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The 2012 U.S. Elections and the Future of the Left

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The 2012 elections may prove to have been a watershed in several different respects. Despite the efforts by the political Right to suppress the Democratic electorate, something very strange happened: voters, angered by the attacks on their rights, turned out in even greater force in favor of Democratic candidates. The deeper phenomenon is that the changing demographics of the USA also became more evident - 45% of Obama voters were people of color, and young voters turned out in large numbers in key counties.

Unfortunately for the political Left, these events unfolded with the Left having limited visibility and a limited impact - except indirectly through certain mass organizations - on the outcome.

The setting

On one level it is easy to understand why many Republicans found it difficult to believe that Mitt Romney did not win the election. First, the US remains in the grip of an economic crisis with an official unemployment rate of 7.9%. In some communities, the unemployment is closer to 20%. While the Obama administration had taken certain steps to address the economic crisis, the steps have been insufficient in light of the global nature of the crisis. The steps were also limited by the political **orientation** of the Obama administration, i.e., corporate liberal, and the general support by many in the administration for neo-liberal economics.

The second factor that made the election a 'nail biter' was the amount of money poured into this contest. Approximately \$6 billion was spent in the entire election. In the Presidential race it was more than \$2 billion raised and spent, but this does not include independent expenditures. In either case, this was the first post-**Citizen United** Presidential campaign, meaning that money was flowing into this election like a flood after a dam bursts. Republican so-called Super Political Action Committees (Super PACs) went all out to defeat President Obama.

Third, the Republicans engaged in a process of what came to be known as "voter suppression" activity. Particularly in the aftermath of the 2010 midterm elections, the Republicans created a false crisis of alleged voter fraud as a justification for various draconian steps aimed at allegedly cleansing the election process of illegitimate voters. Despite the fact that the Republicans could not substantiate their claims that voter fraud was a problem on any scale, let alone a significant problem, they were able to build up a clamor for restrictive changes in the process, thereby permitting the introduction of various laws to make it more difficult for voters to cast their ballots. This included photographic voter identification, more difficult processes for voter registration, and the shortening of early voting. Though many of these steps were overturned through the intervention of courts, they were aimed at causing a chilling impact on the voters, specifically, the Democratic electorate. (1)

So, what happened?

Prior to the election, we argued that what was at stake in the 2012 elections was actually the changing demographics of the USA (along with a referendum on the role of government in the economy). What transpired in the elections was very much about demographics.

The percentage of white voters dropped from 74% to 72% between 2008 and 2012. Romney received 59% of the white vote.

Yet something else happened and it took many people by surprise. Despite the intimidation caused by the voter suppression statutes - and the threatened actions by right-wing groups - African Americans, Latinos and Asians turned out in significant numbers, voting overwhelmingly for the Democrats. (2) 93% of African Americans went with Obama, as did 71% of Latinos (which represented an increase over 2008) and, despite the fact that Asians are only 2-3% of the

electorate, they went 73% in favor of Obama (which was a jump from 62% in 2008). The youth vote, by the way, increased to 19% of the electorate, over 18% in 2008, and went overwhelmingly for Obama. Labor union members went for Obama at a rate of 65%, and unions themselves played a major role in many key states in terms of voter mobilization. By the strategic mobilization of these voters in a well-organized 'ground game,' Obama won 332 Electoral College votes compared with Romney's 206. Obama's popular vote total was also 2.6% ahead of Romney.

The Romney / Ryan camp was entirely unprepared for this. While it is the case that the popular vote total was not overwhelmingly for Obama, there was nothing particularly unusual in US history for such a result. The bottom line is that Obama clearly won both the Electoral College vote and the popular vote and, as such, can claim a mandate for his next steps.

It is important that one understands that the African American / Latino / Asian turnout, along with the long-lines waiting to vote (including in the days of early voting) represented an audacious defiance of the forces that sought to suppress the vote. This audaciousness also represented a response to the increasingly racist attacks on Obama, attacks that were taken very personally by people of color generally and African Americans in particular. (3)

What was equally interesting about the November 6th elections were those in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Contrary to many expectations, the Democrats not only held onto the Senate, but slightly increased their margin of control. Within that expansion was the election of Elizabeth Warren from Massachusetts to the seat once occupied by the late Teddy Kennedy. Warren, who gained a strong reputation in the fight to control Wall Street, promised actions on behalf of working people. Independent Senator Bernie Sanders, a socialist in Vermont, also decisively won reelection.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats increased their totals, but Republicans still dominate. This is mainly the result of the gerrymandering carried out by Republican state legislators during redistricting. The legacy of this gerrymandering may last at least a decade, part of the fallout which resulted from lower voter turnout combined with the Republican mobilization in the 2010 midterm elections.

Of particular note in the elections was the increased presence of women, especially progressive women, being elected to office, including the first openly gay Senator (from Wisconsin, Tammy Baldwin). The state of New Hampshire now has women in all of the top governing positions.

Additionally, several progressive ballot initiatives passed in various states, including on same-sex marriage and the legalization of marijuana. An interesting initiative in the state of Michigan, to alter the state constitution in order to protect the right of workers to collective bargaining, was defeated after a major and concerted attack by pro-employer groups.

What to make of the elections?

We return to our earlier conclusion, i.e., that what was at stake in 2012 was not Obama's record but instead 2012 was a referendum over demographics and the role of government with the far right. Some on the Left found this assertion worthy of ridicule rather than introspection, and dismissed it, claiming that of course Obama's record was central to the debate.

The results of the election conform much more to our conclusions. The vote for Obama, particularly by people of color, could not possibly have been the result of the conclusion that Obama's record made him the great leader. Certainly his record was better than the interpretation projected by Romney / Ryan, but it was also the case that Obama's record was complicated, if not problematic. After all, we had witnessed an economic stimulus that, while significant by historical standards, was insufficient to the task; a healthcare reform package that, while bringing healthcare to millions, was based on a corporate model first elaborated by Mitt Romney when he was Governor of Massachusetts; a failure to close Guantanamo; the continuation and escalation of the Afghanistan / Pakistan war, including the usage of drone strikes; and the failure to adopt a clear policy to address systemic racial injustice in the USA. While there were a number of reforms that were introduced that were of significance, this was all far less than most of Obama's supporters had hoped would be introduced.

So, what then could one say motivated the vote? We return to demographics and the role of government. Obama's very existence represents the problematic future for the political Right; it's not that he's an individual whose birthplace is alleged by them to not be in the USA. This insane propaganda from the Birther movement is designed

to distort the point entirely. The Birthers (4) and their off-spring hate Obama, not because of where he was born, but *because* he was born here. His very existence illustrates the changing demographics of the USA and its move away from being a 'white republic' governed by a broad 'white' front. Instead, we are moving more towards something else, toward a more openly multi-ethnic / multi-racial society, if not politically then at least numerically.

The election thus represented a repudiation of the right-wing irrationalists seeking to turn the clock back, and not just on race, but gender and class as well. In this sense it was not so much about what Obama had accomplished as it was about what sort of society 61 million people did **not** want. That retrograde society, which was rejected, was a neo-apartheid order of domination that condemned at least 47% of the population (according to Romney's calculations) to marginalization, and condemned at least 90% of society to continued economic distress and submission.

Romney was proposing to reduce the role of government even further, at least when it came to supporting something approaching a social safety net. 61 million people recognized the barbarism contained in his message and program, and responded accordingly.

In sum, the November 6th elections were not a referendum challenging Obama's course from the Left, but rather rejecting a challenge from the Right, since there was no viable Left alternative. At the same time there was an additional interesting feature of the elections as identified in various opinion polls: Democratic voters, while not as starry-eyed as many were in 2008, are looking for Obama to fight for them, or at least fight on their behalf. Frustration with Obama's premature compromising in the name of so-called bi-partisanship wins the President few accolades within his base. The electorate is looking for something very different.

The Left in the elections: Building mass organizations vs. the mouths that screeched

Contrary to those who suggest that no Left exists in the USA, it is better to understand that there are two and a half Lefts in the USA. There is the organized Left, which takes the forms of very small political organizations, some of them calling themselves political parties, which are anti-capitalist and generally for some sort of socialism. There is also what Chilean Marxist Marta Harnecker would describe as the "social movement Left," which are forces involved in

left-leaning mass organizations and non-profits, more often than not single-issue or based within a specific sector. There is finally what we could term the 'half' Left, that is, the 'Lone Rangers,' the rather large number of independent individuals who self-identify as leftists but are unaffiliated with any left-wing project, with the possible exception a job with social impact, such as writers or teachers or health care workers. In each case these individuals and formations are anti-capitalist and seek a social transformation of the USA, but with varying degrees of organization, insurgency and effectiveness.

The US Left has historically had a difficult time addressing electoral politics. There are several reasons - the complications that arise from the undemocratic nature of the US electoral system; the size of the USA; the lack of attention to strategy; and most important, ambivalence when it comes to race. As a result, the Left frequently sways back and forth between what could, perhaps, be described as apocalypticism on the one hand (i.e., waving the red flag so that the masses see us before the whole system collapses and, therefore, they know where to go), to reformist / incrementalism, on the other (i.e., believing that the best that can be done is to submerge into the Democratic Party and help move change until the system reaches a point where quantitative change morphs into qualitative change).

There is currently no significant and unified effort within the Left(s) toward building a self-conscious, broad radical Left project that has the objective of winning power. The bulk of the US Left does not think politically. Rather it engages in ideological or moral struggle and often thinks that ideology or morality is identical to politics. Rather than conceptualizing a protracted struggle for power based on the need to build a majoritarian bloc, too many individuals and organizations on the Left remain trapped in a self-satisfying world of small sects and Facebook tirades rather than the hard work of building the alliances of grassroots groups necessary to win.

The limitations of the Left's approach to the fight for power can be illustrated in any number of places, but, for the moment, let's reflect upon the electoral realm. Consider the following. In 1920, Eugene V. Debs ran, for the fifth time, for the Presidency. Though in jail at the time (as a result of political repression), he received nearly one million votes. In the famous 1948 campaign of Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace, the candidate received 1,157,328 votes and no Electoral College votes. In the same election, Dixiecrat candidate, Strom Thurmond, received more popular votes and 39 electoral votes.

Now, in 2012, Green Party candidate, Jill Stein, received 402,125 votes. This is going the wrong way. But it reflects, more than anything, not the character of Stein or her supporters but the approach toward electoral politics taken by the Green Party and many of their followers.

Independent presidential candidacies in the modern era reflect what can be described as a flag-waving / protest mode rather than a struggle for power / bloc-building mode. In other words, they aim to express both outrage and reasoned critique at the system and frustration with the toxicity of democratic capitalism. They have no hope of gaining power either because they do not believe in struggling to gain power or because they believe that power is gained when the ship sinks and we, on the Left, are positioned in the proper lifeboats prepared to save the mass of distressed passengers.

This is only on the electoral side. The various small organizations of the organized Left which do not engage in electoral politics in their own names seem relatively content being small and of little consequence. In the absence of an effort at building a majoritarian bloc they can remain comfortable in their particular niche(s) and not feel the cold winds that often accompany entering into unexplored demographic or geographic territories. They remind us of the old Clifford Odet's play, 'Waiting for Lefty.'

At the same time, over the last 5-10 years, there has developed a new interest in electoral engagement in the social movement Left. Sprouting up in different parts of the USA have been progressive - rather than explicitly Left - political formations that have either engaged in what has come to be known as "civic engagement" work, i.e., voter registration, education, voting rights, electoral law reform, and / or actual electoral engagement. The strength of this work is that its orientation can be described as *left / progressive* in that these are mass-based projects attempting to reach out to a broad array within our natural base. Organizations ranging from Progressive Democrats of America to the Virginia New Majority and Florida New Majority fall into this camp, though the list is quite a bit longer than just these organizations.

In the lead up to the 2012 elections the Left was badly divided over how to respond. One segment, which we will describe as the "mouths that screeched" were adamant that Obama had betrayed progressives; that he was not progressive; that he represented the empire; and therefore not only should not be supported but that it was ideological

treason to suggest any level of support or even just to give him a vote without any implied support.

The vitriolic attacks coming from this sector masked the fact that this segment of the Left is actually becoming irrelevant. They had no visible impact on the elections and their protests were largely ignored. Unfortunately, one of the key things that this segment missed was the racial element of the 2012 elections and the need for voters of color, along with a good number of white allies, to push back at the 'demographic' attacks that were underway from the political Right. By focusing on all that Obama did incorrectly, this segment of the Left ignored, as well, that the Left and progressives are on the *strategic defensive* in the USA and that they need alliances that will provide some level of space within which we can operate.

The segment of the Left that actually made a difference was those *within* the organized Left and the social movement Left who engaged their mass organizations and non-profits in electoral activity. (5) Whether it was voter registration; voter education efforts; electoral infrastructure work; or Get Out The Vote efforts, many of these organizations proved themselves to be very effective campaign organizations. They appear to be in the process of laying the groundwork for the sorts of progressive alliance building that will be necessary to respond to the next electoral realignment that hits the USA.

What is missing entirely, however, is a coherent, self-identified Left, taking either the form of a united front, alliance, or political organization that can serve as a pole for independent, radical yet grounded Left politics. The mass base for such an effort exists. The opinion polls that demonstrate that roughly one third of the population are open to directions other than capitalism means that approximately 90 million people are seeking alternatives. Consider that 90 million figure when you review the stats for the Green Party's votes in 2012. The Occupy Movement also evidenced a political fissure that is certain to widen as the class struggle intensifies, though admittedly Occupy did not result in the formation of one or several credible Left organizations (no criticism implied).

Moving forward

The challenge for the Left then becomes twofold. First, there must be a self-identified, self-aware, mass radical Left formation that openly and unapologetically advocates against capitalism and for environmentally

friendly socialism. Whether such an organization is called a political party, alliance or some other name is secondary to what it must do and what it must avoid. What it must avoid is the idea that it can or should compete in the electoral realm on the presidential level at this time. That is a no-win scenario. What it can do, however, is to unite and train the existing leaders in mass movements and develop an anti-capitalist program and ultimately an anti-capitalist project. We term this notion of a new, self-conscious and organized Left - inspired by the approach taken by and expression used by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci - to be the "*Modern Tecumseh*." (6) Second, the Left can also help to build a progressive front - perhaps a popular front against finance capital that unites disparate forces - that gains electoral expression in the form of an organization (rather than a third party) that runs candidates within the Democratic Party or, runs them independently if conditions exist (such as in Vermont where the candidacy and leadership of Senator Sanders needs to be supported).

As long as the progressive forces in the USA are on the defensive there will be tactical alliances that take place that are not satisfying but are nevertheless necessary. These should not be treated as matters of principle but rather as expressions of necessity of the moment. Further, we on the Left must pay much greater attention to what is transpiring among the people themselves. The fact that so many on the Left would have focused on Obama's record and virtually ignored the intense racist offensive against Obama (and its broader implications) demonstrated that many of our friends are out of touch with reality.

Reality, however, is a good and necessary starting point if one ever wishes to build a majoritarian bloc and win power. We fully expect to see an intensification of class struggle in the near term. We need to assert a new culture of organizing capable of meeting the demands it will place on us, and now is the time to begin.

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¹ The issue of voting rights remains critical since there are cases before the U.S. Supreme Court to challenge critical features of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, features that were part of the Department of Justice's arsenal to overturn certain voter suppression legislation.

² It is important to note, however, that voter turnout was down in comparison to 2008 except for nine states. As of this writing it is not clear as to the sources of the decline.

³ Attacks such as Donald Trump's insulting demand that President Obama turn over his college transcripts. The suggestion of such an action is almost unbelievable. Nothing along those lines would have been tolerated when it came to former President George W. Bush, an individual who was not half the student that was Obama in college.

⁴ The right-wing, irrationalist political movement that asserts that Obama was not born in the USA and is, therefore, not the legitimate president of the USA.

⁵ To be clear, not all forces in the organized Left or the social movement Left engaged in left/progressive electoral organizing. We are simply noting that there were forces from within these sectors that did, in fact, choose to engage.

⁶ Tecumseh: Shawnee leader in the first decade of the 19th century. Recognized that Native Americans would never defeat the USA by fighting as individual tribes or fighting through the creation of a confederation. He was the advocate for a Native American nation-state, i.e., uniting the tribes and fusing their efforts. He was killed in 1813 at the Battle of the Thames in Canada.



