

The illegitimate US election

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In the week since the US midterm elections, more extensive figures on voter turnout have become available, revealing an immense level of popular disillusionment and outright hostility toward the Obama administration, the political establishment and both big-business parties.

According to the United States Elections Project, a mere 36.3 percent of those eligible to vote went to the polls on November 4. This is the lowest turnout since the 1942 midterm election, which was held in the midst of the Second World War. Before that, the only election with a lower voter participation rate (going back at least to the early 1800s) was in 1930, one year after the Wall Street crash that triggered the Great Depression.

US midterm (nonpresidential) elections have for most of the 20th century drawn less than half of eligible voters. However, 2014 was still down sharply from the average over the past four decades of about 40 percent (including 40.9 percent in 2010). Overall, the number of people who voted in 2014 was 6.6 million less than in 2010, despite an increase in the number of eligible voters by nearly 10 million.

In some states, the rate at which eligible voters cast ballots virtually collapsed. Turnout fell by more than *ten percentage points* in Missouri (44.5 percent to 32.3 percent), Washington State (53.1 percent to 38.6 percent), Delaware (47.5 percent to 34.5 percent) and California (44 percent to 31.8 percent).

In thirteen states less than one-third of eligible voters went to the polls, including the three largest states in the country—California (31.8 percent), Texas (28.5 percent) and New York (28.8 percent)—along with Indiana, Utah, Tennessee, Mississippi, Oklahoma, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, West Virginia, Nevada and Missouri.

California's turnout was more than four percentage points below its previous record low of 36.1 percent in the 2002 midterm elections. The number of people who voted fell by 2.8 million between 2010 and 2014 in that state alone. New Jersey's 30.4 percent turnout was nearly 8 percentage points below its previous record low of 38.1

percent in 2002.

While data on income and voter turnout is not yet available, there is a well-established correlation between the two, with significantly higher turnout rates among wealthier voters. In last week's poll, ten of the thirteen states with less than one-third turnout were among the top half of states ranked according to the prevalence of poverty.

The widespread alienation within the general population was particularly pronounced among the youth. Only 21.3 percent of eligible voters aged 18 to 29 voted in 2014, about the same as in 2010.

The low turnout figures mean that many—perhaps the majority—of those elected received the votes of *less than one fifth* of eligible voters. For example, Andrew Cuomo (a Democrat) was reelected governor of New York with 54 percent of the vote. However, given the state's extremely low turnout, this translates into barely 15 percent of eligible voters, or about one in seven.

About 17 percent of those eligible to vote cast a ballot for incoming Republican Governor Greg Abbott of Texas, and a similar percentage supported New Jersey's Democratic Party senator, Cory Booker.

One additional figure highlights the decay of American democracy. While Congress has an approval rating on the order of 13 percent, more than 95 percent of all incumbents were reelected in 2014. This shows that despite the nearly universal contempt for the supposed representatives of the people, there is, in practice, no mechanism within the system to get rid of them.

Revealed in these figures is a political system facing a crisis of legitimacy. Those who populate the White House, Capitol Hill and the various Governor's mansions and state capitols have all the trappings of power, but any broad support for this power has eroded beneath their feet.

Involved is more than apathy or disinterest, but an active contempt and hatred of the entire political system. Currently, opposition takes the form of simply not voting. However, this situation is not sustainable. Popular sentiment must necessarily find other means of expressing

itself.

This prospect has provoked expressions of alarm within the media, particularly those sections close to the Democratic Party, whose traditional role has been to regulate and contain social discontent. In a lead editorial published Wednesday (“The Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years”), the *New York Times* wrote that the “abysmally low turnout” was “bad for Democrats, but it was worse for democracy.”

The *Times*’ explanation for mass abstention, however, is both patronizing and superficial. The editors complain that “Republicans ran a single-theme campaign of pure opposition to President Obama,” while “Democrats were too afraid of the backlash to put forward plans to revive the economy or to point out significant achievements of the last six years.”

If it is indeed the case that the Democrats were afraid of a “backlash” if they put forward an aggressive economic agenda or campaigned on their supposed achievements, the question arises: backlash from whom? Clearly, not from the voters themselves. From whom then?

The *Times* knows the answer, but chooses not to point to the corporate and financial interests, along with the military and intelligence agencies, because to do so would be tantamount to acknowledging who really dictates policy behind the trappings of American democracy. As the *Times* inadvertently implies, moreover, their control of the government is so complete that it imposes the most narrow of political parameters.

The claim, repeated ad nauseam in the pro-Democratic media, that there are great “achievements” to which the Democrats could point is a fraud. The decline in voter turnout is above all a popular verdict on the experiences of the past six years, during two of which the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress and the White House. For the past four years, the Democrats have held the White House and the Senate.

Obama was brought forward in 2008 by the media, the trade unions and pseudo-left supporters of the Democratic Party as an agent of “change” and a “transformative” candidate. Obama himself made a series of promises signaling a sharp departure from the policies of George W. Bush, who left office the most hated president in American history.

Not only were none of these pledges carried out; there was never any intention of doing so. His was a campaign of lies, reflecting the arrogant belief within the American ruling class that it can simply fool the American people through a combination of chicanery and slick marketing.

Obama has since presided over the most rapid growth of social inequality in American history, a systematic assault on jobs, wages and social programs, endless and expanding wars, and the strengthening of a police-state apparatus of spying and repression.

The *Times* concludes its editorial by suggesting that “showing up at the polls is the best way to counter the oversized influence of wealthy special interests, who dominate politics as never before.” The newspaper does not bother to explain how voting every two or four years for one or the other corporate-controlled party will end the “oversized influence of wealthy special interests.”

Tens of millions of people in the United States have drawn the conclusion that the electoral process is a sham and no amount of participation will impact the stranglehold of the financial aristocracy.

The character of the American political system is an expression of underlying social relations. The moribund condition of the state and its agents is above all a product of the extreme growth of social inequality, presided over by a parasitic oligarchy intent on war abroad and plunder at home.

A qualitative turning point has been reached. Unable to find any solutions within the established system, millions of workers and youth will—and are already beginning to—seek other means to defend their interests, including strikes, demonstrations and other forms of social struggle. They will increasingly search for political alternatives outside of bourgeois politics.

The responsibility of socialists is to actively intervene, prior to and in the midst of these struggles, to develop within the working class an understanding of the inextricable connection between the character of American politics and the nature of capitalism. The seething discontent that is building up in the United States in relation to both domestic and foreign policy must be given an ever-more conscious anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, internationalist, socialist and revolutionary orientation. This is the task of the Socialist Equality Party.



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