

Midterm elections to usher in further shift by Obama to the right

Barry Grey
27 October 2010

The element of manipulation in US elections is immense. Under conditions of a political monopoly of two right-wing big business parties, legally enforced by ballot access restrictions and a host of other barriers to third party campaigns, torrents of corporate campaign cash, and the exclusion of anti-capitalist views by the corporate-owned media, elections in America have far more to do with the ruling class's recalibration of policy and changes in its governing personnel than with the democratic will of the people. The sentiments and desires of the people can find no genuine expression within the existing political framework.

Next Tuesday's midterm elections are no exception. With Election Day less than a week away, it is clear that, whatever the precise breakdown of Democrats and Republicans in the new Congress and in statehouses across the country, the outcome of the vote will be a further shift to the right by the Obama administration.

This pivot to even more overtly anti-working class policies flies in the face of popular sentiment, which is moving to the left. However, the semi-official narrative of the election, relentlessly promoted by the media, is that the American people, in the midst of the deepest economic and social crisis since the Great Depression, are rebelling against even the most minimal forms of social relief and clamoring for fewer regulations for the banks and corporations and more tax cuts for the rich.

The supposed embodiment of this "grass roots populism" is the Tea Party movement. In reality, it is largely a media creation, massively funded by billionaire Republican reactionaries and having only a small popular base.

The *Washington Post* on Sunday published an article summarizing the results of its own survey of the Tea Party, which found it to be a "disparate band of vaguely connected gatherings that do surprisingly little to engage in the political process." The newspaper was able to make contact with only 647 groups linked to the Tea Party, some of which involve only a handful of people. "The findings suggest that the breadth of the tea party may be inflated," the *Post* concluded diplomatically.

The basic function of the Tea Party is to help shift the entire spectrum of official politics in the US further to the right.

That this pseudo-populist formation has been able to some extent to tap into popular discontent, and that, more broadly, the growth of anger fueled by mass unemployment and social distress has to this point found expression only on the political right is the result of the uniformly reactionary policies of the Obama administration and the exclusion of any genuinely left-wing alternative from the political system.

It is a staggering indictment of the Democratic Party and American liberalism that two years after the electorate decisively repudiated the war-mongering, pro-corporate policies of Bush and the Republicans, the Republicans have seized the political initiative and are set to make major gains in Tuesday's election, perhaps capturing control of the House of Representatives. This is not due to any surge in support for the Republican Party. Most opinion polls show it to be even more unpopular than the Democrats.

If the Republicans make significant gains on Election Day it will be the result of a collapse in support for the Democrats, expressed in the abstention of millions of working people and youth who voted for Obama two years ago in the mistaken belief that his promises of progressive change were genuine. These illusions have been widely shattered by the administration's refusal to offer any policies to create jobs or provide serious relief for the millions of unemployed, many of whom are losing their homes and their savings and being driven into poverty.

Instead, Obama has continued and deepened the right-wing policies of the previous administration, both abroad and at home. Even in the stretch run before Election Day, he has been unable to distance himself from the financial-corporate elite, in recent days lifting the moratorium on drilling in the Gulf, rejecting calls for a moratorium on home foreclosures, and announcing that retirees on Social Security will receive no cost-of-living increase.

Obama in recent days has been touring the country demanding that Democratic voters turn out to elect embattled Democratic candidates. His speeches have been utterly demagogic, employing hollow populist phrases without any content. Before a large student audience at the University of Southern California on Friday, he declared, "I need you to keep on believing. I need you to keep on hoping. We are going to

restore the American dream for not just some, but for everybody in this great land.”

With consummate cynicism, he has attacked the Republicans as tools of Wall Street, focusing on their demand to extend the Bush-era tax cuts for the rich, even as top administration officials have sent feelers for a compromise to allow most, if not all, of the wealthy to retain their tax windfalls, and White House aides have given interviews appealing for the Republicans to join with the administration after the election to cut social spending and raise taxes on consumption.

At the University of Minnesota on Saturday, Obama denounced the Republicans for cutting taxes “mostly for millionaires and billionaires,” even as Vice President Joseph Biden in an interview on Bloomberg TV was offering to raise the threshold for tax cuts from \$200,000 a year to an unstated figure. Some Democrats are proposing making the cutoff \$1 million in annual income.

There are indications that Obama would welcome a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives and a reduced Democratic majority in the Senate. He has conspicuously campaigned in the run-up to the vote exclusively for Democrats locked in tight Senate and gubernatorial races, not for threatened Democrats in the House. A divided Congress with greater Republican strength would provide a pretext for dropping even small-scale stimulus measures, and give the administration political cover for ending extended benefits for the long-term unemployed.

In a lengthy interview with Peter Baker published earlier this month in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, Obama seemed to accept loss of the House as inevitable. He suggested that a Republican victory would make Republicans more willing to collaborate with his agenda. The article quoted a “senior White House official” giving an unambiguous signal of the rightward trajectory of the administration after the election.

“You’ll hear more about exports and less about public spending,” the official said. “You’ll hear more about initiative and private sector and less about the Department of Energy. You’ll hear more about government as a financier and less about government as a hirer.”

On Monday, the *Times* published an article on the post-election plans of the administration citing officials with the same message. “After two years of operating at loggerheads with Republicans,” the *Times* wrote, “Mr. Obama and his aides are planning a post-election agenda for a very different political climate. They see potential for bipartisan cooperation on reducing the deficit, passing stalled free trade pacts and revamping the education bill known as No Child Left Behind...”

The article quoted Obama’s education secretary Arne Duncan saying that bipartisan agreement on the administration’s school “reform” agenda could help repair “the current state of anger and animosity.” Duncan is among the most right-wing figures in the Obama cabinet. He has spearheaded an unprecedented assault on public education,

promoting for-profit charter schools, the closure of public schools, and mass layoffs and other attacks on teachers.

The article also noted that Obama’s new chief of staff, Peter Rouse, “had good relations with Republicans when he worked on Capitol Hill.”

The article’s premise, backed up by comments from Democratic officials, that Obama has to this point failed to “reach out” to the Republicans is farcical. Ever since his election, he has labored to rehabilitate the Republican Party and rebuild its credibility. He took the unprecedented step of retaining Robert Gates, Bush’s defense secretary and the architect of the military surge in Iraq. He even made an unsuccessful attempt to appoint right-wing Republican Senator Judd Gregg, a deficit “hawk” and favorite of Wall Street, as his commerce secretary.

The reality is that the Republicans decided to stonewall and oppose every Obama initiative, except his expansion of the war in Afghanistan, having calculated correctly that Obama’s pro-corporate, pro-war agenda would rapidly alienate those who had voted for him.

Obama set the stage for a pivot to austerity measures when he announced last February the establishment of the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. The body, tasked with drawing up a plan to eliminate the budget deficit by 2015, is scheduled to issue its recommendations on December 1. It is expected to call for the phasing in of major cuts in Social Security and Medicare as well as regressive taxes on consumption. Its report is intended to set the tone for discussions on sharper attacks on working class living standards during the second half of Obama’s term.

The trajectory of the Obama administration gives the lie to all those who claim that the Democrats can be pressured to carry out progressive reforms and that the growth of right-wing forces can be halted by appealing to the Democratic Party. This perspective—promoted by left-liberal publications such as the *Nation* and pseudo-socialist groups such as the International Socialist Organization—is bankrupt.

What is required is a decisive break with the Democratic Party and the two-party system and the development of a mass socialist movement of the working class. The coming weeks and months will see the emergence of major struggles of the working class, providing the conditions for the building of such a movement. The critical question is the building of the Socialist Equality Party to provide the necessary program and leadership.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact