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The Disconnect in US Democracy

Noam Chomsky

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Americans may be encouraged to vote, but not to participate more meaningfully in the political arena. Essentially the election is a method of marginalising the population. A huge propaganda campaign is mounted to get people to focus on these personalised quadrennial extravaganzas and to think, “That’s politics.” But it isn’t. It’s only a small part of politics.

The population has been carefully excluded from political activity, and not by accident. An enormous amount of work has gone into that disenfranchisement. During the 1960s the outburst of popular participation in democracy terrified the forces of convention, which mounted a fierce counter-campaign. Manifestations show up today on the left as well as the right in the effort to drive democracy back into the hole where it belongs.

Bush and Kerry can run because they’re funded by basically the same concentrations of private power. Both candidates understand that the election is supposed to stay away from issues. They are creatures of the public relations industry, which keeps the public out of the election process. The concentration is on what they call

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a candidate's "qualities," not policies. Is he a leader? A nice guy? Voters end up endorsing an image, not a platform.

Last month a Gallup poll asked Americans why they're voting for either Bush or Kerry. From a multiple-choice list, a mere 6 percent of Bush voters and 13 percent of Kerry voters picked the candidates' "agendas/ideas/ platforms/goals." That's how the political system prefers it. Often the issues that are most on people's minds don't enter at all clearly into the debate.

A new report by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, which regularly monitors American attitudes on international issues, illustrates the disconnect.

A considerable majority of Americans favour "working within the United Nations, even when it adopts policies that the United States does not like." Most Americans also believe that "countries should have the right to go to war on their own only if they (have) strong evidence that they are in imminent danger of being attacked," thus rejecting the bipartisan consensus on "pre-emptive war."

On Iraq, polls by the Program on International Policy Attitudes show that a majority of Americans favour letting the UN take the lead in issues of security, reconstruction and political transition in that country. Last March, Spanish voters actually could vote on these matters.

It is notable that Americans hold these and similar views (say, on the International Criminal Court or the Kyoto Protocol) in virtual isolation: They rarely hear them in campaign speeches, and probably regard them as idiosyncratic. At the same time the level of activism for social change may be higher than ever in the US. But it's disorganised. Nobody knows what's happening on the other side of town.

By contrast, consider the fundamentalist Christians. Earlier this month in Jerusalem, Pat Robertson said that he would start a third party if Bush and the Republicans waver in support for Israel. That's a serious threat because he might be able to mobilise

tens of millions of evangelical Christians who already form a significant political force, thanks to extensive work over decades on numerous issues, and with candidates at levels from school board to president.

The presidential race isn't devoid of issue-oriented activism. During the primaries, before the main event fully gears up, candidates can raise issues and help organise popular support for them, thereby influencing campaigns to some extent. After the primaries, mere statements make a minimal impact without a significant organisation behind them.

The urgency is for popular progressive groups to grow and become strong enough so that centres of power can't ignore them. Forces for change that have come up from the grass roots and shaken the society to its core include the labour movement, the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the women's movement and others, cultivated by steady, dedicated work at all levels, every day, not just once every four years.

But you can't ignore the elections. You should recognise that one of the two groups now contending for power happens to be extremist and dangerous, and has already caused plenty of trouble and could cause plenty more.

As for myself, I've taken the same position as in 2000. If you are in a swing state, you should vote to keep the worst guys out. If it's another state, do what you feel is best. There are many considerations. Bush and his administration are publicly committed to dismantling and destroying whatever progressive legislation and social welfare has been won by popular struggles over the past century.

Internationally, they are calling for dominating the world by military force, including even the "ownership of space" to expand monitoring and first strike capabilities.

So in the election, sensible choices have to be made. But they are secondary to serious political action. The main task is to create

a genuinely responsive democratic culture, and that effort goes on before and after electoral extravaganzas, whatever their outcome.