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How US Democracy Triumphed Again

Noam Chomsky

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The US presidential election was a virtual statistical tie, with estimated differences well within the expected error range. A victor had to be chosen, and much attention has been devoted to what the process revealed about the state of American democracy.

Other aspects of the election may be more illuminating in this regard. Almost half the electorate did not participate and voting correlated with income, a long-standing “comparative peculiarity of the American political system” that is plausibly attributed to “the total absence of a socialist or labourite mass party as an organised competitor in the electoral market”, as the political scientist Walter Dean Burnham puts it. Higher-income voters favour Republicans, but class-skewed voting alone does not account for the vote for George W Bush; his greatest success was among the white working class, particularly males. By large margins they favoured Al Gore on policy issues, and among voters concerned more with issues than “qualities”, Gore won handily. But the genius of the political system is to displace such matters. Business and public attitudes commonly diverge: on trade, budget, public spending, and much

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else. In such cases, issues of great importance to the public either do not arise in the campaigns or are obscured and overwhelmed by peripheral concerns.

Voting against interest is not new. In 1984 Reagan won a “landslide victory” (with under 30 per cent of the potential vote) while voters opposed his legislative programme by three to two. Such outcomes are not surprising when half the population believe the government is run by “a few big interests looking out for themselves”; the figure rose to over 80 per cent as the “neo-liberal reforms” were more firmly instituted.

These tendencies are reinforced by media and advertising campaigns concentrating on style, personality, and other matters of lesser concern to the “few big interests” that largely finance the campaigns and run the government.

The director of Harvard University’s Vanishing Voter Project, Thomas Patterson, reports that today “Americans’ feeling of powerlessness has reached an alarming high”, with 53 per cent responding “only a little” or “none” to the question: “how much influence do you think people like you have on what government does?” The previous peak, 30 years ago, was 41 per cent.

During the campaign, over 60 per cent of regular voters regarded politics in America as “generally pretty disgusting” in each weekly survey. Three-quarters of the population took the process to be controlled by rich contributors, party leaders, and the PR industry, which crafted artificial candidates who cannot be believed even when what they say is intelligible.

Post-election inquiries exposed ugly racist bias and electoral chicanery in Florida and elsewhere. A numerically more significant effect is incarceration. The day after the election, Human Rights Watch reported that the “decisive” element in the Florida election was the exclusion of 31 per cent of African-American men, prisoners or permanently disenfranchised ex-prisoners, amounting to over 200,000 potential voters from a constituency that voted 90 per cent Democratic. The same was true in other swing states.

Reviewing Senate elections since 1978, the academic researchers Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen conclude that “were it not for disenfranchised felons, the Democrats would still have control of the US Senate”. Under Clinton and Gore, the prison population expanded by almost half, extending draconian Reagan-Bush programmes. Twenty years ago, the United States was similar to other industrial countries in rate of incarceration. By now, it is far off the spectrum. The escalation is unrelated to crime rates. Its central component is drug laws that serve primarily as a means of social control: removing superfluous people and frightening the rest. When the latest phase of the “drug war” was designed in the 1980s, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan recognised that “we are choosing to have an intense crime problem concentrated among minorities”.

“The war’s planners knew exactly what they were doing,” the criminologist Michael Tonry observes, reviewing the racist and class-based procedures that run through the system. One consequence is the “decisive” impact on electoral outcomes.

Like the increasing sense of powerlessness, these programmes are a natural component of the “neo-liberal reforms” instituted during the same years. They are designed to transfer decision-making even more than before to unaccountable private power systems, while also creating a “virtual parliament” of investors and lenders that can exercise “veto power” over government decisions thanks to financial liberalisation.

Capital mobility has also been a powerful instrument to prevent labour organising by threat of job transfer – technically illegal, but highly effective (and well documented). A welcome consequence is the “growing worker insecurity” that Alan Greenspan and others hail for its contribution to “economic health”: keeping wages, benefits, and inflation low while increasing profits. The “neo-liberal reforms” have also been accompanied by a notable deterioration in standard measures of economic health worldwide, and have had a significant impact on social indicators. In the United States these tracked economic growth into the 1970s, and have declined since,

now to about the level of 40 years ago. Economic rewards are highly concentrated.

Much of the population becomes superfluous for profit and power, insecure, and politically marginalised as well, their aspirations reduced to choice among commodities while others run the world.

The slogan “trust the people” is the Newspeak version of “trust the corporations”. Since “the people” understand all too well, mechanisms must be instituted to divert and control them.

The constitutional system was designed “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority”, in the words of its leading framer, James Madison. Political power, he explained, must be in the hands of “the wealth of the nation”, men who can be trusted to “secure the permanent interests of the country” – the rights of the propertied – and to defend these interests against the “levelling spirit” of those who “labour under all the hardships of life, and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings”.

In a modern version, Walter Lippmann put it that the general public are “ignorant and meddling outsiders” who should be mere “spectators of action”, apart from periodic choice among the “responsible men”. An unspoken premise is that the narrow category of “responsible men” acquire that status by service to authentic power. Having done so, they are to function in “technocratic insulation”, in World Bank lingo, undisturbed by the “outsiders”. The doctrine, labelled “polyarchy” by the political theorist Robert Dahl, is given even firmer institutional grounds by the reduction of the public arena under the “reforms”. From this perspective, conventional in elite opinion, George W Bush’s election does not reveal a flaw of American democracy, but rather its triumph.