The class divide in America and the 2000 presidential campaign

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With the first caucus and primary votes less than a week away, the process of selecting the next US president is proceeding on two very different planes—like so much else in America, the most deeply divided along social and class lines of any major industrialized country.

For the moneyed elite, the presidential campaign has been in full swing for nearly a year. The candidates are familiar faces, all of them trusted servants of the profit system. Indeed, the candidates seem almost genetically bred for this purpose, since the four of the five most prominent candidates are the sons respectively of a senator (Gore), an admiral (McCain), a billionaire (Forbes) or a previous president (Bush).

Corporate interests and wealthy donors, in collaboration with the media, have already winnowed the field significantly before a single voter has gone to the polls. Campaigns have been boosted or laid low on the basis of fundraising prowess, media publicity and the informal discussions in ruling circles that ultimately translate into official public opinion.

Of the 12 who at some point in 1999 announced their candidacies for the Republican presidential nomination, half had left the race by October, 13 months before the general election. Elizabeth Dole, Lamar Alexander, John Kasich, Dan Quayle and Robert Smith dropped out, while Patrick Buchanan bolted to the Reform Party. Three of those who remain, Orrin Hatch, Gary Bauer and Alan Keyes, are largely ignored by the media and lack the resources to continue beyond the initial contests in Iowa and New Hampshire.

For all practical purposes, the Republican campaign has been reduced to three candidates—Texas Governor George W. Bush, Arizona Senator John McCain, and magazine billionaire Steve Forbes—each in a position to make an impact in the early caucuses and primaries because each sits on a campaign war chest of at least $20 million. (Bush set a record by raising $67 million last year, while the only limit to Forbes' campaign spending is his own willingness to write checks.)

On the Democratic side, only former Senator Bill Bradley chose to challenge Vice President Al Gore for the right to succeed Bill Clinton. None of the tepid liberal critics of the right-wing social policies of the Clinton-Gore administration—Jesse Jackson, for instance, or Senator Paul Wellstone—launched a presidential bid. The dean of Democratic Party liberalism, Senator Edward Kennedy, announced his endorsement of Gore two weeks ago, and a half dozen Kennedys have made campaign appearances for Gore in Iowa in advance of the January 24 caucuses.

Bradley validated his campaign, at least in the eyes of the media and elite circles, by mounting an effective fundraising operation which nearly matched the vice president in its ability to tap Wall Street and corporate contributors. Just as Bush "won" the second quarter of 1999, demolishing most of his rivals with a huge display of money raising, Bradley "won" the fourth quarter, outdoing Gore and ending the year slightly ahead of the vice president in cash on hand. Whatever the outcome of the Iowa and New Hampshire contests, Bradley can hardly claim to be heading a grassroots or insurgent effort, as he has outspent Gore in television advertising in both states.

While the presidential candidates of the two big business parties have already raised and spent vast sums, rallying a large section of the corporate elite to bankroll what is expected to be a $3 billion election campaign, the presidential race has effectively bypassed the bulk of the American people.

According to one remarkable polling series published in early January, the proportion of the population which backs any of the major announced candidates has actually declined as the Republican and Democratic campaigns have gotten under way. While 64 percent of those questioned said in November that they had not made up their minds about a presidential candidate, by late December that figure had risen to 74 percent.

By wide majorities the American people are deeply alienated from the political system and from the corporate interests which dominate it. As many as two-thirds believe—quite correctly—that big money interests control official Washington and that the concerns of ordinary working people go unrepresented in both parties. But this hostility to the prevailing political order remains passive, largely expressed through abstention and mistrust, in the absence of a visible alternative.

Voter participation in the Iowa caucus January 24 and the New Hampshire primary February 1, the two traditional starting points of the presidential primary season, is expected to continue the trend of record low turnouts among eligible voters, a pattern already seen in the 1996 presidential and 1998 congressional balloting, and in state elections in 1999. Those casting ballots to select the presidential nominees of the two big business parties will be a very small fraction of the American people.

Yet, with the public barely taking notice, the primary campaign may be concluded within six weeks of the New Hampshire vote. Because of changes in the primary dates in many of the largest states, the majority of Democratic and Republican convention delegates will be selected by the end of March, and the nomination contest may be resolved for all practical purposes by March 7, when primaries are held in California, New York, Ohio, Georgia and five New England states. The March 7 primaries will be only the second balloting in the Democratic Party campaign, after tiny New Hampshire.

The frontloading of the primary campaign gives even greater leverage to corporate wealth, since only those candidates with the resources to compete in what is essentially a nationwide primary March 7 can hope to gain the presidential nomination. The consensus of Democratic and Republican campaign consultants and media pundits has been that $20 million is the minimum to wage a campaign into March, a requirement that excludes all but Bush, McCain, Forbes, Bradley and Gore.

Another effort to preempt any intervention by the broader public in the presidential campaign is the announcement January 7 that the televised debates to be held in the fall will be limited to candidates showing more than 15 percent in public opinion polls. This decision, announced by a bipartisan commission of three Democrats and three Republicans, has as its immediate purpose the exclusion of the Reform Party nominee,

whether Patrick Buchanan, Donald Trump or some other. But the action has far greater political significance.

The entire American political system is geared to the maintenance of the monopoly of the two existing big business parties, the Democrats and Republicans. No other bourgeois-democratic country—France, Germany, Britain, Japan, etc.—would dare to adopt a procedure which so blatantly discriminates against political minorities. On the contrary, many of them have rules guaranteeing one or more seats in parliament to any party that captures at least 5 percent of the vote. In much of Europe, parties with considerably less than 15 percent of the electorate are considered significant participants in the political system, and their representatives often hold important posts in government.

The decision to exclude so-called minor candidates was justified on the grounds that only candidates with a significant chance of winning should be allowed to appear in the fall debates. The media accepts this arbitrary rule as though it were perfectly natural. Yet the networks air intra-party debates during the Democratic and Republican nomination campaigns in which this criterion is not applied. Had the 15 percent rule been implemented in this early stage of the electoral process, Bush would have debated with himself for most of the campaign, and been joined only by Forbes in Iowa and McCain and Forbes in New Hampshire.

The contradiction between the policy pursued during the nomination campaign and that during the general election is quite striking. Candidates like Keyes, Bauer and Hatch are included in the Republican debates, and similar candidates have been included in Democratic nomination debates under conditions of a multi-candidate field, as in 1992, when Clinton regularly debated with Paul Tsongas, Tom Harkin, Bob Kerrey and other long-forgotten candidates. The frequency of debates this year—13 so far before Iowa and New Hampshire—has been held up as an example of democracy in action, ostensibly giving the candidates and the public access to each other unfiltered by the media, and providing the public the information it needs to make an informed judgment.

But in the fall campaign, such considerations are set aside. Instead, the only criterion for inclusion in the debates is whether the candidate has a significant chance of winning the election. The 15 percent rule tramples on the elementary democratic precept that the public has the right to hear from a wide range of alternatives, and that those mounting serious campaign efforts have the right to reach the public.

The difference between the pre-nomination and post-nomination debate procedures is to be explained largely from the standpoint of what is expedient for the narrow circle of moneyed interests, media moguls and political power brokers who dominate the election process. At the early stage, when they have yet to reach a consensus on which aspirants will best advance their general interests as the nominees of the two parties, there is something to be said for putting the contenders through their paces and seeing how they perform. But once the Republican and Democratic nominees have been determined, the same social and political circles have a vested interest in reinforcing the political monopoly of the two parties and excluding everybody else—especially left-wing critics and parties.

The Democratic and Republican parties have for more than a century constituted a closed political system in which both parties serve the basic interests of big business, while preserving, to one degree or another, illusions in democracy and popular sovereignty. In the last two decades even the relatively narrow spectrum of differences between liberal and conservative defenders of capitalism has eroded, and both parties have moved further and further to the right.

At the same time, the presidential election remains the most closely watched political event in America, as far as the great mass of the people are concerned. The bourgeois candidates are therefore obliged to make gestures toward broader social issues, such as health care, education, the conditions of youth and the elderly. In the 2000 election all the major candidates have sought to emulate Clinton's knack for combining fundamentally reactionary policies with rhetorical concern for the conditions of those who are not profiting from the stock market boom.

The result is a campaign in which Bush, McCain, Gore and Bradley could give each other's speeches without great discomfort and without anyone knowing other than their speech writers. Each of them strives occasionally to strike a "caring" note—Bradley on health care, Gore on education, Bush as a "compassionate conservative," McCain as a critic of big money "special interests" in Washington. But the substance of their policies is a consensus so right-wing that just two decades ago it would have been considered the province of the ultra-conservative fringe.

Despite 20 years of budget cutbacks, which have wiped out the bulk of federally funded social programs, no candidate advocates significant government action to meet critical social needs. Bradley's health care plan—which relies largely on insurance companies and market mechanisms—was roundly denounced, not only by the Republicans, but by Vice President Gore, as far too ambitious, even under conditions of projected record budget surpluses. As for education, Gore proposes modest pay incentives for teachers to work in difficult urban districts, while Bradley has embraced the right-wing nostrum of school vouchers, an essential element in the attempt to destroy the principle of universal public education.

Most significant is the attitude of the candidates to the pillars of the American state itself. When Clinton announced the reappointment of Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan, every Democratic and Republican candidate joined in support, saluting Greenspan's success in maintaining the financial bubble which has so enriched the top layers in American society, while drastically increasing the social gulf between the privileged 10 percent at the top and the vast majority of the American people.

When Gore momentarily offended another key state institution, the Pentagon, he was universally denounced and hastily backtracked. In the course of a debate January 5, he said that he had opposed Clinton's reactionary "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military and that he would not appoint as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff any officer who did not support allowing gays to serve openly. After an outcry from the military brass and heavy attacks in the media, Gore reversed himself two days later.

All the candidates bow before the ideological shibboleths of religion and anticommunism. After Bush declared Jesus Christ to be his favorite political philosopher, other Republicans joined him in declaring evangelical Christianity a virtual requirement for the presidency. Gore has also sought the support of fundamentalist elements, while Bradley is a former speaker for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Gore, Bush and McCain all declared their support for the US refusal to return six-year-old Elian Gonzalez to his father in Cuba, kowtowing to the anticommunist hysteria among Cuban exile groups in south Florida. Slandering the boy's father, Gore said that Juan Gonzalez "has demonstrators paid by Castro chanting outside his window. There is no evidence that he is expressing a sincere, genuine feeling about what is in his child's best interest."

On the Republican side, pandering to racial prejudice is still the norm. McCain and Bush repeatedly refused to take a position on the flying of the Confederate flag over the state capitol in Columbia, South Carolina, not wishing to offend Southern racists in the weeks before that state's primary. They declared that the use of the flag was a matter for the state government to decide. But the slogan of states' rights has been invoked by the Democrats too. Gore gave a similar argument to explain his refusal to comment on a decision by Kansas state officials to limit the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

All are silent on the overriding issue facing the American people: the staggering growth of social inequality, fueled by the stock market boom and the merger frenzy on Wall Street. None suggests that the enormous

economic polarization between the top 10 percent of the population and the bottom 90 percent represents either a social injustice or a threat to democracy.

On the contrary, the Republicans debate the scale of the tax-cut bonanza which they would offer the rich—McCain proposes $240 billion, Bush offers $480 billion, Forbes weighs in with more than $1 trillion—while the Democrats argue against such cuts by embracing yesterday's conservative Republican nostrum of the balanced budget. (In a recent interview Gore declared he would maintain a balanced budget even in a major recession by cutting federal expenditures, thus committing himself to the policies of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover).

It is the inability of the big business two-party system to confront any of the social issues that concern the broad masses of people that gives such an air of unreality to the 2000 campaign. The media focuses on the most trivial aspects of the campaign, inflating minor incidents and petty scandals, while ignoring the overwhelming fact that America is increasingly divided into two nations—the beneficiaries of the financial boom, perhaps 10 percent at the top, and the vast majority whose living standards have stagnated or declined for nearly three decades.

Deprived of any outlet within the existing political system, these class tensions will inevitably find expression in major social upheavals which will take the ruling elite—and the masses themselves—largely by surprise.

See Also:

"We're all corrupt," says Republican contender in the US election sweepstakes
[23 October 1999]

In US presidential campaign: big money backs Bush, Gore and Bradley
[12 July 1999]