

The disillusioned and dissatisfied electorate

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An initial analysis of the results of Tuesday's presidential election reveals one overriding element that is little noted in the American media: the staggering decline in voter turnout, and in particular the vote for President Barack Obama. More than anything else, the vote is the expression of an electorate that is disillusioned and increasingly alienated from the entire two-party political system.

The media, particularly the liberal and "left" supporters of the Democratic Party, were quick to hail the re-election of Obama as a major triumph. The International Socialist Organization, for example, began its editorial, "Barack Obama has won re-election, thanks to a strong turnout by the Democratic Party's core supporters in every place the president needed to win."

In fact, Obama saw a substantial drop in his vote across the board, with millions more Americans choosing not to vote in this election. Little remains of the enthusiasm of 2008, when Obama was swept into power on a wave of popular hostility to the Bush administration.

Obama's total vote count was approximately 9 million less than what he received in 2008, falling from 69.5 million to 60.5 million, or by about 13 percent. For his part, Romney pulled in only 57.5 million votes, about 2.5 million less than John McCain in 2008. That is, Obama just barely received more votes than his Republican challenger four years ago.

The elections were characterized by a massive infusion of billions of dollars, with endless advertisements and media commentary over the course of nine months. The past four years have seen a significant growth in the number of eligible voters. However, in the end, the number of people voting fell by about 11 million. Particularly striking, in California, a bastion of the Democratic Party, the total vote fell from 13.2 million in 2008 to only 9.2 million in 2012, with Obama receiving in

that state more than a million fewer votes than the Democratic candidate in 2004, John Kerry.

Turnout declined in every state, according to Curtis Gans of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate. "This was a major plunge in turnout nationally," he noted.

The sharp fall in Obama's vote as he won his second term is virtually unprecedented in the history of American politics. It is in fact exceedingly rare for a president to win a second term with less votes than in the first election. George W. Bush, for example, increased his vote from 50 million in 2000 to 62 million in 2004. Clinton increased his vote from 45 million in 1992 to 47.5 million in 1996. Reagan increased his vote from 44 million in 1980 to 54.5 million in 1984.

Indeed, the last time that a president won reelection with a decline in his popular vote came in the elections of 1944 and 1940, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt saw his enormous advantage over his Republican challengers fall somewhat in his bids for third and fourth terms after his landslide election in 1932.

However, a comparison to Roosevelt's votes is itself instructive in understanding the scale and significance of Obama's decline. In 1936, Roosevelt was elected to a second term in the midst of the Great Depression, seven years after the Wall Street crash of 1929. In that election, FDR increased his popular vote from 23 million to 28 million, a growth of more than 20 percent. His Republican challenger, Alf Landon, won only 36.5 percent of the popular vote, carrying just two states, Vermont and Maine, for a total of eight electoral votes. In the next two elections, Roosevelt's total vote fell to 27.3 million and then 25.6 million.

As with FDR, Obama was elected under conditions of deep economic and social crisis, taking over from the

most hated president in US history, George Bush. However, in four years he managed to almost entirely dissipate whatever advantage he had over his Republican challengers.

The principal factor behind the different electoral trajectories of the two candidates is that FDR—driven by the fear of social revolution and resting on the still considerable resources of American capitalism—launched a significant program of social reform. In contrast, Obama has spent his four years in office extending and deepening the right-wing policies of his predecessor.

As a result, Obama found himself just barely able to defeat a Republican nominee who represents in the most crass and naked form the greed of the financial aristocracy that is responsible for the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The election result is an expression of not only the political bankruptcy of the Obama administration, but the crisis of the entire two-party system. Both parties are dedicated to serving the interests of a tiny financial aristocracy, which has absolutely nothing to offer the American people but austerity, war and the destruction of democratic rights.

Regardless of who is elected, the same policies are continued. Obama continued the policies of Bush, and Romney, if he had emerged victorious, would have, in all essentials, continued the policies of Obama.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the elections, the dominant theme in the media and political establishment, beginning with Obama himself, is the call for “bipartisanship”—which means a joint offensive of both parties against the working class. The elections, it is declared, are a popular “mandate” for the Democrats and Republicans to come together to “solve the nation’s problems.”

In his own remarks on Tuesday night, Obama declared, “I am looking forward to reaching out and working with leaders of both parties to meet the challenges we can only solve together,” beginning with the need to “reduce the deficit.” Obama has declared that his “first order of business” will be to reach an agreement to implement trillions of dollars in cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and other social programs in response to the “fiscal cliff” at the end

of the year. On Wednesday, Republican leaders responded by declaring that they too were committed to reaching an agreement.

According to the official interpretation of American politics, an interpretation shared by the “left” as well as the right, the population is divided along every matter of identity—race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation. Obama won, according to this analysis, because he was able to get the “woman vote” or the “Hispanic vote.” Class can never be mentioned. Yet this is the most fundamental question.

The most important implication of Tuesday’s election is the increasing alienation of the working class from the entire political set-up. And for good reason. There are immense social tensions building up in the United States, rooted in social inequality that prevails at levels not seen since the 1920s. Yet these tensions can find no outlet within the electoral process.

When working class struggles erupt in the United States in the coming months, they will come into increasingly direct conflict with the entire political system—including the network of liberal and pseudo-left organizations whose principal function is to uphold the political domination of the Democratic Party. Opposition will and must take another form: the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program.

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