

# The Nation covers up for Democratic Party debacle

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In its never-ending search for new alibis for the Democrats, the *Nation* magazine has discovered the real cause for the party's defeat in the November 2 election. It was not due to the Obama administration's right-wing policies alienating its former supporters, but rather because the Republicans outspent them on campaign commercials.

This theory was advanced in an article by John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney, posted on the magazine's website November 10 and in the print edition dated November 29, under the headline, "The Money & Media Election Complex."

They write, "[T]he most important story of the most expensive midterm election in American history: the radical transformation of our politics by a money-and-media election complex that is now more definitional than any candidate or party—and that poses every bit as much of a threat to democracy as the military-industrial complex about which Dwight Eisenhower warned us a half-century ago."

The article presents numerous figures on the growth of television advertising and the decline of print media coverage as factors in US elections. Certainly, the corporate-controlled media plays an outsized and fundamentally anti-democratic role in the manipulation of the US electoral process. But this was just as true in 2008, when the corporate elite backed Obama overwhelmingly, as in 2010, when there was a tilt towards the Republicans. The *Nation* seeks to conceal the role that the financial elite plays within the Democratic Party in order to preserve the tattered conception that the Obama administration—the direct instrument of American imperialism—is somehow "progressive."

The 2010 election represented something qualitatively new, according to Nichols and McChesney. "This is not the next chapter in the old money-and-politics debate," they write. "This is the redefinition of politics by a pair of new and equally important factors—the freeing of corporations to spend any amount on electioneering and the collapse of substantive print and broadcast reporting on campaigns. Unchecked by even rudimentary campaign finance regulation, unchallenged by a journalism sufficient to identify and expose abuses of the electoral process and abetted by commercial broadcasters that this year pocketed \$3 billion in political ad revenues, the money-and-media election complex was a nearly unbeatable force in 2010."

From a premise that is fundamentally false, as we shall see later, the *Nation* writers have drawn truly apocalyptic conclusions: nothing could have beaten the Republicans in 2010; they were all-powerful. This line of reasoning has the comforting consequence—at least for Obama's liberal apologists—that the root cause of the electoral debacle is not to be found in the politics of the Democratic Party, but in the structure of the US electoral process itself. It also coincides with claims by leading

Democrats, most notably House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, that the electoral rout was the product of a tidal wave of secret money, for which the Democrats should not be held responsible.

Even if it were true that the Democrats were greatly outspent in the 2010 elections, that would not explain the collapse in the base vote of the Democratic Party, and particularly among those layers of the working class—young people, African Americans, the poor—who turned out most heavily for Obama in 2008.

Exit poll numbers compiled and published in the weeks after the November 2 vote reveal the extent of this collapse. The figures are staggering, and almost entirely ignored by the *Nation*. Barely 80 million people voted for congressional candidates this year, compared to 120 million who cast ballots for Congress in 2008, and 130 million who voted in the presidential contest. The decline of 40 million votes came disproportionately from those sections of the population who voted overwhelmingly for Obama.

African Americans made up 13 percent of the 2008 vote, when 17 million turned out at the polls, but only 10 percent of the much lower total in 2010, with only 8 million voting, a drop of 9 million votes.

Young people made up 18 percent of the vote in 2008, accounting for about 23 million voters. In 2010, people aged 18 to 29 made up only 10 percent of the vote, accounting for about 8 million voters. The decline is 15 million voters, the percentage decline almost 70 percent.

If you add them together, even with some overlap, there are 23 to 24 million fewer voters among these two groups alone. They account for more than half the 40 million decline in voter turnout from 2008 to 2010.

No one can credibly declare that either young people or African Americans are turning to the right politically, or that they were somehow swayed by an overpowering Republican media blitz.

The only politically serious explanation of their turn away from the Democrats in 2010 is that they have been disillusioned by the performance of the Obama administration, above all the failure to provide jobs, as well as the continuation and escalation of the wars launched by the Bush administration in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For young people, despite the huge surge in 2008, the balance sheet of the Obama phenomenon has been an actual net decrease in electoral participation. Only 20.9 percent of youth voted in 2010, well below the 23.5 percent who voted in 2006, the previous midterm election.

The *Nation* evades these basic realities of the 2010 vote because they want to reinforce or if possible rekindle the illusions in Obama and the Democrats, and prevent working people who have gone through this bitter experience from drawing the conclusion that they need an alternative to the entire big-business-dominated political structure.

For that purpose, it is necessary to manufacture the myth that the electoral rout of the Democrats was due largely, if not entirely, to the intervention of big money. The abject pessimism of such an approach should be evident—if big money is the decisive factor in politics, then any form of social struggle from below is hopeless.

The actual figures show that, contrary to the *Nation*, the Democrats were competitive with the Republicans in fundraising and expenditure, and spent more in many of the most contested races.

According to figures compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics, a leading watchdog group on campaign fundraising, as well as reports filed with the Federal Election Commission and surveys published by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, the bulk of the billions spent on the 2010 elections, the \$2.8 billion raised and spent by the candidates and parties, was split roughly 50-50.

Another \$400 million was raised and spent by outside organizations acting to support or oppose particular candidates. This tilted significantly towards the Republicans, but not by nearly the seven-to-one margin claimed by the *Nation*, because it was offset by the huge expenditures on behalf of the Democrats by the AFL-CIO union officialdom. AFSCME, the SEIU, and the National Education Association combined spent \$171.5 million.

In the House of Representatives, according to an October 26 report in the *New York Times*, “Even with a recent surge in fundraising for Republican candidates, Democratic candidates have outraised their opponents over all by more than 30 percent in the 109 House races the *New York Times* has identified as in play.”

Heavy fundraising by outside pro-Republican groups succeeded in making many more congressional districts financially competitive, but, according to the *Times*, “Democrats actually had the spending advantage in about 60 percent of the 109 competitive House races and had invested, collectively, about 10 percent more money into the contests than Republican candidates and their aligned groups had over the previous few months.”

The *Times* gave as an example the race in New York’s 20<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, in the Hudson valley, where Scott Murphy, a Democrat who won a special election in 2009, spent \$1.5 million on the fall campaign, compared to \$400,000 for his Republican challenger, retired Army colonel Chris Gibson. Outside groups spent \$700,000 supporting Gibson or attacking Murphy, while pro-Democratic groups spent less than \$200,000. The financial balance still heavily favored Murphy, with a cumulative total of \$1.7 million to Gibson’s \$1.1 million. But on election day, Gibson won the district by 112,314 to 94,489 votes.

On October 26, the *Washington Post* reported, based on an analysis of campaign finance disclosure forms, that “Nearly \$4 of every \$10 spent by independent groups last week was aimed at helping Democratic candidates.... Once spending by the parties themselves is added to the mix, Democratic candidates are getting the benefit of nearly half—46 percent—of independent spending reported to the Federal Election Commission. Many Democratic incumbents are also sitting on flush bank accounts that they have been building since the end of the 2008 election.”

The *Post* continued, as though rebutting the *Nation* in advance: “The pattern undercuts Democratic attempts to blame well-funded conservative groups for an expected wave of losses when voters go to the polls

Tuesday.” It added that of 66 closely contested House districts, Democratic candidates received more outside spending support in 29.

More money did not automatically produce electoral success. Three Republican multi-millionaires—Meg Whitman, Linda McMahon, and Rick Scott—spent nearly \$250 million of their own fortunes. Only Scott was successful, narrowly winning the governorship of Florida. Whitman was defeated for governor of California, and McMahon failed to win a Senate seat from Connecticut.

Figures from mid-October, summarized in the *Wall Street Journal*, showed that Republican candidates for the US Senate were out-raising their Democratic opponents significantly, although many of these candidates lost, including Christine O’Donnell in Delaware, Sharron Angle in Nevada, Carly Fiorina in California and Dino Rossi in Washington. By contrast, in the 40 closest House races, Republican candidates trailed their Democratic opponents by \$17.6 million to \$19 million, but nearly all these seats were swept by the Republicans.

The *Nation* article deals with such contradictory facts with verbal tricks or outright falsification. Nichols and McChesney write, “Of fifty-three competitive House districts where Rove and his compatriots backed Republicans with ‘independent’ expenditures that exceeded those made on behalf of Democrats—often by more than \$1 million per district, according to Public Citizen—the Republicans won fifty-one.”

The passage is designed to give the impression that Karl Rove is an unstoppable force, but the wording is misleading. Republican outside groups did indeed outspend Democratic outside groups, but in many of these 53 districts, *total spending* for the Democratic candidate exceeded that for the Republicans. The Democrats lost because they had alienated their political base, not because they were swamped financially.

Finally, Nichols and McChesney are reduced to blaming those who did not turn out for the Democrats. They write, “The money-and-media election complex is creating a radically different electoral landscape than anything Americans have known since the Gilded Age. That landscape is characterized, pundits tell us, by an ‘enthusiasm gap.’ No kidding. Americans are not stupid. They knew their relatively paltry contributions, and even their votes, were unlikely to stop a \$4 billion onslaught.”

Again, note the verbal sleight-of-hand. The “\$4 billion onslaught” includes *nearly \$2 billion spent by and for Democrats*, not Republicans. This includes hundreds of millions of dollars extracted from workers’ paychecks by unions that betray their interests, both on the job and in politics.

Working people were not intimidated into staying home election day by the barrage of advertising from the Republicans. Or to put it more precisely, the vast sums expended *by both sides* on mudslinging and distortions served to alienate the public from the electoral process. But that is only an aspect of a more fundamental political reality: the disenfranchisement of the working people, the vast majority of the population, by a political system limited to two right-wing pro-capitalist parties.

The central political issue facing working people in the United States is the need to break with the two-party system and build a mass independent political party of the working class, fighting for a socialist program. In that struggle, the liberal apologists for the Democratic Party, like the *Nation*, are a bitter enemy.



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