

The 2016 elections: American democracy in shambles

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21 October 2016

In the aftermath of the final presidential debate on Wednesday, the US media is in an uproar over statements made by Republican candidate Donald Trump that he might not recognize the result of the November 8 election.

Asked by debate moderator Chris Wallace from Fox News whether he would “absolutely accept the result of this election,” Trump replied that he would “look at it at the time,” and would “keep you in suspense.” On Thursday, Trump climbed down on his remarks somewhat, saying that he would “accept a clear election result.” However, arguing that Clinton “is the most corrupt and dishonest person ever to seek office,” he added that he would reserve the right “to contest or file a legal challenge in the case of a questionable result.”

Trump’s comments at the debate are in line with previous statements that the election is rigged by the media in favor of Clinton, and his assertions, which clearly have racist overtones, that millions of Americans, particularly in urban centers, are voting illegally. He is pitching his appeal to conditions that will develop after the elections, seeking to channel social anger and hostility to the entire political system in an extremely right-wing direction.

From the media and dominant sections of the political establishment, the response has been universal condemnation of Trump for besmirching the purity of American democracy. The *Washington Post* proclaimed that “respecting the will of the voters has since the end of the Civil War allowed for a peaceful transition of power that has made this country the envy of the world.” The *New York Times* added that Trump has turned from “insulting the intelligence of the American voter to insulting American democracy itself.”

Republican Senator and former presidential candidate John McCain issued a statement declaring that a concession to the victor in an election is “an act of respect for the will of the American people, a respect that is every American leader’s first responsibility.” And Vice President Joe Biden, donning the mantle of sanctimonious outrage, said in a speech on Thursday, “If you question, if you assert that a democratic

election is fixed, you are attacking the very essence of the notion of whether we have a democratic system.”

These statements from newspaper editorial boards and leading politicians reek of hypocrisy. They also express a nervousness whose causes extend far beyond the comments of Mr. Trump. The political representatives of the ruling class are rushing to the defense of a political system that is increasingly seen as illegitimate by broad sections of the population.

From a historical standpoint, it must first of all be pointed out that until the middle of the 20th century every election in the United States was “fixed,” insofar as large portions of the population were barred from voting. Women were only given the right to vote in 1920. The systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South—through poll taxes, Jim Crow segregation and other measures—was only ended in the mid-1960s, a byproduct of the immense social struggles of that period. And it was only in 1971 that the age of eligibility for the franchise was lowered from 21 to 18. Until then, young men could be drafted to fight and die in wars at the order of a commander-in-chief they could not vote for.

For the past four decades, democratic forms of rule have been under systematic attack, in line with the extreme growth of social inequality. A turning point came with the campaign to impeach Bill Clinton over a sex scandal in 1998 and 1999, followed by the theft of the election in 2000. To the extent that the 2000 elections are mentioned at all in the present discussion over Trump’s comments, it is to praise Al Gore’s “respect for the process” in accepting the Supreme Court decision to hand the election to George W. Bush.

In fact, the 5-4 decision by the highest court in the country to halt the recounting of ballots in Florida installed in office an individual who lost the popular vote and, if all the ballots had been fairly counted, the electoral vote as well. In one of the decisions culminating in this travesty of democracy, the Supreme Court asserted that the American people have no constitutional right to vote for the president of the United States. The rigging of the 2000 election was carried out, not

in the back room of a county courthouse, but by the highest court in the land.

In early December 2000, in advance of the decision in *Bush v. Gore*, WSWS editorial board chairman David North noted that the decision would reveal “how far the American ruling class is prepared to go in breaking with traditional bourgeois-democratic and constitutional norms.” In the end, the blatantly political action by Supreme Court was met with no serious opposition from the Democratic Party and Gore, or from the media and political establishment as a whole. The outcome, as the WSWS wrote at the time, “revealed the lack of any significant constituency within the ruling elite for a democratic adjudication of the presidential election.”

The ruling class has demonstrated its contempt for democracy through its actions over the past decade and a half. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were followed, under Bush and then Obama, by a raft of anti-democratic measures justified by the “war on terror”: the Patriot Act; warrantless mass surveillance; indefinite detention without trial; torture and “extraordinary rendition”; drone assassination, including of US citizens; the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security and the Northern Command, a military jurisdiction to oversee the increasing domestic use of the military. To this list must be added a militarized police force that kills more than 1,000 Americans every year.

As for the electoral process, Supreme Court decisions have undermined the Voting Rights Act and sanctioned state laws requiring photo IDs and other restrictions aimed at disenfranchising poor, elderly and minority voters. Some 6 million citizens (one out of every 40 eligible voters) are barred from voting due to previous felony convictions. The *Citizens United* decision in 2010 abolished restrictions on big business financing of candidates and their political action committees. It is estimated that more than \$7 billion has been spent on the 2016 elections, all told, twice what was spent in 2012.

Everything is done to prevent independent and third-party candidates from having their names appear on the ballot, including requirements that they gather tens or even hundreds of thousands of signatures. Many states will not even count write-in votes. Meanwhile, the media works to ensure that the official “debate” remains safely confined to the narrow framework acceptable to the ruling class.

“American democracy” is a hollowed-out shell, overseen by two parties that are controlled by the financial oligarchy and the military. The experience of the Obama administration—which came to power promising “change you can believe in”—has only demonstrated to millions of people that their vote has no impact on the policies of the ruling class.

The protracted decay of American democracy has culminated in the election of 2016, a contest between a millionaire scion of the Clinton dynasty and a billionaire real estate speculator and reality television star.

Trump himself is a product of a diseased social and political system, the legitimate heir of the “war on terror.” As for Clinton, she is merely another expression of the same disease, running her campaign on the basis of the same scandal-mongering used by the Republicans against her husband, combined with McCarthyite smears that have a long and noxious history.

The Democrats’ stock response to any question about leaked emails exposing Clinton’s ties to Wall Street is to change the subject to the completely unsubstantiated claim that it is all the handiwork of Russian President Vladimir Putin. While Trump has said that he might not accept the election as legitimate, if Clinton is defeated the Democrats will declare that it is the result of Russia’s interference in the electoral process.

Behind the whole rotten process, the fundamental issues are covered up or ignored. The reality of American “democracy” can perhaps be summed up in the fact that, three weeks before November 8, the American military has launched a massive military escalation in the Middle East, and there is no significant discussion about the consequences in an election that is supposedly the principal means through which the population can affect policy.

The crisis of democracy is a product of the decay of American capitalism, overseen by a ruling class that is determined to advance a policy of war abroad and austerity at home—a policy that requires ever greater attacks on democratic forms of rule. Whatever happens on November 8, it will resolve nothing, and only set the stage for a protracted political crisis that can be resolved only through the independent intervention of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.



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