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For Whom Should the Left Vote?

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There are important differences, of course, between Democratic President Barack Obama and Republican contender Mitt Romney, but the long conservative trend in American politics will continue regardless of who wins the presidential election Nov. 6. Either candidate will move it right along.

From a left point of view, Obama is superior to Romney in the sense that the Democratic center right is politically preferable to the Republican right/far right. The Democrats will cause less social damage — though not less war damage or the pain of gross inequality or the harm done civil liberties — than their conservative cousins.

Indeed, both candidates are conservative. Obama is moderately so, judging by his first term in the White House, though "liberal" in his current campaign rhetoric and on two social issues — abortion and gay marriage. Romney is definitely so, though he shifts opportunistically from the extreme right to the right and back again. In the last weeks of the campaign, sensing his impending defeat, the former Massachusetts governor momentarily leaned to the center right.

The Republican Party has gravitated ever further to the right during the last few decades and is now securely in the hands of extremist politicians, symbolized by the ascendancy of the Tea Party and the many House and Senate members who follow its far right agenda. Jim Hightower, the well known liberal Texas columnist, wrote an article in AlterNet Oct. 8 that briefly described key programs in the GOP platform:

* Medicare must be replaced with a privatized "VoucherCare" (or, more accurately, "WeDon'tCare") medical system;
• All poverty programs must be slashed or eliminated to "free" poor people from a crippling and shameful dependency on public aid;
• The government framework that sustains a middle class (from student loans to Social Security) must be turned over to Wall Street so individuals are free to "manage" their own fates through marketplace choice;
• Such worker protections as collective bargaining, minimum wage, and unemployment payments must be stripped away to remove artificial impediments to the "natural rationality" of free market forces;
• The corporate and moneyed elites (forgive a bit of redundancy there) must be freed from tax and regulatory burdens that impede their entrepreneurial creativity;
• The First Amendment must be interpreted to mean that unlimited political spending of corporate cash equals free speech; and
• Etcetera, ad nauseam, ad infinitum.

The one thing Hightower left out is that if the Republicans insist on identifying corporate bosses as "Job Creators," why then aren't they creating jobs? Romney blames China, as do

the Democrats, but that's election politics. China is a rising capitalist economy that only started to really take off about 15 years ago, and it is doing what all such rising economies do — adopting some measures to grow and protect their developing industries and trade. The U.S. did it too as a growing economy for many decades. That's capitalism. It goes where it can make the most profit. Washington supports this. Nothing prevents the U.S. government from investing in the creation of millions of jobs in America except conservative ideology.

Despite the seeming distance between the two parties on economic issues — emphasized by Republican proposals cribbed from the pages of "Atlas Shrugged"— economist Jared Bernstein, a Democrat, wrote on his blog Sept. 6 that he was going beyond "good Democrats and bad Republicans" to perceive "the ascendancy of a largely bipartisan vision that promotes individualist market-based solutions over solutions that recognize there are big problems that markets cannot effectively solve." He's on to something.

Bernstein, until this year Vice President Joe Biden's chief economic adviser, then wrote: "We cannot, for example, constantly cut the federal government's revenue stream without undermining its ability to meet pressing social needs. We know that more resources will be needed to meet the challenges of prospering in a global economy, keeping up with technological changes, funding health care and pension systems, helping individuals balance work and family life, improving the skills of our workforce, and reducing social and economic inequality. Yet discussion of this reality is off the table."

There are a number of major policy areas of virtual agreement between the parties. Their most flagrant coupling is in the key area of foreign/military policy.

The Democrats — humiliated for years by right wing charges of being "soft on defense" — have become the war party led by a Commander-in-Chief who relishes his job to the extent of keeping his own individual kill list. What neoconservative would dare fault him for this? Imagine the liberal outcry had Bush been discovered with a kill list! This time the liberals didn't kick up much fuss.

During the third presidential debate Romney had little choice but to align himself with Obama's war policies in Afghanistan, the attacks on western Pakistan, the regime change undeclared war against Libya, the regime change war in Syria, the aggressive anti-China "pivot" to Asia and drone assaults against Yemen and Somalia with many more to come.

Virtually all liberals, progressives, some leftists and organized labor will vote for Obama. Many will do so with trepidation, given their disappointment about his performance in office, particularly his tilt toward the right, willingness to compromise more than half way with the Republicans, and his reluctance to wage a sharp struggle on behalf of supposed Democratic Party goals.

Many of these forces now view Obama as the "lesser evil," but worry he will sell them out once again. According to the Washington publication The Hill on Oct. 24:

> "Major labor unions and dozens of liberal groups working to elect President Obama are worried he could 'betray' them in the lame-duck session by agreeing to a deal to cut safety-net programs. While Obama is relying on labor unions and other organizations on the left to turn out Democratic voters in battleground states, some of his allies have lingering concerns about whether he will stand by them if elected….

“The AFL-CIO has planned a series of coordinated events around the country on Nov. 8, two days after Election Day, to pressure lawmakers not to sign onto any deficit-reduction deal that cuts Medicare and Social Security benefits by raising the Medicare eligibility age or changing the formula used for Social Security cost-of-living adjustments. ‘There’s going to be a major effort by lots of groups to make sure the people we vote for don’t sell us down the river,’ said Roger Hickey, co-director of the Campaign for America’s Future. “People, groups, organizations and networks are working very hard to get Obama and the Democrats elected, and yet we are worried that it is possible that we could be betrayed almost immediately,’ he said.”

One specific issue behind this distrust is the awareness that, if reelected, Obama has said he will seek a “grand bargain” with the Republicans intended to slash the deficit by $4 trillion over the next decade. During deficit talks with House leader John Boehner over a year ago Obama voluntarily declared that cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security were “on the table” for negotiation— the first time any Democratic President ever offered to compromise on what amounts to the crowning legislative achievements of the New Deal and Great Society administrations.

At the time Obama envisioned reducing Medicare by $1 trillion and Medicaid by $360 billion over two decades. The exact amount from Social Security was not disclosed. During the campaign Obama promised to “protect” these three “entitlements.”

While denouncing Romney’s “plan to turn Medicare into a voucher program and increase health care costs for seniors,” AFL-CIO chief Richard Trumka disclosed Oct. 23 that “a bipartisan group of senators who are not up for reelection is working behind closed doors in Washington to reach a so-called grand bargain that completely bypasses this debate and ignores the views of voters. What is the grand bargain? It boils down to lower tax rates for rich people — paid for by benefit cuts for Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.”

Another reason for a certain suspicion about what Obama will achieve in a second term is based on his unfulfilled promises from the 2008 election. Here are some of them from an Oct. 27 article titled “The Progressive Case Against Obama” by Matt Stoller:

> “ A higher minimum wage, a ban on the replacement of striking workers, seven days of paid sick leave, a more diverse media ownership structure, renegotiation of NAFTA, letting bankruptcy judges write down mortgage debt, a ban on illegal wiretaps, an end to national security letters, stopping the war on whistle-blowers, passing the Employee Free Choice Act, restoring habeas corpus, and labor protections in the FAA bill.

“Each of these pledges would have tilted bargaining leverage to debtors, to labor, or to political dissidents. So Obama promised them to distinguish himself from Bush, and then went back on his word because these promises didn’t fit with the larger policy arc of shifting American society toward his vision.”

Many liberals and progressives seem convinced that the two-party system is the only viable battleground within which to contest for peace and social progress, even if the two ruling parties are right of center. This is one reason they shun progressive or left third parties.

This national electoral battleground, however, as has become evident to many Americans in recent years, is owned and operated by the wealthy ruling elite which has, through its control of the two-party system, stifled any social progress in the United States for 40 years.

Throughout these same four decades the Democrats have shifted from the center left to center right. The last center left Democratic presidential candidate was the recently departed former Sen. George McGovern, who was whipped by the Republicans in 1972. In tribute to this last antiwar and progressive presidential candidate, and as a contrast to the present center right standard bearer, we recall McGovern's comment from the 1972 Democratic convention:

> "As one whose heart has ached for the past 10 years over the agony of Vietnam, I will halt a senseless bombing of Indochina on Inaugural Day. There will be no more Asian children running ablaze from bombed-out schools. There will be no more talk of bombing the dikes or the cities of the North [Vietnam]. And within 90 days of my inauguration, every American soldier and every American prisoner will be out of the jungle and out of their cells and then home in America where they belong."

There is more to America's presidential and congressional elections than meets the eye of the average voter. Next week's election, for instance, has two aspects. One has been in-your-face visible for over a year before Election Day, costing billions. The other is usually concealed because it's not a matter that entertains public debate or intervention.

The visible aspect — the campaign, slogans and speeches, the debates, arguments and rallies —is contained within the parameters of the political system which Obama and Romney meticulously observe. Those parameters, or limitations, are mainly established by that privileged elite sector of the citizenry lately identified as the 1% and its minions.

The concealed aspect of elections in the U.S. is that they are usually undemocratic in essence; and that the fundamental underlying issues of the day are rarely mentioned, much less contested.

Many of the major candidates are selected, groomed and financed by the elite, who then invest fortunes in the election campaigns for president, Congress and state legislatures (over $6 billion in this election). And after their representatives to all these offices are elected, they spend billions more on the federal and state level lobbying for influence, transferring cash for or against legislation affecting their financial and big business interests.

American electoral democracy is based on one person, one vote — and it's true that the wealthy contributor of hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to favored candidates is similarly restricted to a single ballot. But the big spenders influence multitudes of voters through financing mass advertising, which in effect multiplies the donor's political clout by a huge factor.

Democracy is grossly undermined by the funding from rich individuals and corporations that determine the outcome of many, probably most, elections. These are the wealthy with whom a Romney can easily describe 47% of the American people as scroungers dependant on government handouts, and they will chuckle and applaud. They are the same breed with whom an Obama can comfortably mock the "professional left" within his party and get knowing nods and smiles.

The most important of the major issues completely omitted from the elections and the national narrative is the obvious fact that the United States is an imperialist state and a militarist society. It rules the world, not just the seas as did Britannia, and the sun never sets on America's worldwide military bases, an "empire of bases" as Chalmers Johnson wrote.

Most Americans, including the liberals, become discomforted or angered when their country is described as imperialist and militarist. But what else is a society that in effect controls the world through military power; that has been at war or planning for the next war for over 70 years without letup; that spends nearly $700 billion a year on its armed forces and an equal amount on various national security entities?

The American people never voted on whether to become or continue as an imperialist or militarist society any more than they voted to invade Iraq, or to deregulate the banks, or to vaporize the civilian city of Hiroshima.

In the main a big majority believe Washington's foreign/military policies are defensive and humanitarian because that's what the government, the schools, churches and commercial mass media drum into their heads throughout their lives. They have been misinformed and manipulated to accept the status quo on the basis of Washington's fear-mongering, exaggerated national security needs, mythologies about American history, and a two-party political system primarily devoted to furthering the interests of big business, multinational corporations, too-big-to-fail banks and Wall Street.

Needless to say, both ruling parties have participated in all this and it is simply taken for granted they will continue to cultivate militarism and practice imperialism in order to remain the world's dominant hegemon.

There are many ways to keep the voting population in line. The great majority of Americans are religious people, including many fundamentalists. Both candidates of the political duopoly have exploited religious beliefs by telling the people that God is on America's side and that the deity supports America's dominant role in the world, and its wars, too.

At the Democratic convention in September, Obama concluded his speech with these inspiring words: "Providence is with us, and we are surely blessed to be citizens of the greatest nation on Earth." The term Providence, in the sense intended, suggests that God "is with us," guides America's destiny and approves of the activities we have defined as imperialist and militarist.

Romney declared last month that "God did not create this country to be a nation of followers. America is not destined to be one of several equally balanced global powers. America must lead the world."

Further along these lines, Obama said in the third debate that "America remains the one indispensable nation, and the world needs a strong America, and it is stronger now than when I came into office." Having God's backing and being the only one of some 200 nation states in the world that cannot be dispensed with is what is meant by the expression "American Exceptionalism" — a designation that gives Washington a free pass to do anything it wants.

American "leadership" (i.e., global hegemony) has been a policy of the Democratic and Republican parties for several decades. A main reason the American foreign policy elite gathered behind Obama in 2007 was his continual emphasis upon maintaining Washington's world leadership.

Many other key policies will not change whether Obama or Romney occupy the Oval Office.

• For instance, the U.S. is the most unequal society among the leading capitalist nations in

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). About half its people are either low income or poor, and they received lower benefits than families resident in other OECD countries. What will Obama and Romney do about this if elected to the White House? Nothing. Burgeoning inequality wasn't even a topic during the three debates. And in Obama's nearly four years in office he completely ignored this most important social problem plaguing America.

According to the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz: "Economic inequality begets political inequality and vice versa. Then the very vision that makes America special — upward mobility and opportunity for all — is undermined. One person, one vote becomes one dollar, one vote. That is not democracy."

• Climate change caused by global warming is here. America has been wracked in recent years with devastating storms, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods, as have other parts of the world. One of the worst of all storms decimated large parts of the eastern United States a few days ago. And what will Obama and Romney do about it? Nothing. This most important of international questions was not thought worthy of mention in all three debates. Bill McKibben got it right the other day when he said: "Corporate polluters have bought the silence of our elected leaders."

Obama's environmental comprehension and occasional rhetoric are an improvement over Romney's current climate denial (one more cynical reversal of his earlier views). But the president has done virtually nothing to fight climate change during his first term — and he simply can't blame it all on the Republicans. He has a bully pulpit with which to galvanize public consciousness but doesn't use it. Actually the Obama government has played a backward role in the annual UN climate talks —delaying everything, even though the U.S. is history's most notorious emitter of the greenhouse gases that have brought the world to this sorry pass.

• The shameful erosion of civil liberties that swiftly increased during the Bush Administration has been continued and expanded during the Obama Administration. One cannot help but question the teacher training that goes into producing a Harvard Professor of Constitutional Law who blithely approves legislation containing a provision for indefinite detention that in effect suspends habeas corpus for some, a heretofore sacrosanct aspect of American democracy.

• The economic suffering of African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans in the years since 2008, when the Great Recession began, is far worse than that of whites. Black family income and wealth is incomparably lower. Black unemployment is twice that of whites. The Obama White House has not brought forth one program to alleviate the conditions afflicting these three communities, and it's hardly likely a Romney government would do any better.

On other visible election issues, such as the rights of labor unions, the Democrats are much better than the Republicans, who despise the unions, but Obama has certainly been asleep at the switch, or maybe he just knows labor will support him come what may. Portraying himself as a friend of labor, Obama refused to fight hard enough — even when the Democrats controlled the House and Senate — to pass the Employee Free Choice Act, the one bill labor truly wanted from the White House in return for years of service. During his first term Obama presided over anti-union legislation and stood mute as the labor movement was pummeled mercilessly in several state legislatures, even losing collective bargaining rights in some states. With friends like this…

In rhetoric, Obama is far superior to the Republicans on such issues as social programs, the deficit, unemployment, foreclosures, tax policy, Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare. But in actual practice he has either done virtually nothing or has already made compromises. When he thinks he may lose he backs away instead of fighting on and at least educating people in the process. Look at it this way:

• The only social program to emerge from the Obama Administration is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, a near duplicate of Romney's Republican plan in Massachusetts. Obama wouldn't even consider the long overdue and far better single payer/Medicare-for-all plan. Obamacare is an improvement over the present system, although it still leaves millions without healthcare. But it only came about after convincing Big Insurance and Big Pharma that it would greatly increase their profits. The big insurance and drug companies accumulate overhead costs of 30%. Government-provided Universal Medicare, based on today's overhead, would only be about 3% because profit and excessive executive pay would be excluded.

• In his willingness to compromise, Obama largely accepted the Tea Party right wing emphasis on deficit reduction instead of investing in the economy and social programs, especially to recover from the Great Recession, continuing stagnation and high unemployment. This will mainly entail budget reductions and targeted tax increases focusing on finally ending the Bush tax cuts for people earning $250,000 or more a year. These cuts were supposed to expire two years ago but were extended by Obama in a compromise tax deal with obstructionist Republicans Congress.

It's an old Republican trick when in office to greatly increase the deficit through tax breaks and war costs, then demand that the succeeding Democratic Administration focus on reducing the deficit by virtually eliminating social programs for the people. Reagan and Bush #1 did it successfully to President Bill Clinton (who spent eight years eliminating the deficit without sponsoring one significant social program), and Bush #2 has done it to Obama.

Almost as informative as what separates the two parties is what they agree upon. Bill Quigley, legal director at the Center for Constitutional Rights and a law professor at Loyola University in New Orleans, compiled the following list, which was published on AlterNet Oct. 27:

1. Neither candidate is interested in stopping the use of the death penalty for federal or state crimes.

2. Neither candidate is interested in eliminating or reducing the 5,113 U.S. nuclear warheads.

3. Neither candidate is campaigning to close Guantanamo prison.

4. Neither candidate has called for arresting and prosecuting high ranking people on Wall Street for the subprime mortgage catastrophe.

5. Neither candidate is interested in holding anyone in the Bush administration accountable for the torture committed by U.S. personnel against prisoners in Guantanamo or in Iraq or Afghanistan.

6. Neither candidate is interested in stopping the use of drones to assassinate people in

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia.

7. Neither candidate is against warrantless surveillance, indefinite detention, or racial profiling in fighting "terrorism.'

8. Neither candidate is interested in fighting for a living wage. In fact neither are really committed beyond lip service to raising the minimum wage of $7.25 an hour — which, if it kept pace with inflation since the 1960s should be about $10 an hour.

9. Neither candidate was interested in arresting Osama bin Laden and having him tried in court.

10. Neither candidate will declare they refuse to bomb Iran.

11. Neither candidate is refusing to take huge campaign contributions from people and organizations.

12. Neither candidate proposes any significant specific steps to reverse global warming.

13. Neither candidate is talking about the over 2 million people in jails and prisons in the U.S..

14. Neither candidate proposes to create public jobs so everyone who wants to work can.

15. Neither candidate opposes the nuclear power industry. In fact both support expansion.

Over the past several weeks, liberal and progressive groups have been seeking to convince disenchanted voters who share their politics to once again get behind Obama with renewed enthusiasm and hope for progress. These organizations fear such voters will not turn out on election day or instead vote for a progressive third party candidate such as the Green Party's Jill Stein, or a socialist candidate, such as the Party for Socialism and Liberation's Peta Lindsay, both of whom are on the New York State ballot.

It would be better for all American working families, including the poor and the oppressed sectors if the Republicans were defeated, and Obama will do less harm than Romney and the far right.

I will not vote for Obama because he is a warrior president comfortably leading an imperialist and militarist system — a man who ignores poor and low income families, who eviscerates our civil liberties and who knows the truth about global warming but does pathetically little about it.

I'll vote for Peta Lindsay, a young African American socialist woman. I completely agree with her 10-point election platform, the last point of which is "Seize the banks, jail Wall Street Criminals." And I want to help to build socialism, the only real answer to the problems afflicting America and the world.

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