

The US election

Gore cites breach of democratic rights in defending his appeal of Florida vote

Patrick Martin
29 November 2000

In Vice President Al Gore's nationally televised speech Tuesday night, as well as a subsequent press conference on Wednesday, the Democratic presidential candidate cited fundamental issues of democratic rights as his basis for contesting the result of the Florida vote as certified by Republican state officials.

Gore focused on the undeniable fact that tens of thousands of votes have not been counted because of opposition by the Bush campaign and Republican officials. Referring to the mob action that halted the hand recount in Miami-Dade County, he said, "In one county, election officials brought the count to a premature end in the face of organized intimidation." Gore continued: "In a number of counties, votes that had been fairly counted were simply set aside. And many thousands of votes that were cast on Election Day have not yet been counted at all, not once."

As in his speech to the Democratic National Convention last August, the vice president made an appeal, however limited, to the working class, characterizing the sanctity of the vote as the cornerstone of traditional American notions of political equality. On election day, he said, "every four years, the poor as well as the rich, the weak as well as the strong, women and men alike, citizens of every race, creed and color, of whatever infirmity or political temper all are equal. They're equal, that is, so long as all of their votes are counted."

Gore had a second audience in mind in his television speech and his remarks the following day—the US Supreme Court, which on Friday is to hear the challenge brought by the Bush campaign against any hand recount in Florida.

"If you ignore the votes, you ignore democracy

itself," he said. "You ignore the will of the people. You ignore the basic principle upon which our whole system of self-government is based. That principle is the consent of the governed. And the consent of the governed is expressed in elections, through ballots, votes that are cast by the people."

As a political representative of the American bourgeoisie, Gore was reminding his class, and especially the Supreme Court justices, of the potential perils to the capitalist system itself if it dispenses with even the pretense of democratic procedures.

From a legal standpoint, Gore's contesting of the Florida election has ample justification. Contest procedures are set out in Florida statutes and have been invoked frequently in previous elections. In the Florida Supreme Court's November 21 ruling, which granted only a very limited time for the initial hand recount, the court cited the necessity to provide adequate time for the expected contest. Bush lawyers even argued then that no hand recount was needed because the Democrats could contest the vote results instead. But after Gore decided to exercise his right to contest the election, the Bush campaign denounced the action as illegitimate.

From a political standpoint, Gore's speech was an attempt to go over the heads of the media and speak to a broader public. The fact that he made such an appeal, evoking even indirectly the mass struggles for voting rights and equality of past decades, is an expression of how sharp the struggle has become within the ruling elite. It is rare in American politics, constrained within the suffocating confines of the two-party system, with both the parties and the media controlled by corporate interests, for any political issue to be called by its right

name.

The events in Florida represent a very real threat to the democratic rights of the American people. The question posed by Gore is to the point: "If we ignore the votes of thousands in Florida in this election, how can you or any American have confidence that your vote will not be ignored in a future election?"

The methods employed by the Bush campaign and the Republican Party represent, by any objective standard, an assault on democratic rights. They are seeking to hijack a presidential election while demonizing all opposition to their grab for power as illegitimate and even criminal.

Only a handful of observers in the mass media have touched on this issue. In a column Tuesday for the *Boston Globe*, Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution, a bourgeois think tank in Washington DC, criticized "the venom that has been injected into the country's political bloodstream" by the Republican right.

"In 30 years of watching Congress and the presidency," Mann wrote, "I have never encountered rhetoric as vituperative and destructive of the constitutional order as has emanated from established figures in the Republican Party and their partisan allies. 'Coup d'etat.' 'Stealing elections.' It makes the impeachment battle look like child's play."

By and large, the media response to Gore's assertion of democratic principles has been one of derision and scorn. The *Washington Post* editorialized, "The critics, including his opponent, George W. Bush, are right that Mr. Gore has already had many bites at the apple." The *Chicago Tribune* joined the growing chorus of editorial pages calling for Gore to drop his legal challenges and concede the election to Bush.

The media reaction is a measure of the contempt for democracy that animates large sections of the ruling elite and their media servants, especially on the television networks, where utter cynicism prevails among millionaire anchormen and commentators. Television pundits and analysts dismissed the substance of Gore's appeal to democratic standards, concerning themselves solely with its success or failure as a tactical move in the conflict with the Bush campaign. Much of the commentary was based on poll numbers allegedly showing that a majority of the American people desire a Gore concession. These are the same polls that

forecast a Bush victory in the presidential election, in which Gore won a plurality of 337,000 in the popular vote.

The television networks triggered Gore's premature concession phone call on election night by miscalling the outcome of the Florida contest, wrongly awarding it to Bush (an action initiated by Fox Network, where the lead vote counter was Bush's first cousin, John Ellis). Now these same networks are trying to compel another concession statement, using poll numbers that are just as suspect as those which were being circulated on November 7.

Notwithstanding Gore's speech, the pressure is mounting on his campaign and the Democrats to drop their challenge to the Florida vote certification and accept Bush as president-elect. No confidence can be placed in any of these bourgeois politicians to carry through a serious struggle against the right-wing threat to democratic rights. That task can only be carried out only through the building of an independent political movement of working people.



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