The 2000 US election results: the constitutional crisis deepens

The Editorial Board
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The extraordinary events of the past 24 hours have fundamentally and irrevocably altered political life in the United States. For the first time in more than 125 years, a national election has produced a disputed result. Not only is there a split between the popular and electoral vote, but the stench of ballot fraud is wafting from the Florida voting precincts upon which Governor George W. Bush's victory depends.

It remains unclear whether Vice President Al Gore will vigorously pursue a legal challenge to the legitimacy of the Florida vote. The fact that Gore waited until late Wednesday afternoon to issue a public statement on the election indicates that there exist serious divisions within his own staff over whether to continue to fight for the presidency.

But even if Gore quickly reconciles himself to defeat, the inconclusive and tainted outcome of the presidential election has created a constitutional crisis for which there is no easy solution, and has deeply compromised the entire political setup.

If Republican Governor Bush is confirmed as the forty-third president, his administration will lack political legitimacy in the eyes of tens of millions of American citizens. There is already widespread talk among the people of a stolen election, and this will have politically explosive consequences as a Bush administration attempts to implement—as it certainly will—its reactionary social agenda.

The most significant feature of the election results is their exposure of the deep fissures and tensions within American society. The electoral map resembles, to a remarkable extent, that of the United States at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Of course, there are differences. But the North-South divide continues.

Another major division is that between the great urban areas which, for the most part, went for Gore, and the rural areas, which went for Bush. As for the voters themselves, there was a clear difference in the social composition of the Democratic and Republican electorate. The poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class in the major cities—above all black and Hispanic workers—voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic candidates.

As for the institutions of political rule, the election produced both a House of Representatives and a Senate virtually divided down the middle between the two parties. The Supreme Court is likewise split between a five-member ultra-right majority and a minority of four somewhat more moderate justices.

The electoral deadlock is the culmination of a series of events over the eight years of the Clinton administration that have revealed an intensification of antagonisms within the political establishment. Particularly in light of the impeachment episode, the manifold signs of gridlock impel one to ask: what is the source of the political impasse?

The crisis of the 2000 elections reflects the growth of social contradictions to such a point of intensity that they can no longer be adjudicated within the existing political and constitutional framework. And because the spectrum of political discourse in the US is so constricted—to the point that the political establishment would not even allow Green Party candidate Ralph Nader to participate in the presidential debates—deep-going social contradictions can find no open expression within the political system. When they finally do emerge, they have already matured to the point where they threaten to burst the seams of the existing constitutional order.

Most fundamental is the enormous growth of social inequality, which has reached proportions not seen in the US since the 1920s. The division of America between a fabulously rich upper crust and the vast majority of the population is, in the end, incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

Whatever the near-term outcome of the election impasse, the American ruling elite has no lasting solution to its constitutional crisis. Those, for example, who propose simply abolishing the electoral college—the system established by the founding fathers at the end of the eighteenth century—and electing presidents by direct popular vote, ignore the fact that the electoral college was set up as a component part of a complex constitutional structure

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designed to balance the competing claims of the states and the federal government. It cannot be removed without calling into question the federal structure of the United States, including such institutions as a Senate with two representatives from each state.

These old structures are incapable of dealing with the intensification of social contradictions within the US. But the elimination of the electoral college, for example, would require the imposition of a new structure. Any attempt at such a major change would only inflame the conflicts already tearing at the political system. As inadequate as the old structures are, the ruling elite has nothing with which to replace them.

It can only move further to the right, and seek to defend its property and political power by more authoritarian means. It is instructive to recall that the last great constitutional crisis arising from a disputed election—that of 1876—resulted in a new political settlement that ended Reconstruction in the South and opened the way for Jim Crow apartheid.

The present state of affairs stands as a colossal indictment of the prevailing political culture in the US, which has developed under the tutelage of a deeply reactionary media, whose operatives devote their efforts to traducing public opinion. Even in the midst of the electoral crisis, they evince an attitude of unseriousness and cynicism.

Many commentators are predicting that the political stalemate resulting from the election foretells a period of stasis, in which nothing of great significance will take place in the US. They suggest that should Bush end up in the White House, the Republicans will be forced to adopt a policy of compromise and moderation. Such projections have no more substance than all of the other forecasts of the media pundits, who have shown themselves to be phenomenally out of sync with the realities of American life.

The Republican right already demonstrated in the impeachment conspiracy that it was prepared, in the face of public opposition, to employ extra-constitutional means to impose its agenda. Should the Republicans capture the White House, they will seek rapidly to push through measures eliminating all restraints on the accumulation of personal wealth and the exploitation of the working class. The very fact that the 2000 election revealed that public sentiment is moving against their policies will, if anything, impel them to act with greater haste and determination.

Should, on the other hand, Gore be installed, the fascistic elements that dominate the Republican Party will refuse to accept the legitimacy of his administration. From day one they will begin a new campaign of subversion against Clinton's successor.

But as the election itself revealed, there is a growing, although as yet politically unclarified, determination among working people to assert their own interests. Notwithstanding the conservative and flaccid character of Gore's campaign, and the universal refrain of media reactionaries that the country was contented and apathetic, the combined popular vote for Gore and Nader registered a significant numerical majority of voters with, broadly speaking, liberal and left views.

Without any lead from Gore or the Democratic Party, the electorate once again repudiated the Republican impeachment campaign. Popular anger over the year-long attempt to leverage a sex scandal into a political coup was a major factor in the double-digit victory of Hillary Clinton in her New York Senate race, as well as in the defeat of two Republican congressmen, James Rogan and Bill McCollum, who played leading roles in the impeachment drive.

The electoral crisis has revealed the breakdown of any political consensus, mirroring the ferocious level of social polarization in America. Within this situation, a new administration will come to power lacking credibility among broad sections of the population. The implications of this state of affairs will only begin to become clear when the next government seeks to implement right-wing policies under conditions of a deepening economic crisis.

The 2000 election heralds the onset of a period of social upheavals. None of the existing parties can establish a popular consensus. That can be achieved only on the basis of a mass movement that recognizes and takes as its starting point the objective reality of the class contradictions within society, and advances a socialist program for the working class. The next period must see the development of this movement in the form of an independent party of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party, through its political organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, is devoted to the realization of this political task.

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