

US election campaign: Two right-wing parties offer no solution to social crisis

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The two corporate-controlled parties that enjoy a political monopoly in the United States kicked off the fall election campaign over the Labor Day weekend, but the exercise was even more hollow than usual. The Democrats and Republicans are conducting an election campaign that is being all but ignored by the bulk of the American people.

Neither party can address the deep social crisis facing working people, with an economic slump now entering its seventh year, the real unemployment rate still at near-depression levels, and poverty, hunger and homelessness an ever-present threat to tens of millions. Neither party opposes the drive by the Obama administration for military interventions in the Middle East, North Africa, Ukraine and the Far East. On the contrary, candidates of both parties are attacking the White House from the right, demanding even more inflammatory and militaristic policies.

In lieu of any discussion of the major issues facing American working people, the two parties offer empty demagoguery, political stunts, and campaign commercials that vilify the opposition and pollute political discussion. Meanwhile, the real decisions on policy are being made behind closed doors by the military-intelligence apparatus and the powerful financial interests it serves.

In advance of the November midterm elections, the Democratic Party has effectively conceded that the Republicans will retain control of the House of Representatives and likely increase their 35-seat margin slightly. The House currently consists of 234 Republicans and 199 Democrats, with two vacancies.

Every seat is up for reelection, but because of the drawing of district boundaries to ensure safe seats for one party or the other, fewer than 75 are actively contested, and fewer than 40 are considered to be “in play” by election analysts. Consultants for both parties are predicting a Republican gain of 5 to 10 seats.

Typical of the House campaign are the two largest US states, California and Texas, one with a heavily Democratic congressional delegation, the other heavily Republican. Only 1 congressional seat of the 55 in California is considered seriously at risk of changing hands from one party to the other. Similarly, only 1 of the 36 seats in Texas is seriously contested. The Democrats did not even enter candidates in 13 of the 36 Texas congressional districts.

In the US Senate, the Democrats hold a 55-45 majority, with 36 seats up for election this year, 21 held by Democrats and 15 by Republicans. Fewer than half of these seats are being seriously contested, mostly Democratic-held seats in states that voted for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney over Barack Obama in 2012, or where the presidential contest was relatively close.

The main focus of the 2014 election campaign for both big business

parties and the corporate-controlled media is whether the Republicans will succeed in gaining the six seats necessary for a Senate majority.

It is difficult to predict precisely the effect a Republican takeover of the Senate would have on actual legislation, since a large Democratic minority in the Senate could block most Republican-backed bills, just as the Republican minority has done for the past five years, and Obama retains his veto power, which can be overridden only by a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress.

A change in party control of the Senate would, however, shift the US political system even further to the right. It would be presented by the media (and by the Democrats themselves) as proof that the right-wing policies of the Obama administration were too liberal and have been rejected by the public.

Moreover, a Republican-controlled Congress would certainly cut government social programs even more than a divided Congress has already done. Obama would no doubt continue to preach bipartisan collaboration, not by splitting the difference between a Democratic Senate and a Republican House, but by embracing a slightly watered-down version of the policies proposed by a Congress entirely under Republican control.

The actual outcome of the Senate contest remains in doubt, with predictions of Republican gains of anywhere from four seats—which would leave the Democrats in control—to eight or nine.

Three seats where Democratic incumbents have retired, in the largely rural states of West Virginia, South Dakota and Montana, are expected to go to the Republicans.

In addition, there are four seats held by Democratic incumbents seeking reelection in states carried by the Republicans in the 2012 presidential election: Louisiana, Arkansas, Alaska and North Carolina. A Republican sweep of these four seats would likely give them control of the Senate, but the Democratic candidates are currently holding narrow leads in each one.

Three of the four Democrats—Mary Landrieu in Louisiana, Mark Pryor in Arkansas and Mark Begich in Alaska—are the scions of politically prominent families with substantial business backing and right-wing political records, even by the standards of the Democratic Party. Landrieu, in particular, is a notorious defender of the oil and chemical industry, which dominates the Gulf Coast region.

The fourth endangered Democrat, Kay Hagan in North Carolina, is seeking reelection in a state Obama carried in 2008 but lost narrowly to Romney in 2012.

Besides these contests, Democratic-held seats in New Hampshire, Virginia, Michigan, Iowa, Minnesota, Colorado and Oregon face significant Republican challenges, although the Democratic candidates hold leads in the polls in most of them. A Republican

victory in any of these seven states would likely insure Republican control of the Senate next year.

There are only two states, both in the South, where Democratic candidates are making serious efforts to take Republican seats. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell leads narrowly in Kentucky over Kentucky secretary of state Alison Lundergan Grimes. In Georgia, Michelle Nunn, daughter of former Democratic senator Sam Nunn, has a slight lead over Republican businessman David Perdue for a seat where the Republican incumbent is retiring.

In both states, the Democratic candidates have positioned themselves well to the right of the Obama administration, attacking Obama's health care overhaul along the same lines as Tea Party ultra-rightists and advocating budget-cutting austerity measures. In Kentucky, Grimes has lined up with the coal bosses against any attempt to enforce environmental or safety regulations.

The Grimes campaign has sought the greatest possible distance from the unpopular Democrat in the White House. In a comment to the *New York Times* Sunday, her father, Jerry Lundergan, the former Democratic national committeeman from the state, said, "My daughter has never had a conversation with Barack Obama and probably never will, unless he wants to help Kentucky."

The third arena of the 2014 elections is over control of state governments. Thirty-six of the 50 states will elect new governors, and most states will hold contests for control of one or both houses of the state legislature. Republicans currently control the majority of states as a result of their 2010 election sweep: 29 of the 50 state governorships, and at least 60 of the 99 state legislative chambers.

In the state races, the party advantage is the opposite of the US Senate campaigns: the Republicans will suffer losses, the only question being how extensive, because they currently hold the governorships in a slew of states carried by the Democrats in 2012, including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Florida.

The most endangered Republican governors include Rick Scott in Florida, hated for cuts in school funding and his rejection of Medicaid expansion; Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania, who has presided over massive cuts in education funding; Rick Snyder in Michigan, identified with passage of a right-to-work law and imposition of an emergency manager and bankruptcy on Detroit; and Scott Walker in Wisconsin, whose attacks on public employees provoked an outpouring of working class protest in February-March 2011, including a movement toward a general strike that was aborted by the union leaders.

Their Democratic opponents offer no alternative. In Florida, the Democratic candidate is the former Republican governor, a supporter of school vouchers and chain gangs, Charlie Crist. In Pennsylvania, the Democrats nominated a self-funded multimillionaire factory owner, Tom Wolf. In Michigan, the Democratic candidate is ex-congressman Mark Schauer, who lost his seat to a Tea Party Republican in 2010. In Wisconsin, the Democrats chose another multimillionaire, Mary Burke, former CEO of Trek Bicycle Corporation.

Even more so than the House of Representatives, the state legislative campaigns are perfunctory, with the outcomes determined largely by the drawing of district boundaries and campaign financing. In Texas, for example, of 155 seats in the state House of Representatives, 63 have no contest at all because only a single candidate filed, while 40 seats have only one major party candidate, opposed by a Green, Libertarian or other third-party candidate. Less than one third of the seats, 47 out of 155, have contests between the Democrats and

Republicans.

While the election campaign has already received massive attention in the media, which will undoubtedly intensify over the next two months, the American public has been largely uninterested and indifferent. Voter turnout in the primary elections hit record lows, with fewer than 15 percent of eligible voters participating.

Turnout in midterm congressional elections is usually considerably lower than in a presidential election year, with the groups tending to vote Democratic—the poor, racial minorities, youth and single women—showing the biggest drop-off in participation.

This year is likely to mark a historical watershed in terms of mass abstention. Opinion polls throughout the year have shown a declining trend not only for Obama, who barely registers 40 percent approval, but for both parties in Congress (Democrats 31 percent, Republicans 19 percent) and for Congress as an institution (an abysmal 13 percent).

There is a growing sense among working people that the electoral system is a sham, in which the two supposed alternatives are both controlled by billion-dollar financial interests. What is still lacking is the understanding of the need for an alternative, an independent political movement of the working class directed against the profit system.

Obama's campaign schedule this past week demonstrates the class character of the Democratic Party. He made an obligatory appearance at a Labor Day rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to utter a few demagogic phrases. His main business was to appeal to the real "base" of the Democratic Party, appearing before multimillionaires at three separate fundraising events.

The first was a closed-door roundtable in upscale Westchester County, New York, hosted by shipping magnate George Logothetis, where 25 supporters paid \$32,400 apiece. The second was a barbecue at the estate of former UBS Americas chairman Robert Wolf, where 250 supporters paid \$15,000 or more per couple. The third was a reception at the Newport, Rhode Island, home of Richard Bready, the former chief executive of Nortek, where about 60 people anteed up the \$32,400 maximum personal donation. The combined take at the three events was close to \$6.5 million.

The most intensely fought contests this fall will see unprecedented amounts of campaign spending. The Kentucky race alone is expected to top \$100 million, in a state with a total population of only 4.4 million people. The Florida gubernatorial campaign will cost even more, with Scott, a former hospital CEO and multimillionaire, spending at least \$80 million himself.

The paradox of American politics is that the more the two capitalist parties spend, the lower their standing in the eyes of the American public. This is indicated not only by the poll numbers cited above, but in the growing disillusionment with the future offered by American capitalism. According to a *Wall Street Journal* /NBC poll in early August, 76 percent of Americans aged 18 and older did not believe their children's generation would fare better than their own. The 76-21 split compares to a 43-49 split on the same question in 2001. As for the US two-party system, 79 percent expressed dissatisfaction or hostility.



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