

# The working class and the 2000 US elections

## Part 3: The crisis of the political system

**Socialist Equality Party United States**  
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*This is the third and concluding part of the SEP statement on the US elections.*

The deep-going polarization of American society between the wealthy elite and the general population lies at the root of the decay of the political system. The decrepit character of the two old parties and the electoral process which they control is widely recognized. Longstanding and increasingly empty rituals—primary campaigns, conventions, debates—continue largely as a democratic veneer on a society which conforms to the classical definition of oligarchy.

In the third book of his *Politics*, Aristotle wrote: “Tyranny is the rule of one man to the advantage of the ruler, oligarchy to the advantage of the rich, democracy to the advantage of the poor.” It was not a matter of the external forms—the existence of voting, for instance—the Greek philosopher wrote: “The real difference between democracy and oligarchy is poverty and wealth.”

By that standard, the United States remains a democracy only in the most nominal sense. The wealthy control the two political parties, and they dictate policies that benefit themselves directly and immediately. Thus the spectacle of a hefty majority in Congress voting enthusiastically for the abolition of estate taxes, which are paid by only a few thousand multimillionaires, while balking at an increase in the minimum wage which would benefit 20 million workers.

The divorce between the official political structures and the broad masses of the American people is not an overnight phenomenon, but the end product of a protracted period of decay. Over the past 25 years both big business parties have moved sharply to the right, abandoning even the most limited concern for the interests of working people, and prostrating themselves as never before in front of Wall Street and corporate America.

The Republican Party, once the party of the Eastern financial establishment, is today largely controlled by Southern racists and Christian fundamentalists, together with extreme free market ideologues—elements who were once considered the lunatic fringe of right-wing politics in America. The Democratic Party has abandoned the liberal reform policies identified with Roosevelt's New Deal in favor of the program formerly advanced by their Republican opponents—fiscal conservatism, law-and-order demagoguery, and moralistic piety.

The degree of this alienation is reflected in a simple fact: little more than 40 percent of those eligible to vote will go to the polls on November 7. The president of the United States and the majority in the incoming House of Representatives and Senate will be chosen by a small fraction of the people. Those who vote will be disproportionately drawn from the most privileged layers. Voter turnout among the young, the poor and the disadvantaged is so low that it is routinely discounted by the pollsters and campaign technicians for the Democrats and Republicans.

While the bulk of the population ignores or boycotts the election, the ruling class is pumping ever-greater resources into determining the outcome. The 1996 campaign was the first \$2 billion election. The 2000 campaign is expected to cost over \$3 billion, culminating in a television

advertising blitz in which both sides saturate the airwaves with distortions, demagoguery and mudslinging.

Competitive races for the House of Representatives now routinely require a war chest of more than \$1 million. Senate races in major states, such as Hillary Clinton's campaign in New York, involve expenditures of \$20 million or more by each party. As for the presidency, more than \$500 million apiece will be spent on the campaigns of the Democratic and Republican nominees. These staggering expenditures appear to operate under a law of diminishing returns. The more lavishly financed the electoral races, the less popular enthusiasm or even interest they evoke.

The result is an enormous political vacuum on the left, which gives a distorted character to the whole of American political life. It is more than 50 years since the McCarthyite witch-hunters sought to criminalize the advocacy of socialist politics in America. Now even liberalism is beyond the pale, and the spectrum of official politics extends from the “moderate” conservatism of Clinton and Gore to the semi-fascist politics of Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms and Tom DeLay.

The two-party system provides no progressive outlet for the fundamental antagonism between the mass of working people and the privileged class. That, however, does not mean there are no conflicts within the political establishment. In the absence of any serious discussion of social issues with broad popular relevance, the political system is dominated by a ferocious struggle between rival factions within the moneyed elite.

This conflict has become increasingly frenzied and unrestrained, the more the ruling circles have felt themselves free of any popular check. Thus the extreme right-wing elements who were stunned by Clinton's election in 1992 and outraged by his mild reformist proposals on health care and taxation launched a campaign of political subversion, disrupting the functioning of the administration with the Whitewater investigation. This culminated, with the Monica Lewinsky scandal, in an attempt to oust an elected president through a conspiracy of right-wing operatives, judges, the Congressional Republican leadership and the office of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

Impeachment failed, not because of any serious resistance by the Democrats, but because of overwhelming public opposition to the use of a trumped-up sex scandal to reverse the results of two elections. Both parties were shocked by the outcome of the 1998 congressional election, which saw the Republicans lose seats after having voted to go ahead with impeachment. Now, in the 2000 campaign, both parties seek to avoid any discussion of the impeachment drive and the significance of this attempted political coup d'etat.

Beyond the electioneering and demagoguery, what are the real differences between the Democratic and Republican parties?

The goal of the Republican Party and the Bush campaign is the removal of all restraints on the accumulation of personal wealth. It represents the most selfish, avaricious, egotistical and short-sighted sections of the ruling elite.

Remarkably, both the Bush campaign and the congressional Republican leadership have sought to rally popular support for the elimination of the estate tax, which affects only a few thousand of the richest families each year. The inheritance tax and its companion, the graduated income tax, were adopted during the Progressive Era in the early 1900s. These measures were motivated by concerns that excessive concentration of wealth was a threat to democracy. Now, the few remaining obstacles to the consolidation of a financial aristocracy are under attack.

The Democratic Party and the Gore campaign represent sections of the ruling class that are less fixated on the immediate enjoyment and accumulation of wealth, and somewhat more farsighted in their defense of the profit system. They want to enjoy power and wealth not only today, but also tomorrow, and therefore insist on reserving some resources for the use of the government and for the provision of a social safety valve.

Gore's "people, not the powerful" demagoguery is an acknowledgement that capitalism cannot survive without some degree of popular support, however much this support is based on illusions and false hopes. His populism is strictly limited and carefully calibrated, selecting only specially targeted industries for chastisement, while upholding the overall structure of corporate domination. Significantly, Gore, like Clinton in 1992 and 1996, enjoys considerable support among the richest capitalists on Wall Street.

The dilemma for the ruling class is that neither alternative offers a way out of the mounting contradictions of American capitalism. If the policies of Bush are a form of senile dementia of a ruling class choking on its own riches, those of Gore represent an exercise in self-delusion.

Even if one were to concede that Gore is sincere in his protestations of sympathy for the common man (a proposition to which we do not subscribe), any attempt by a Gore-Lieberman administration to implement even their paltry reformist program would encounter the most ferocious resistance from the corporate and political elite.

One only has to recall the outrage in ruling circles over the tiny increase in the tax rate for millionaires in Clinton's 1993 budget, passed without a single Republican vote in Congress. This measure ignited a semi-hysterical reaction from the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, and paved the way for the political provocations that culminated in Clinton's impeachment.

Moreover, even the limited measures proposed by Gore contain grave political dangers for the ruling class, because they awaken popular expectations which cannot be satisfied under the present system, and encourage resistance to the untrammelled exercise of corporate power. It is a historical law that a bad regime is most in jeopardy when it tries to reform itself.

Fundamentally, the world position of American capitalism makes it impossible for a bourgeois administration to carry out any significant social reforms. The United States no longer enjoys the relative independence from the world market it enjoyed in the early part of the twentieth century or the hegemonic position vis-à-vis its foreign rivals that sustained it for much of the latter part of the century.

The financial boom of the 1990s has been to a large extent grounded on the ability of the United States to attract foreign capital investment, based largely on corporate America's greater success—compared to its European and Asian rivals—in slashing jobs, eliminating regulations and destroying the welfare state.

The US economy itself is increasingly unstable, not only because of the uncertainty surrounding the stock exchange, but because of the mounting balance of trade deficit, now running at the rate of \$400 billion a year. Amid all the election-year hosannas to the federal budget surplus, there has been almost no discussion of the trade deficit, which would quickly become an insupportable burden if foreign investors began to flee the US market.

Even at the height of American economic dominance, no capitalist

democracy in the world resisted social reform and social progress by the working class so fiercely as the United States. It required 60 years of ferocious and bloody battles for American workers to win even the most minimal trade union rights, achieved only through an incipiently insurrectionary struggle in which millions of workers seized factories and workplaces.

The struggle for elementary democratic rights for blacks took a century, from the end of the Civil War to the passage of significant civil rights legislation. It was resisted by means of lynchings, mass repression and assassinations, and only achieved in a political environment of urban uprisings. The social welfare system ultimately established on the basis of the labor and civil rights struggles was the most rudimentary of any major industrialized country.

To suggest that social reform could be carried out now by a Democratic or Republican administration, when the whole edifice of the stock market boom is built on the destruction of social programs and the impoverishment of ever-wider layers of the working class, is a crude deception. The only basis for a new era of social progress is an independent political struggle of the working class.

The conditions are developing rapidly for the emergence of an independent movement of working people. Both the Democrats and Republicans have lost any real mass base. There is a deep divide that cuts both ways: the ruling elite is insensitive and largely indifferent to the plight of the masses; the masses can scarcely fathom the real extent of the social gulf that has developed. In terms of their political and social aspirations, the two main classes are not even speaking the same language: hence the constant miscalculations of public opinion by the media and political pundits, first in the impeachment crisis and now in the presidential elections.

The bulk of the American population is alienated, not only from the political system, but from the entire structure of corporate power in America. As *BusinessWeek* magazine noted recently, in a cover story on growing anti-corporate sentiment, the vast majority of Americans feel a deep antipathy towards the power of big business.

The more farsighted representatives of the capitalist system have begun to express concern over this trend. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan warned of public "unease about the way markets distribute wealth," in a recent speech to an international conference of bankers in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. "Any notable shortfall in economic performance from the standard set in recent years," he said, "runs the risk of reviving sentiment against market-oriented systems."

The 2000 campaign began with both parties celebrating the booming stock exchange as though it meant universal prosperity, not just a bonanza for a privileged minority. Throughout the history of capitalism, every period of speculative boom has been marked by the growth of illusions that the business cycle had been superseded and the profit system had entered a new era in which markets could only go up. Such delusions, which amount to little more than rationalizations for personal greed, have been widespread. But in the last several months the mood of self-congratulation has begun to fade, and with it, Bush's lead in the polls.

A campaign that has already had many twists and turns may have further shocks in store. But whatever the outcome, the great issue is this: neither of the bourgeois candidates or parties has any solution to the deepening social crisis. The only realistic prognosis is that the post-election period will be characterized by intensified social unrest, which will rapidly reach massive proportions once the economic situation deteriorates.

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The working people of America, the vast majority of the population, find no genuine advocates for their social interests or democratic rights in the existing, completely ossified, political system. When they move into social and political struggle—as they inevitably will in the coming period—they will be thrust into a political trajectory leading to a break with the old parties and the

construction of a new mass political party of the working class.



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