

The Democratic Party implosion

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The debacle suffered by the Democratic Party and the Obama administration in Tuesday's midterm election marks an end to the period when the Democrats could use identity politics based on race, gender and sexual preference to mask their steady shift to the right and their agreement with the Republicans on ever-deeper attacks against the working class.

Democrats were routed by their Republican opponents at both the national and state level. In the Senate, Republicans will now be the majority party, having gained at least 7 seats and likely more. In the House of Representatives, Republicans picked up at least 14 seats, increasing their majority to levels not seen since the 1920s. Republicans beat Democrats in many key gubernatorial elections, including in traditionally Democratic states such as Illinois, Maryland, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

The Democratic collapse has elicited the predictable response from the media and the political establishment—the claim that the election is a call for bipartisanship and an end to “gridlock” by an electorate that has moved to the right.

“The message from voters is clear,” said outgoing Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. “They want us to work together.” The Obama White House has already indicated that it is eager to work with Republicans to push through a raft of right-wing measures, including new corporate tax cuts, further attacks on democratic rights, and an escalation of the war in Syria and Iraq.

The claims of a popular shift to the right are belied by the passage of referenda to raise the minimum wage in a whole number of states that elected Republicans to the Senate and to governorships as a result of a fall in the turnout of working-class and young voters.

Illinois voters, for example, overwhelmingly passed nonbinding ballot measures on increasing the minimum wage, funding public education through a new tax on millionaires, and requiring health insurance companies to provide birth control coverage. At the same time, Republican gubernatorial candidate Bruce Rauner easily

defeated the incumbent, Democrat Pat Quinn.

Binding minimum wage measures passed in Arkansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Alaska—all states that elected Republican senators.

The Democratic strategy of appealing to affluent layers of the middle class on the basis of identity politics while working with the Republicans to step up attacks on workers' jobs, wages and living standards produced an electoral disaster. In a contradictory way, reflecting a system monopolized by two right-wing parties of big business, the election showed that appeals on the basis of race, gender and sexuality move only a small fraction of the population, while the broad masses of people are driven by more fundamental class issues—issues on which the Democrats have nothing to offer.

Overall, voter turnout was estimated at 36.6 percent of eligible voters, compared to 40.9 percent in the 2010 midterm elections. Young voters (aged 18-29) comprised only 13 percent of those who cast ballots, compared to 19 percent in 2012.

Even among those who voted, polls revealed a deeply disillusioned electorate. According to CNN exit polls, six in ten voters said they were either dissatisfied or angry with both the White House and Republicans in Congress. Two-thirds of voters said the country was on the wrong track, and less than a quarter said they thought the next generation would be better off than the current generation.

The Democrats' implosion in 2014 is the culmination of a protracted process. The association of the Democratic Party with social reform was rooted in the New Deal policies of the 1930s and the reform measures of the post-World War II period. Through bitter social struggles, the working class was able to wrest from the ruling class and its political representatives significant reforms. The Democratic Party was able to secure an electoral base among working people due to its association with these measures and, later, civil rights legislation.

As American capitalism entered a period of protracted decline in the 1970s, the ruling class moved sharply to the right. As part of this process, the Democrats and their

periphery worked to redefine “left” politics to focus on issues of gender, race and sexual identity. More affluent sections of the middle class were brought forward into positions of power and privilege through affirmative action and other measures, while the ruling class carried out a coordinated offensive against jobs, wages and social programs that benefited the working class.

The process reached its apotheosis in the election of Obama, proclaimed by the liberal and pseudo-left proponents of identity politics as a “transformative” candidate who, because of his status as the first African-American president, would change the direction of policy in a progressive manner.

Instead, the Obama administration, no less an instrument of the ruling class than its Republican predecessor, continued and intensified all of the right-wing, anti-working class policies of Bush. The impact on popular consciousness could already be seen in the narrow reelection of Obama in 2012, which saw the incumbent president’s vote actually decline compared to 2008.

Underlying these processes is a profound crisis—not only of the Democratic Party, but of the entire political system. Both parties represent the interests of a tiny layer of the corporate and financial elite in alliance with the military-intelligence apparatus. Beyond the confines of the top 5 or 10 percent of the population, the state confronts a working class that is angry, dissatisfied and increasingly hostile.

These sentiments have yet to find a direct political expression, and they cannot within the framework of the two-party system and the official institutions of American capitalism. The 2014 midterm election has made all the more clear the necessity for a break with both parties of big business and the building of an independent political movement of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary and socialist program.



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