

Whose Vote Counts, Explained: Netflix series examines voting rights in America

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25 October 2020

The Netflix docuseries, *Whose Vote Counts, Explained*, is a timely look at some of the outrageous and shameful restrictions on the right to vote in the US. Although the program is entirely incapable of probing these issues to their roots or showing how to defend democratic rights, the coverage of different aspects of this issue is nonetheless important and informative.

Narrated by actor Leonardo DiCaprio and singers Selena Gomez and John Legend, the three-episode program uses interviews, news footage and archival sources, and is aimed at a broad audience. The talking heads include right-wingers such as columnist George Will and former Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, along with Democrats like former Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams and leading “progressive” Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

The struggle for the right to vote is as old as the United States itself. At first it was extended only to propertied white men, at most 20 percent of the population. This grew, with the 15th, 19th and 26th Amendments granting the right to vote respectively to African-American men, to women and to all those over 18 years old.

This was not simply a matter of slow and steady progress, however—not at all. The most ruthless attacks on the right to vote took place in the post-Civil War period, when Jim Crow segregation in the South was accompanied by the poll tax, literacy tests and many other methods, including lynch mob terror, to deny the ballot to those who had won it through the abolition of slavery and the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, enacted in 1870.

Over the last century, the expansion of voting rights has been intimately bound up with the struggles of the working class. The decades-long battle against Jim Crow culminated in the mass civil rights movement, spanning the decade from 1955-65. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 dismantled barriers that had disenfranchised millions for more than three-quarters of a century.

The “preclearance” provision of this legislation, requiring any jurisdictions that had enforced Jim Crow restrictions to obtain federal permission before altering voting procedures,

was regularly reauthorized by Congress, under both Republicans as well as Democrats. This changed in the past quarter of a century, however, as the consensus within the ruling class on how to stabilize its rule broke down. Republicans launched an effort to roll back the Voting Rights Act, partly in order to suppress the vote of African Americans and others more likely to cast ballots for the Democrats.

A turning point was reached in the 2013 Supreme Court decision that invalidated the abovementioned preclearance provision. The ruling opened the floodgates, and not only in the South, for escalating attacks on the right to vote. The targets were African Americans, but also immigrants, the poor and other sections of the working class.

“Exact match” laws have been used to invalidate signatures, polling places have been closed and early voting has been curtailed or abolished. Photo identification laws have effectively disenfranchised millions without driver’s licenses. Regular purging of the voter rolls, along with hysterical campaigns against alleged voter fraud—these and other methods have been used to intimidate potential voters.

Another front is the use of laws that bar those with felony convictions from voting, in some cases even after they complete their sentences and parole. This has become especially effective in the age of mass incarceration, which saw the US prison population skyrocket by about 700 percent in the four decades between 1970 and 2010.

Florida is a prominent example, as *Whose Vote Counts* reveals. One administration there restored the voting rights of 155,000 ex-felons, only to have that reversed by its successor Republican Governor (and now Senator) Rick Scott, who mandated that former convicts appeal individually, and denied all but 4,000 such applications. The state’s voters, through a referendum, voted decisively to restore these rights, whereupon the state government discovered a new way of suppressing the vote, requiring former felons to pay thousands of dollars in legal costs before having their constitutional right restored.

While Republicans have been spearheading most of these

efforts to suppress the vote, the Democrats have done little or nothing to mobilize mass opposition to these attacks. On the contrary, they have carried out their own campaign of vote suppression, including well-funded legal efforts to keep the Socialist Equality Party and other candidates off state ballots.

Another growing sign of the hollowing out of democratic forms of rule in the US is the use of gerrymandering. This has a long history, but the development of technology has turned the fashioning of voting districts to favor one party or another into a fine art. Based on the results of the census taken once every ten years, the politicians choose their voters instead of the other way around. Bizarrely-shaped districts are carved out favoring one party or the other. This has been a bipartisan practice, but in recent years it has been used more effectively by Republicans. In Wisconsin, for instance, the Democrats received 53 percent of the votes in local races in the last election, but the Republican secured 63 percent of seats in the State Assembly and five out of the state's eight Representatives in Congress.

The electoral college is yet another means by which the democratic principle of one person-one vote is flouted. This is rooted in the Constitution itself, adopted at a very different moment. As the country has become increasingly urbanized and working class in composition, the regressive and anachronistic character of this provision from nearly 250 years ago has become obvious. Because all of a state's electoral votes are awarded to the winner of a plurality of the vote, it is increasingly possible to win the presidency while losing the vote of the people. As *Whose Vote Counts* points out, the winner of the popular vote lost the electoral college and consequently the presidency both in 2000 and 2016. It should be added that Donald Trump's path to reelection, assuming it is not an openly extra-Constitutional one, will be based once again on losing the popular vote but winning in the electoral college.

There is also the question of money in politics. Here too, a notorious Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United* in 2010, cleared the way for the ever-greater political monopoly of the top one-hundredth of one percent of the population, turning the US into an oligarchy in all by name. The presidential campaign of 2016 involved expenditures of \$2.3 billion, and the cost of the elections overall that year was \$6.5 billion. More and more, the political representatives of the ruling class are coming directly from that class itself. As the series notes, 214 of the 435 members of the House of Representatives are millionaires, while in the Senate the comparable figure is 65 out of 100.

For months in the course of presidential election years, the media follows the "money race" as closely as it does the opinion polls. This is the meaning of the powerful definition

of Vladimir Lenin, co-leader of the Russian Revolution, more than a century ago: "Democracy for an insignificant minority, democracy for the rich—that is the democracy of capitalist society."

The Netflix docuseries ends with a brief survey of possible reforms to the electoral system. These half-hearted proposals, including ranked voting and a partial reform of the electoral college, only demonstrate the impossibility of defending democratic rights in a system in which oligarchic rule has become increasingly entrenched and is represented by both of the warring capitalist parties.

The advice boils down to the exhortation from Democrat Stacey Abrams, clearly looking toward the removal of Trump from the White House: VOTE.

Neither Abrams nor anyone else on this program can explain why, as DiCaprio himself notes, although Hillary Clinton received 66 million votes in 2016 and Trump 63 million, 94 million who were eligible did not vote at all. Most of the nonvoters were not prevented from doing so, but saw no purpose. They were prevented not by legal barriers, but by the nature of the system and its choices. However, the indifference and disgust of the working class in the face of record inequality presided over by both parties is not discussed. Instead, the two-party capitalist system is taken as immutable.

Far from being immutable, this two-party system has been coming apart at the seams, especially since 2016. Although the series was of course completed before the developments of recent weeks, there can be no mistaking the connection between the past attacks on the right to vote and their metastasis in the form of Trump's open incitement of fascist violence and his threats to refuse to leave the White House.

Politics cannot be divorced from the class struggle. Amidst the pandemic, economic collapse and the threat of dictatorship, millions will be entering into the greatest struggles since the days of their grandparents and great-grandparents. They must find a new political road. The right to vote is bound up with the struggle for workplace democracy, for a new and higher form of democracy, based on the power of the working class and the fight for socialism. This is the only answer to the threat of fascist dictatorship and war that is the product of the system represented by Trump and also by his feckless Democratic rivals.



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