gone and are not coming back.

Obviously, from a formal left perspective, today’s center right is preferable to right/far right when confined in a two-party system. However, such a distinction contains compromising content beyond intense surface differences when each party’s principal obligations are to

- (1) maintaining the existing socio-economic system by catering to its financial and corporate institutions and its wealthiest beneficiaries;
- (2) sustaining its global imperialist structure of economic and military domination; and
- (3) presiding over the increasing immiseration of the majority of the population as wealth and privilege increasingly accumulate for the upper classes.

These two parties, working in tandem with degrees of power alternating every few years, have jointly produced the economic, political and social situation that exists in the United

States today — a system where the cherished concepts of democracy, equality and privacy rights are decaying before our eyes, the plight of working people is getting worse, and war has become a permanent condition of society. And since each party continues to gravitate further to the right the chance the Democrats will execute a significant left turn seem impossible.

A left turn, however, is an absolute necessity to resolve these problems and many more that afflict American society — most certainly including crises from economic inequality to climate change and the ever-present possibility of nuclear war — and it will only come from outside the 1% -controlled two-party system.

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