

American Politics: THE ELECTIONS WON'T BRING PROGRESSIVE CHANGE, SO WHAT CAN?

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Less than six months before the November presidential elections in an exceptionally distressed United States the narrow, unpleasant parameters of political possibility are emerging. Two alternatives confront the American people, both to the right of center.

1. If President Barack Obama is reelected, with the Democratic Party retaining control of at least one chamber of Congress, there probably will be four more years of economic stagnation, high unemployment, increasing poverty and inequality, more wars, erosions of civil liberties and global warming.

2. If Mitt Romney is elected, with the right/far right Republican Party dominating either House or Senate, every particular of the travail afflicting the country today will be multiplied, with emphasis on fulfilling the desires of the 1% at the expense of the 99%.

What else could be expected during the present conservative era? Paul Krugman, the liberal Nobel Prize-winning economist and New York Times columnist, recently described Obama, whom he supports, as having ruled like “a moderate Republican circa 1992.” Viewing the ultra-conservatives, African American professor and left intellectual Cornell West detected “creeping fascism.”

In today's society — based on gross economic inequality facilitated by a two-party political system spanning center right to far right and where big money is the decisive factor in the electoral process — an ostensibly democratic election can hardly mitigate the worst of abuses afflicting working people and their families much less bring about substantial reform.

This dreary reality is offset by an important new development. For the first time over the last several presidential elections — when voters are usually cheering exclusively for their candidate — masses of people are protesting in the streets against inequality of income and opportunity, and the class war waged by the wealthy, as well as global warming, ending wars, dismantling NATO and the like. Some unions, too, are not simply backing Obama but protesting on their own against Wall Street's depredations.

Thirty years of wage stagnation, the growing rich-poor chasm, evisceration of the so-called American Dream and the long, painful effects of the Great Recession are the objective conditions behind the developing political consciousness of many Americans. Like the Roman Catholic church after widespread evidence of priests molesting children, sacrosanct capitalism — the economic holy of holies — is finally attracting public criticism for its crimes and hypocrisy, not yet on a huge scale but growing.

The sudden entrance of Occupy Wall St. last September with an open critique of the

substantial excesses of capitalism in American society, following the democratic Arab Spring and Wisconsin uprising, has energized much of the left and progressive forces. Nationwide May Day actions and the 15,000 who demonstrated against NATO in Chicago later in May, among other protests, including civil disobedience, are encouraging harbingers that many more people eventually will take their grievances to the streets and meeting halls, where all social progress begins. If this momentum manages to continue for the next few years it could become a broad and diverse national movement for social change — but it's still a big "if."

The political system seems no longer accountable to the public. Several matters of great importance to the American people do not even figure in this year's election because both ruling parties basically agree about them and there's little to squabble about but details. The administration has taken the U.S. up to its elbows in the quagmire of war, so the conservatives cry, "up to the shoulders!" Here are some issues the voters won't be able to influence at the ballot box:

- President Obama is presiding over U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, killing "terrorist suspects" in Somalia and wherever the CIA's drones wander. May opinion polls show 66% of the American people want the expensive 10-year-old stalemated Afghan conflict to end, and 40% — many of whom want it terminated now — are strongly opposed. Only 27% support the war, 8% strongly. For all the chatter about nearing the end of the Afghan war at the NATO summit in Chicago May 20, Obama days earlier announced that he was prolonging the war a decade after his "final" pullout date at the end of 2014. An undetermined number of special forces combat troops, military trainers, and CIA paramilitaries will "defend" the corrupt Kabul government until 2024. American taxpayers will foot the bills — several billion a year. Progressive Democrats in Congress seek to restrain Washington's penchant for wars, but they are consistently ignored and occasionally berated by the Obama Administration for their efforts.
- Most citizens want cuts in the war budget. But as they go to the polls, the American people will be lugging a military and national security behemoth on their recession-bent backs, costing about \$1.2 trillion a year. Rumors of meaningful reductions are illusory. The Pentagon accounts for over half of this amount (about \$642 billion for fiscal 2013); the rest goes to Homeland Security, 17 spy agencies, nuclear weapons, interest on past war debts, and so on.
- Global warming is here and getting worse while the White House is opening up new areas to drill for oil and supports massive development of shale-derived natural gas (which requires fracking), "clean" coal (though it does not yet exist), nuclear power, and dirty tar sands fuel. The Obama Administration's support for alternative non-carbon development is a token tossed to the environmental movement. Meanwhile, the U.S. — which demands to be recognized as world leader — is using its leadership to undermine international progress in fighting climate change. Big business and Wall St., primarily concerned with expansion and greater profits, heartily approve. Like Rhett Butler, the conservatives, frankly, just don't give a damn.
- Since he has borrowed populist phrases for the election, some of from Occupy, President Obama has finally at least mentioned poverty, inequality and low wages, but he has done nothing about this situation since taking office and will not put forward an anti-poverty program if reelected. The United States is the most economically unequal of the top 20 advanced, industrialized capitalist economies in the Organization for Economic Cooperation

and Development (OECD). The U.S. also pays the lowest wages to its working class compared with OECD countries. Almost 25% of the American work force receives low wages (about \$10 an hour down to minimum wage and below), usually without any benefits or healthcare. One in two Americans is low income or poor. The poor account for one in seven people. About 47 million Americans require food stamps to eat. Food stamps are the only “income” for six million of them. This has not come about by mistake; it’s the political system’s payoff to the ever-richer plutocracy and its minions.

- The Obama Administration has responded more resourcefully to the Great Recession than the conservative opposition, but it only goes a quarter or half way in remedial action, which adds to the stagnation and prolongs the pain for the working class, lower middle class and a large sector of the middle class as well. When Obama delivers on the economy — whether in the stimulus, jobs, foreclosures, bank regulations, or infrastructure — it’s always partial and inadequate because the main concessions are made with the power structure up front before the inevitable compromises with the right wing. There’s a difference between talking like a fighter when trawling for votes, and avoiding confrontation as president. Krugman says “we have responded to crisis with a mix of paralysis and confusion.” This is a major reason why over 22 million Americans need but cannot secure full time work.

- President Obama has retained all former President Bush’s many erosions of civil liberties, particularly the onerous Patriot Act, and added many of his own, such as when he approved of indefinite detention for suspects, including American citizens. A unique coalition of liberals and conservatives in the House tried to pass legislation to reject indefinite detention May 18, but the effort was defeated. The U.S., under Obama, is becoming a full fledged surveillance state. Tom Engelhardt writes that “30,000 people [are] hired to listen in on conversations and other communications in this country.”

- Any listing of the important issues that are not part of the election campaign and over which the citizenry has no say must include a foreign/military/national security policy based on exercising world hegemony backed by military power. What’s the “pivot” to East Asia really all about, other than to weaken China in its own sphere of possible influence and cling to world domination? Why has the U.S. been taking steps to bring about regime change in Syria, other than to dominate yet another country and weaken Iran in the process? Why did Obama facilitate a violent civil war for regime change in Libya, other than to gain another oil-rich client state, but this time with an enormous aquifer under its sands which may become more precious than the oil as water supplies dwindle through North Africa? Why did the president get behind the coup in Honduras, other than to dispatch a potentially progressive regime friendly to Venezuela?

Further, why does Obama still maintain Cold War sanctions and a trade blockade against Cuba, other than to win Florida votes in November? Why is Washington supporting the vicious Sunni monarchy in Bahrain which routinely oppresses and attacks the Shi’ite majority seeking equality, other than satisfying the obnoxious rulers of Saudi Arabia? Why is Obama now fighting a war in Yemen, other than to keep the new president, who ran unopposed with strong U.S. support, in his pocket, and to bestow another favor upon the Saudi lords? Why is the administration seeking to strangle Iran, other than to prevent an Iran-Iraq alliance that might compromise U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf, through which 40% of the world’s oil must pass? And what is the real purpose of the Oval Office’s new “scramble for Africa,” other than establishing a military presence throughout the continent while elbowing China out of the way to grab natural resources,

trade and markets.

President Obama blames all his failures in office on the conservatives and the recession, and most Democrats accept this explanation. Even progressive Democrats, well aware of Obama's abundant shortcomings, will cut him slack for fear of the "greater evil."

The corrosive impact of far right ideology in America must not be underestimated. But despite Don't-tread-on-me Tea Party reactionaries and conservative obstruction in Congress, Democrats in the House and Senate remain responsible for many unmet objectives and a weak legislative record. Led by Obama, they would not fight for progressive goals and spent much of the time trying to fulfill the naïve presidential fantasy of "governing like Americans, not Republicans or Democrats." Once the conservatives understood Obama would rather compromise than fight they attacked full force and virtually paralyzed the Democratic agenda.

The silence of some Democratic politicians toward the erosion of civil liberties, indifference to climate change and support for unnecessary wars — a silence many would have broken had a Republican been in the White House — should subject them to publicly wearing scarlet letters inscribed with a "C" (for craven) around their necks.

Despite the stagnant economy — the main issue in the election according to 86% of potential voters — the Republican Party's lurch to the far right and the bizarre legislative behavior of the Tea Party-influenced GOP House majority led by the ineffable Speaker John Boehner seem to have at least evened the election odds. Stranger things have happened in American politics, but it remains very doubtful that the critically important independent voters will swing toward fringe conservatism. This factor, in our view, gives Obama the edge.

In this connection the April 28 international edition of Britain's conservative magazine, *The Economist*, wondered "What happens to a two-party political system when one party goes mad?" The article quotes the following from the new book "It's Even Worse Than It looks," a product of one author from the establishment Brookings Institute and the other from the conservative American Enterprise Institute: "The Republican Party has become an insurgent outlier — ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science, and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition."

Many right wing voters despise Romney, a shape-shifting opportunist whom they distrust, but they will stick with him because Republican leaders and funders insist he has the best chance to defeat the "big government socialist" whom many Tea Partiers scandalously allege conceals his "true" nationality and religion. Those funders, by the way, will see to it that — as opposed to 2008 — the Republicans will spend at least enough money to buy the election as the Democrats, so the race should be close.

Once a moderate Republican, Romney adopted far right positions on most issues to secure the nomination, calling for severe cutbacks in social programs for the poor, unemployed, foreclosed and similarly discarded, among a plethora of counterproductive social and economic nostrums satisfying to the Rush Limbaughs and Michele Bachmanns. Now he's in a tight bind. It is absolutely necessary to gravitate partially toward the center, where the independent votes are, but he is under considerable restraint from his own unforgiving constituency.

Consistent with mendacious ultra-conservative propaganda, Romney attributes the economic crisis entirely to Obama's presidency, without suggesting that the Great Recession emanated from the millionaire tax cuts, war spending and the huge deficits of his Republican predecessor (following years of Clinton Administration deregulations of banking and Wall St. that set the stage for what by now had become a "winner take all" economic system.)

Romney's nonsensical economic speech in Iowa May 15 was an epic self-exposure. While promising to cut social spending, increase the war budget and not raise taxes, he declared: "President Obama is an old-school liberal whose first instinct is to see free enterprise as the villain and government as the hero.... America counted on President Obama to rescue the economy, tame the deficit and help create jobs. Instead, he bailed out the public sector, gave billions of dollars to the companies of his friends and added almost as much debt as all the prior presidents combined."

Virtually every word was a lie, according to an analysis of the entire speech by the Associated Press the next day which pointed out that "the debt has gone up by about half under Obama. Under Ronald Reagan, it tripled." AP didn't mention Romney's political characterization of Obama, but he's hardly a liberal — as was clear during his first term, and his adhesion to "free enterprise" capitalism is indissoluble.

Romney has been sharply critical of Obama on two of the biggest issues of the campaign — healthcare and the Afghan war — despite the fact that his own past positions on both matters were nearly identical to those of his rival. Obama's healthcare plan is based on the program Romney implemented as governor of Massachusetts. And despite far more hawkish rhetoric to please the far right during the primaries, the Republican's views on Afghanistan did not differ markedly from those of Obama. In recent weeks before and after the NATO summit, Romney has hardly spoken of the Afghan war, obviously recognizing that his primary views are anathema to the American people as a whole.

Obama and Romney have agreed on other issues. An article in Grist April 24 by Lisa Hymas pointed out that Obama's "smart growth" initiative — the Partnership for Sustainable Communities — was also created in the mold of a Romney program.... As governor, Romney actively fought sprawl and promoted density. He ran on a smart-growth platform: 'Sprawl is the most important quality-of-life issue facing Massachusetts,' he said in 2002.... Under President Obama, the EPA moved from praising Romney's smart-growth office to mimicking it." It went into effect in June 2009. Romney also supported abortion rights, environmentalism and immigration as governor.

These "coincidences" are the outstanding ironies of the campaign so far. "Far right" Romney and "liberal populist" Obama have both resembled "moderate Republicans" when in power. Obama will revert to his center-right configuration if reelected, but if Romney ever gets to the White House his constituency will force him to largely govern as an ultra-conservative.

A principal Republican issue in the past several presidential elections has been that the Democrats were "weak on defense," including in 2008 when Obama opposed the Iraq war, but the right wing has lowered the volume significantly because it can't work this year.

The Democratic Party, of course, voted for, supported and funded the Afghan and Iraq wars, but Obama defeated pro-war Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination because his

critique of the disastrous adventure in Iraq accorded with that of most Democratic primary voters — then turned around when elected and stole the Republican thunder by transforming into a war president. He governs foreign/military affairs as a hawk, juggling several bloody conflicts simultaneously, abjectly pandering to the armed forces and fostering the growth of militarism in American society. A year after the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, the Obama Administration has launched its own Imperialist Spring in the same region.

Many Democrats voted for Obama in the 2008 primaries because he was considered a “peace candidate” of sorts. A recent article by Atlantic Magazine staff writer by Conor Friedersdorf compiled a brief partial account of Obama’s “peace” record:

- Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan, adding tens of thousands of troops at a cost of many billions of dollars.
- He committed American forces to a war in Libya, though he had neither approval from Congress nor reason to think events there threatened national security.
- He ordered 250 drone strikes that killed at least 1,400 people in Pakistan.
- He ordered the raid into Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden.
- He ordered the killings of multiple American citizens living abroad.
- He expanded the definition of the War on Terrorism and asserted his worldwide power to indefinitely detain anyone he deems a terrorist.
- He expanded drone attacks into Somalia.
- He ordered a raid on pirates in Somalia.
- He deployed military squads to fight the drug war throughout Latin America.
- He expanded the drone war in Yemen, going so far as to give the CIA permission to kill people even when it doesn’t know their identities so long as they’re suspected of ties to terrorism.
- He’s implied that he’d go to war with Iran rather than permitting them to get nuclear weapons.”

No matter who wins in November nothing listed above will change, except perhaps for the worse. If Obama returns to the White House it will be to the same mess the U.S. finds itself in today, along with the wars, inequality and hardship. Should Romney get in it will be a mess on steroids.

Progressive change certainly remains possible in America, although neither ruling party is equipped to bring it about. These parties were not prepared to end the Vietnam war either, or to get rid of Jim Crow, or to implement the eight-hour day, or to allow women the democratic right to vote. But the people organized radical mass movements to fight for these goals and won.

The informal people’s struggles of various organizations that began coalescing early last year, propelled several months later by Occupy’s left critique of inequality, Wall St. and the 1% ruling plutocracy, has the potential to become a mass movement. Many such potentials have come along and faded for various reasons, including some that were co-opted or lost their vision. But such broad and deep movements — as long as they are massive, activist, radical and well organized — also have significantly changed American history. It may be a long, arduous struggle, but that’s the light at the end of this dismal electoral tunnel.

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