

Record-low US primary voting shows mass alienation from two-party system

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A report issued last week tabulating the results of the first 25 statewide primary elections held in the United States this year found that voter turnout was the lowest in history, at least since the primary system became the norm after the Second World War.

Only 14.8 percent of eligible citizens have voted in the primaries held so far, a decline of 3.5 percentage points from the turnout in the same 25 states in 2010. This is less than half the postwar record turnout of 31.9 percent set in 1966.

In raw figures, the mass abstention is even more staggering. Of the 122.7 million citizens eligible to vote in the first 25 primaries this year, only 18.2 million actually went to the polls, while 104.5 million declined to participate in choosing Democratic and Republican nominees for the November 4 election.

Given the enormous media coverage of the primary campaigns and the record expenditures by both parties and a myriad of corporate-financed groups established to influence the outcome of the voting, the mass abstention is a stark reflection of the disillusionment and alienation of the broad mass of working people from the American two-party system.

Curtis Gans, director of the Center for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE) at American University and author of the report, made observations along this line in his analysis of the figures.

He wrote: “Many decades ago citizens turned out to vote out of a sense of civic duty and because of an allegiance to one or other major party. That motivation has largely been lost. The numbers in this report reflect how deeply citizens are turning away from political engagement and from positive feeling about one or another major political party.”

The CSAE report documents the obstacles to popular participation in elections, including voter registration

procedures so cumbersome that 61 million eligible citizens are not registered and therefore cannot vote. To this could be added the exclusion of former prisoners from the voter rolls in many states, particularly in the South, and the spread of laws requiring photo IDs, enacted to reduce the percentage of voting by the poor, who have greater difficulty obtaining the necessary identification.

However, Gans noted that a slew of procedural measures established to make voting easier, including same-day registration, expanded mail-in voting, and early voting, showed no long-term effect. California, where two-thirds of the votes are cast by mail, and Oregon, which is entirely a mail-in procedure, both posted record low primary voting.

He concluded: “The core problem of participation does not reside in the realm of procedure, but rather in motivation. Contributing factors to the decline in motivation are not hard to find: campaigns that are run on scurrilous attack ads that give the citizen a perceived choice between bad and awful; one major party situated far to the right of the American center and the other without a clear and durable message; a decline in faith that government will address major societal need...”

This considerably understates the nature of the political dilemma confronting working people. It is not just the Republican Party that is “situated far to the right” but the Democratic Party as well.

Both parties adhere to the political consensus prevailing within the financial aristocracy, supporting imperialist war, attacks on democratic rights, and savage austerity measures that undermine working class living standards and public services. They seek to obscure the political monopoly exercised by corporate America with conflicts over secondary and tertiary issues, or by whipping up divisions along the lines of

race, gender, sexual orientation and religion to conceal the fundamental class questions.

The figures presented in the CSAE report are worth considering in some detail, since they demonstrate that the great mass of the American people have become so alienated from the two-party system, and particularly the Democratic Party, that there exists an enormous political vacuum in the country.

Of the 25 states holding primary elections prior to mid-July, 15 showed record low overall voter turnouts. Only three showed an increase in turnout from 2010 to 2014. Democratic turnout was higher in only four states, while Republican turnout was higher in six states. Democratic Party turnout hit record lows in 15 of the 25 states.

Republican primary turnout, at 8.2 percent of eligible voters, was down from the 2010 level of 9.6 percent, but only slightly below the average of 13 midterm elections over the last half-century, where the average Republican primary turnout was 8.9 percent.

The historical decline is thus in large measure due to declining participation in Democratic Party primaries—significant because for decades the Democratic Party was the main vehicle for the subordination of the working class to capitalist politics, with the AFL-CIO unions peddling illusions that Democratic candidates were “friends of labor.”

Popular participation in Democratic Party midterm election primaries hit its post-World War II high in 1970—a year of mass antiwar activity and popular radicalization that the unions and organizations such as the Communist Party and Socialist Workers Party sought to divert behind supposedly antiwar candidates within the Democratic Party. This culminated in the 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern.

In 1970, 20.9 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in Democratic Party primaries. This year, that figure is down to only 6.4 percent of eligible voters. In other words, popular participation in Democratic midterm primaries has fallen by 70 percent over the past 44 years. Participation in Republican midterm primaries has fallen by 38 percent over the same period.

Voter participation in Democratic primaries has fallen for 11 consecutive midterm elections, from 1974 to 2014. (Because voter participation is generally much higher in presidential years like 2008 and 2012 than in non-presidential years like 2006 and 2010, the study

compares 2014 only with other “midterm” elections, when only congressional and state offices are on the ballot).

The experience of the Obama administration represents a definite turning point in this long-term process of decline. Democratic turnout increased significantly in both the 2006 congressional elections and the 2008 presidential election, with record numbers of black and other minority workers going to the polls.

But whatever the initial illusions that the first African-American president would produce a positive change in the conditions of life for working people, the right-wing, pro-Wall Street record of the Obama administration has produced a historically unprecedented collapse in popular support for the Democratic Party, culminating in a 29 percent decline in participation in Democratic mid-term primary elections between 2010 and 2014.

The figures presented in the CSAE report strongly suggest that millions of working people are fed up with the Democratic Party and are looking for an alternative to oppose the reactionary policies of the financial oligarchy promoted by both the Democrats and Republicans.



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