

New York Times column advocates ending midterm elections in America

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An op-ed piece published by the *New York Times* on Monday, one day before yesterday's midterm elections, reveals the deeply anti-democratic outlook that predominates in the American ruling class. Entitled "Cancel the Midterms," the column argues that federal elections for the House of Representatives and Senate should no longer be held in non-presidential election years.

The authors, David Schanzer, a professor of public policy at Duke University in North Carolina, and Jay Sullivan, an undergraduate student at Duke, propose that midterm elections be abolished by passing a constitutional amendment lengthening the term of office of House members from two years to four years and reducing the term of US senators from six years to four. As a result, federal elections would be held every four years instead of two.

Schanzer is not your average college professor. His résumé includes two years (2003-2005) as Democratic staff director for the House Committee on Homeland Security, a stint as legislative director for Democratic Senator Jean Carnahan (2001-2002), two years (1996-1998) as counsel to then-Senator (now vice president) Joseph Biden, and two years (1994-1996) as counsel to Republican Senator (subsequently defense secretary under Bill Clinton) William Cohen. His positions in the executive branch of the US government include special counsel at the Pentagon (1998-2001) and two years (1992-1994) as an attorney at the Justice Department.

He is currently not only an associate professor at Duke and adjunct professor at the nearby University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, he is also director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security and director for strategy and outreach for the Institute of Homeland Security Solutions, described in his Internet biography as a "research consortium between Duke, UNC Chapel Hill, and RTI International focusing on applied social science research to advance the national homeland security mission."

Schanzer is a national security Democrat plugged into the highest levels of the military/intelligence apparatus. He also runs a blog on the liberal Democratic web site *Huffington Post*. His anti-democratic views reflect the evolution into the

camp of reaction of a broader layer of the affluent middle class in and around the Democratic Party.

The arguments Schanzer advances are not original or new. They are of the type put forward by right-wing, authoritarian opponents of parliamentary democracy for more than a century. They boil down to the claim that midterm elections disrupt and weaken the power of the chief of state, i.e., the president, and are expensive to boot. While he limits himself to denouncing midterm elections, the same basic arguments can be used to advocate the abolition of all elections.

The column begins by complaining that Tuesday's election is "almost certain to create greater partisan divisions, increase gridlock and render government of our complex nation even more difficult." Here the authors repeat the official myth that the US political system is bedeviled by unrestrained partisan conflict between the Democrats and Republicans. Behind the carefully maintained façade of "gridlock," however, the two parties work in lockstep to implement the ruling class's agenda of war, austerity and the gutting of democratic rights.

To bolster his argument, Schanzer refers to the massive popular abstention and the role of "shadowy 'super-PACs,'" which "will have spent more than \$1 billion to air more than two million ads to influence the election." Further on, he notes that House members "spend up to 70 percent of their time fund-raising during an election year."

But he does not propose abolishing corporate campaign bribes or suggest that the domination of a financial aristocracy over the political system may have something to do with popular disaffection. Instead, he argues that the people should have even less opportunity to express their will.

While he grants that biennial elections for the House of Representatives may have made sense when the Founding Fathers inscribed it in the US Constitution, he asserts that the advent of social media, the Internet and 24-hour cable news networks have made midterms unnecessary because "we do not need an election every two years to communicate voters' desires to their elected officials."

In other words, the problem with the American political system is that the views and desires of the people are not getting through to the politicians! This in a country where poll after poll shows massive opposition to war, austerity and government spying but this has no impact on the policies of the government or either big business party. And the election of Obama, based on his promises to end wars abroad and reverse the anti-social and anti-democratic policies of Bush at home, was followed by a continuation and deepening of the very same policies.

The revolutionary thinkers and politicians who founded the American republic very deliberately insisted on biennial elections to the House of Representatives, which they saw as the most democratic branch of government, whose dependence on the popular will would, they hoped, make it a bulwark against presidential despotism. James Madison wrote of the House of Representatives in *Federalist Papers No. 52* :

“As it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the branch of it under consideration should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people. Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured.”

Schanzer wants the opposite. Getting to the nub of his argument, he writes: “The main impact of the midterm election in the modern era has been to weaken the president... less than two years after inauguration, the midterm election cripples that same president’s ability to advance [his] agenda.”

Schanzer, the anti-terror and homeland security expert, wants an imperial presidency that is not impeded in pursuing its agenda by expensive diversions and distractions such as congressional elections. The character of the agenda Schanzer supports is indicated by his claim that “This adjustment would also give Congress the breathing space to consider longer-term challenges facing the nation—such as entitlement spending...”

Without elections every other year, the president and Congress could get down to the business of gutting Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid—programs upon which tens of millions of workers depend to keep them out of poverty. The American ruling class needs a strong, authoritarian state to carry through its social counterrevolution against the opposition of the working class. This is the real content of Schanzer’s “modest proposal.”

Schanzer has made clear his contempt for democratic rights in previous writings. He posted a blog on *Huffington Post* on May 16, 2013 defending the Obama Justice Department’s secret seizure of the telephone records of

Associated Press reporters. In the course of the posting, entitled “Don’t Forget: Leakers of Classified Information Are Criminals,” he denounced “non-responsible media” that do not allow the government to censor their articles, including in that category “pseudo-journalists and media voyeurs like Julian Assange.”

While the media calls confidential sources for government secrets “whistle-blowers,” he complained, “there is another word for these individuals—criminals,” among whom he singled out Bradley Manning.

No one who follows the media should be surprised that the *New York Times* would publish such reactionary drivel. The *Times*, like the entire political and media establishment, has supported the erection of a police state infrastructure in the United States. From mass government spying on the population to the military-police lockdown of Boston in 2013 and Ferguson, Missouri in August of this year, the official media have done their best to conceal the preparations for dictatorship where possible, and justify it where they could not hide it.

Behind the disintegration of American democracy and spread of authoritarian and fascistic views within the corporate elite and the state is the immense growth of social inequality. Elections in the US have become increasingly empty and undemocratic exercises because America is a plutocracy, and both parties are its servants.

Ever more openly, the forms of political rule are coming into alignment with the underlying social and economic reality. Columns such as Schanzer’s should be taken as a serious warning by the working class. Democratic rights are under full-scale attack. They can be defended only through the independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the entire political establishment and the capitalist system it serves.



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