

Voter turnout in US primaries hits record lows

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The average turnout of eligible voters in this year's primary elections fell to 17.4 percent, the lowest rate of voter participation in the history of American mid-term elections, according to a survey released September 27 by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE).

The nonpartisan organization tabulated voter turnout in all primaries where Democratic and Republican candidates vied for their party's nomination for statewide office (governor, US Senator, or both). In its summary report, the CSAE said, "The decline continued a trend which has seen overall citizen mid-term primary voting plummet 45 percent and Democratic turnout drop 52 percent since 1966, auguring long-term problems for both nation and party."

In the 1966 mid-term elections (those held in non-presidential election years) average participation in the primaries reached a high point of 31.8 percent. Since then there has been a steady decline in voter turnout, a trend which has accelerated over the past decade. Voting in this year's primaries declined by 10 percent from 1994.

Average Republican voting fell by 9 percent from 1994, with 8.7 percent of Republicans going to the polls. This is a drop of 37 percent from 1966. Average Democratic turnout fell by 9 percent, to 9.2 percent of those eligible to vote, the lowest turnout in Democratic Party history.

While the report focused on the 1998 primaries, it pointed out that the sharp decline in participation is not limited to mid-term elections. The 1996 presidential election registered the lowest turnout (49 percent of the voting age population) since 1924. Outside of the South, the rate of participation was the smallest since 1824.

Curtis Gans, who directed the study, said the voting indices refuted claims that mass abstention is a sign of voter contentment. He noted that the greatest declines in participation over the past three decades have occurred among the poorest, youngest and least educated Americans.

'It's hard to conceive of a contented electorate,' he said, 'when the people who are voting least are the people at the bottom of the income scale, at the bottom of the age scale and the least educated. They are the ones who are feeling no hope in the system.'

Gans summed up the far-reaching implications of these

voting trends:

'What we are witnessing is a progressive meltdown in civic engagement, a major danger to American democracy, and the continuing and progressive decline in the Democratic Party. Primaries are and have been for the active and interested in each political party, but when you have a situation where an average of less than five percent of the electorate can determine the nominees and direction of either major political party, you are inviting intense faction to take over one or both parties and skew the public agenda.... Increasingly, as voter turnout declines, the electorate is being dominated by the self-interested and the zealous at the expense of the common interest.'

The figures released by the CSAE provide a measure of the erosion of mass support for both of the traditional bourgeois parties in America. Historically, both the Democrats and Republicans, while defending the interests of the most privileged sections of society, sought to extend their bases of support to wider layers. They advanced social policies that appealed to constituencies well beyond the financial elites to whom they answered. The stability of capitalist rule rested largely on the ability of these two parties to maintain a broad base of support in the population.

Both parties contended for the support of the broad middle-class layers in the US, and their relative electoral success at any point largely depended on their ability to win over the bulk of such strata. The Democrats were traditionally the bourgeois party of social reform, basing themselves primarily on urban middle class people and workers, poorer farmers and, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt, oppressed ethnic minorities. The specific role of the Democratic Party was to subordinate the working class to American capitalism and integrate sections of the middle class behind a program that defended the profit system. It had the support of trade unions that held the allegiance of tens of millions of workers.

The Republicans based themselves primarily on small businessmen, better-off farmers, professional people and other middle-class layers in rural and small-town America.

Over the past quarter century, both parties have found it increasingly difficult to sustain their traditional appeals to broader social layers. Profound changes in world economy and the international position of American capitalism have

produced an ever-accelerating shift to the right in the social policy of the bourgeoisie. In adapting themselves, both the Democrats and Republicans have largely alienated their former strongholds of popular support.

The voting figures for the Democrats are the culmination of a protracted process of decline, which began in earnest in the 1970s. In that decade the breakdown of the postwar economic boom took the form in the US of both mass unemployment and soaring inflation, and large sections of the middle class, as well as sections of workers, turned away from reformist policies that had demonstratively exhausted themselves. The trade unions, which had based themselves on these very policies, began the precipitous decay that has virtually removed them as a major factor in American politics.

The Democrats have ever more overtly repudiated policies of social reform, culminating in Clinton's adoption of the austerity program of the Republicans. Unable to advance a social policy that addresses the most important concerns of working people, the Democratic Party has redefined liberalism as the embrace of identity politics. It bases itself today primarily on a narrow layer of upper-middle-class people and sections of the corporate and financial elite. Ironically, the party that once presented itself as the partisan of the 'little man' against the abuses of corporate power now boasts of presiding over the most lucrative bull market in Wall Street history, and casts itself as the party of fiscal responsibility.

The Republican Party has undergone a parallel process of decay. Having adopted the program of market libertarianism, which rejects any restraints on the capitalist market and demands the destruction of all social reforms, it finds itself increasingly in conflict with the interests of broad layers of the middle class whom it once claimed to represent. It has fallen back on so-called cultural issues--anti-abortion, school prayer, anti-pornography--basing itself ever more directly on ultra-reactionary forces such as the Christian fundamentalist right.

Both parties have become discredited in the eyes of huge sections of the population, who face an increasingly difficult struggle to survive.

In terms of basic social policy, the Clinton administration has marked the virtual effacement of any differences between the two parties, as even some right-wing opponents of Clinton acknowledge. Robert Bartley, the editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, noted in a September 30 column: 'In the end Bill Clinton won re-election on a program of restraining government, by ratifying the Reagan revolution.'

Notwithstanding this convergence on policy, the more isolated the two parties become from the masses of the American people, the more reckless and uncontrolled are their intramural struggles. The Starr investigation and Republican impeachment drive are the starkest expressions of this phenomenon.

The narrow base and insulated milieu of the two parties contribute to the political disorientation which is reflected in

the assault on the White House. One expression of this disorientation is the repeated failure of political leaders and the media to gauge the public mood.

At the beginning of the year the Clinton administration suffered a political embarrassment at its televised 'town meeting' on Iraq when its top foreign policy spokesmen were unprepared for widespread opposition from the audience to US plans for an air war against Baghdad. And throughout the Monica Lewinsky affair, the forces backing Starr, including the media, have been repeatedly befuddled by the negative reaction of the public to their scandal- and sex-mongering. The latest example is the broadcast of Clinton's grand jury testimony, which they were convinced would rally public opinion behind the impeachment drive, but, in fact, had the opposite effect.

The erosion of any mass base of support for either the Democrats or Republicans, as documented in the CSAE survey of the primary elections, provides a starting point for answering one of the sharpest questions that has arisen in relation to the Starr investigation and impeachment campaign: How could such a transparent provocation, organized by forces with well-known ties to extreme right-wing elements, succeed in paralyzing the Clinton administration and bringing it to the point of collapse? And do so, moreover, in the face of overwhelming, albeit unorganized and largely passive, popular opposition.

Such a political conspiracy can only thrive within a political system that has largely separated itself from the broad masses of the population and any connection to democratic values. At the same time, a political system so detached from the concerns and feelings of the general population is hardly prepared to weather the force of great shocks. Under conditions of deepening economic crisis, and clear signs of an impending recession, the diseased and ossified political system in America is certain to undergo enormous upheavals.



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