

US midterm election: the meaning of the Democratic debacle

By the Editorial Board
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The Republican sweep in the November 5 midterm election sets the stage for an enormous intensification of the social and political crisis in the United States. The attempt by the media to present the election result as a vindication of George W. Bush and an expression of popular support for his policies is an exercise in cynical propaganda.

Even to speak of the Republicans “winning” the campaign is misleading. The November 5 election was not seriously contested by the nominal opposition party.

It was a political debacle for the Democrats. The rout was across the board, with the Democrats ceding control of the Senate, losing seats in the House of Representatives, and going down to defeat in a majority of gubernatorial races. The Republican Party now has the presidency and a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time since the election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. Adding the Supreme Court as another right-wing stronghold, the Republicans are in control of all three branches of the US government for the first time since the Hoover administration in 1930.

The Bush administration is under no illusions as to the breadth of popular support for its policies, but it will exploit the collapse of any opposition within the political establishment to carry out an unprecedented attack on the working class.

Already given the green light by the House and Senate, the White House is expected to launch war against Iraq in the next few months, with incalculable consequences for the peoples of the Middle East, America and the world.

Well before any invasion, the domestic implications of the US war drive will be felt when a lame-duck session of Congress—with Republicans in control of both houses—meets to adopt appropriations bills to fund all government domestic and social service programs. With military spending soaring, and tax receipts slashed by the recession and stock market slide, the Bush administration is demanding significant cuts in social spending. These will only be the down payment on massive retrenchment once the full cost of war in the Persian Gulf—and elsewhere—is felt.

The first order of business in the lame-duck session will be passage of legislation to establish a new Department of Homeland Security, to centralize all federal police and security forces into a single agency. The bill was stalled by a

dispute over Bush’s demand to strip workers in the new department of their civil service protection rights and collective bargaining rights. Now it will be full speed ahead with a measure whose premise is that American workers must sacrifice their democratic rights in the name of the “war on terrorism.”

For all intents and purposes, the outcome of the November 5 election was decided weeks ago when the Democratic congressional leadership made the decision to grant Bush sweeping authority to wage war against Iraq. It is not possible for a party to conduct a serious election campaign against an administration whose authority it has boosted with a vote of political confidence.

Bush’s political mentors decided to frame the Republican campaign as a referendum on the administration’s war policy, and the Democrats meekly obliged. This, however, was not simply a tactical mistake. It was a devastating self-exposure.

The Democrats rationalized their support for an unprovoked imperialist war by claiming that to do otherwise would be political suicide, adding that once the war question was out of the way, they could concentrate on opposing Bush’s domestic policies. They simply ignored a rash of public opinion polls revealing widespread disquiet over the war and declining support for Bush’s militaristic agenda.

In reality, in supporting the war they were supporting the entirety of the administration’s program. It is impossible to separate Bush’s predatory foreign policy from his policies of repression and social reaction at home. They are two sides of the same agenda—one that is pursued in the interests not of the American people, but of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

In the end, the Democrats were neither able nor willing to propose any serious measures to deal with the growth of unemployment or the worsening crisis in education, health care and housing. They dared not challenge Bush’s tax handouts to the rich, his attacks on social programs, or his record military budget. It was capitulation all down the line.

The Democrats’ collapse was all the more significant, given the context in which it occurred. The Republican administration is widely seen as illegitimate, having come to power on the basis of electoral fraud and judicial fiat, and its leading personnel are implicated in massive corporate scandals.

Yet, unlike the 1998 and 2000 elections, there was no significant mobilization in minority or working class areas,

where loyalty to the Democratic Party is traditionally strongest. The Democrats did not provide a single reason for the oppressed layers of the population to rally to their support.

This is the real source of the Republican victory, not mass support for Bush and his right-wing program. The picture presented by the media of a people enthralled by their war-time leader is absurd. Working people in America have not suddenly and unaccountably decided that they passionately desire war, tax cuts for the wealthy, handouts to corporate interests, and the destruction of jobs and public social services.

The November 5 vote was a watershed election. It heralds the breakup of the American two-party system—a system that provides no outlet for the working class to express its interests. The two parties, the media and the existing electoral machinery are entirely subordinated to the narrow and selfish interests of a small and privileged elite. Mass alienation from the political system is reflected in the dismal turnout at the polls—an estimated 38 or 39 percent, the second lowest in history.

The very fact that the Republicans can monopolize all of the levers of state power, despite the acknowledged fact that the electorate is evenly divided, testifies to the undemocratic and dysfunctional character of the political system.

The debacle of the Democratic Party brings to an end the period when the social concerns of the working class could be mediated within a system of two capitalist parties. The American ruling elite cannot any longer sustain a credible reform party of big business.

Millions of working people are losing their illusions in the Democratic Party, but they as yet see no alternative.

The yawning political vacuum on the left results in a seeming Republican juggernaut. This, however, will reveal itself to be the prelude to a colossal social and political crisis. Precisely because the US political system no longer provides any outlet for the expression of the real feelings of the American people, popular anger and frustration will inevitably take the form of convulsions and upheavals. It will not take long before serious social struggles begin to erupt in the US.

The discrediting of American capitalism's traditional reform party means that the growing social crisis will tend to drive the working class along the path of independent political struggle. This must be recognized and made the basis of a new political strategy.

There is no looking back after November 5. The time has come for the American working class to begin the arduous task of constructing an independent political party. The entire experience with the Democratic Party points to the programmatic basis upon which such a party must be built. It demonstrates that there can be no serious opposition to political reaction and war unless it is based on opposition to the capitalist system itself. The midterm election has posed in the sharpest manner the unpostponable task of creating a mass socialist alternative to both parties of big business.

The task of building this alternative is being undertaken by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. We pledge to our readers and supporters in the US and internationally that we will intensify our efforts to construct the mass socialist party of the working class.

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