Behind the Democrats' election debacle: growing alienation among US working class voters

Patrick Martin
12 November 2002

In the aftermath of the defeat suffered by the Democratic Party in the November 5 mid-term election, party officials and officeholders, as well as sections of the media, have begun to comment on the causes of the party's failure to hold the Senate or gain seats in the House of Representatives.

Much of this analysis is an evasion or a form of apologetics, since it attributes the Democratic debacle to the purported political influence and popularity of George W. Bush in his role as a "wartime" president. The commentators fail to ask the obvious question: who and what has made it possible for a president who lost the popular vote and was undemocratically installed in office, and who is widely derided as ignorant and inarticulate, to exercise such supposed power?

As the WSWS pointed out in its initial analysis of the vote ("US midterm election: the meaning of the Democratic debacle"), the outcome of the election owes far more to the collapse of the Democratic Party and its inability to mount any serious opposition to the Bush administration than to any intrinsic strength of the Republicans or popular support for their extreme-right policies.

A detailed examination of the November 5 vote requires careful study of the turnout and voting patterns, which has been hampered by the shutdown of the Voter News Service (VNS), the consortium of news organizations that has conducted extensive exit polling of voters for several decades. On the eve of the election, the VNS announced that for unexplained technical reasons, it would be unable to provide early projections of the outcome of the various races, and would not provide analyses or breakdowns of voting patterns. But some significant information has begun to surface in press accounts of voter turnout in a number of cities and states.

Voter turnout overall was estimated at 39.3 percent of eligible voters, slightly above the all-time low of 37.5 percent in the last mid-term election in 1998. But in most of the country, the turnout among working class and minority voters—who traditionally tend to vote heavily for the Democrats—was down significantly from 1998. Turnout among those layers most closely aligned with the Republicans—upper-middle-class and Christian fundamentalist voters—rose substantially.

Turnout rose in a handful of states with highly competitive races—Missouri, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Florida—while plunging in many others, including New York and California.

The growing estrangement of black working class voters from the Democratic Party is a national phenomenon, but it was particularly noticeable in the South, where the Republicans swept gubernatorial races in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, and led by a few thousand votes, pending a recount, in Alabama. Democrats won the governorships of three of these states in 1998, and would have carried Florida in the 2000 presidential campaign but for the intervention of the US Supreme Court.

The consequence of the Democrats' capitulation to Bush's 2000 election coup was a sharp decline in voter turnout as compared to 1998 and 2000 in the Democratic strongholds of Palm Beach and Broward counties in southern Florida, the focus of much of the recount battle two years ago. Turnout in Palm Beach fell from 52.7 percent in 1998 to 45.8 percent this year, while turnout in Broward fell from 45.6 percent to 34.5 percent, in contrast to an increase in the statewide turnout from 49.6 percent four years ago to 53.6 percent in last Tuesday's vote.

The statewide black turnout, according to newspaper exit polling, was 43 percent on November 5, compared to the record 72 percent in 2000.

A referendum vote conducted alongside the gubernatorial race in Florida provided a clear indication that the 2002 midterm election did not represent a swing to the right on the part of the public. Florida voters approved a ballot proposition establishing tight legal limits on class sizes in the public schools and mandating the state government to fund the schools to the level required to hire the necessary teachers. The measure passed by 52-48 percent, although Republican Governor Jeb Bush and most of the state business establishment vehemently opposed it. Bush even promised, in a private comment inadvertently captured on tape, to use "devious" methods to evade carrying out the class size plan if it passed.

According to many accounts of the Florida campaign, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Bob McBride, who supported the class size referendum, had been closing the gap with Bush until a debate in which he was directly asked—by NBC's Tim Russert, the moderator—how he would pay the cost of hiring the additional teachers. McBride ducked the question, making it clear that his support for better schools was purely rhetorical and that he, like Bush, was unwilling to find the necessary funding for public education. From that point on, McBride's poll numbers began to sink.

In neighboring Georgia, the Republicans had their biggest election victory, defeating an incumbent senator and governor and taking two congressional seats that had been redrawn by the Democratic state legislature to favor their party. The Republican candidates amassed huge vote totals in largely white outer suburbs of Atlanta and in the rural south of the state, more than offsetting the Democratic margins in the state's largest city.

Governor Roy Barnes saw his vote drop by 15,000 from 1998, although he actually increased his margin of victory in Atlanta itself. In smaller rural counties with large black populations his vote plunged. The victor in the race, former Democratic state senator Sonny Perdue, became the first Republican governor of Georgia since the Reconstruction period that followed the American Civil War of 1861-65. He benefited from an increase of 250,000 in the Republican vote, mainly in suburban counties like Gwinnett (whose total vote rose by 22,000), Cherokee (up 10,000)

© World Socialist Web Site

and Forsyth (up 12,000).

In the Carolinas, the Republicans defended two open Senate seats while defeating an incumbent Democratic governor, Jim Hodges, in South Carolina. One voter registration group estimated black voter turnout fell about 11 percent from 1998, while there was an increase in the fundamentalist Christian right vote in suburbs and rural areas. In North Carolina, Republican Senate candidate Elizabeth Dole carried several urban counties with large minority populations, such as Guilford County (Greensboro).

In Texas the Democratic Party sought to base its electoral hopes on a coalition of racial minorities, nominating a Hispanic candidate for governor and a black candidate for US Senate, but both ran on conservative programs, avowing their support for the war and tax policies of George W. Bush, and therefore giving no reason to vote for them other than skin color and ethnicity. Both candidates lost badly, with one analysis of voting returns finding that 52 percent of ballots cast were straight-ticket Republican.

Perhaps the most dismal failures for the Democrats came in the Middle Atlantic and New England states which presidential candidate Al Gore swept in 2000. Republican candidates won governorships in Maryland, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Vermont, as well as taking the governorship and an open Senate seat in New Hampshire, the only state in the region that Gore did not win. Democrats won governorships only in Pennsylvania and Maine, but in the latter state the Republicans held onto a Senate seat.

Particularly striking were the defeats in Massachusetts and Maryland, two states with the highest party registration advantage for the Democrats. Maryland Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Townsend, daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, lost to Republican Congressman Robert Ehrlich, as turnout fell in the black and working class districts of Baltimore and the inner Washington suburbs, while rising in the outer suburbs of both metropolitan areas.

The Democratic defeats in New England reflected a sharp decline in support among white working class voters, since most of these states have only small minority populations. Shannon O'Brien, the Democratic candidate for governor of Massachusetts, carried only 59 percent of the vote from union households, despite the all-out endorsement of the trade union bureaucracy. Millionaire venture capitalist Mitt Romney carried the high-tech Route 128 belt around Boston by a large margin, offsetting O'Brien's narrower than expected lead in Boston and older industrial cities like Quincy and Lowell.

There were reports of increased voter turnout in several Midwestern and plains states where close contests ultimately decided control of the Senate: Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota and Colorado. In Missouri, Democrat Jean Carnahan received 81,000 more votes than the winning Senate candidate four years ago, but her Republican opponent, James Talent, polled 104,000 more votes than the 1998 winner.

In Minnesota, where former Vice President Walter Mondale was a stand-in candidate after the death of Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone, a last-minute political provocation apparently tipped the balance. Wellstone had opened up a lead in the polls after his well-publicized vote against a resolution giving Bush authority to wage war on Iraq. But Republican Norm Coleman defeated Mondale by over 50,000 votes.

More than 20,000 people, many of them young, turned out for a memorial service for Wellstone the week before the election at the University of Minnesota. They booed Governor Jesse Ventura, an independent, and Senate Republican leader Trent Lott, and cheered calls from Wellstone's family and friends for a Democratic victory at the polls to honor the senator's memory.

The governor stormed out of the ceremony in a display of outrage, and the media portrayed the memorial gathering as a partisan lynch mob. Ventura reversed his previously announced intention to appoint a Democrat to fill Wellstone's seat, naming Independence Party chairman Dean Barkley instead, and tacitly threw his support to Coleman. Two-thirds of self-identified independent voters backed the Republican, according to one subsequent poll, giving Coleman his margin of victory.

The only exception to the nationwide pattern of narrow Democratic losses in key races came in South Dakota, where incumbent Senator Tim Johnson defeated Republican John Thune by 528 votes. His entire margin of victory came from a record turnout among Oglala Lakota Indian voters on the Pine Ridge reservation, where turnout jumped from below 30 percent to nearly 50 percent, following an aggressive voter registration campaign, and 90 percent of the votes went to Johnson.

Colorado was another case of sharply lower turnout among minority and working class voters, while turnout rose in wealthier neighborhoods and among Christian fundamentalists. Largely black precincts in north Denver saw a turnout of 35 percent, compared to 67 percent citywide.

According to an organizer for the Progressive Coalition, a low-income lobbying group, the Democratic campaign paid almost no attention to low and moderate-income families. "There's a continuing pattern of disrespect from the party toward low-income people and people of color," he said. Referring to the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for US Senate Tom Strickland, a wealthy corporate lawyer, he added, "It can't be just about one guy with $6 million who hates his opponent. That's not going to turn people out to vote."

In California, where Democratic Governor Gray Davis was reelected, the Democratic campaign did far worse than expected against a candidate, Republican William Simon Jr., who virtually self-destructed. (Simon's investment firm was indicted during the summer for falsifying its accounts, in the midst of the national scandals over WorldCom, Global Crossing, Enron, etc.)

Turnout in the largest US state plunged to a record low of 36 percent, in what the *Los Angeles Times* called a "mass voter boycott" prompted by "the absence of substantive debate." The Latino vote fell from 13 percent of the electorate in 1998 to 10 percent, while the proportion of black voters fell from 13 percent to only 4 percent. The total number of black and Latino voters fell by 1,150,000 compared to 1998.

Davis had won an easy victory four years ago, but his vote fell by 1.7 million while the Republican vote fell only 400,000, significantly reducing his electoral margin. Among the issues widely cited by commentators in the state was Davis's opposition to three different bills banning racial profiling by state and local police, one of which he vetoed.

While black voters showed their hostility to Davis by staying home, Latino voters in part boycotted the vote and in part gave their support to Green Party candidate Peter Camejo, who received 6 percent of the vote in Hispanic areas, his best showing.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site