2004 Elections

Noam Chomsky

November 29, 2004

The elections of November 2004 have received a great deal of discussion, with exultation in some quarters, despair in others, and general lamentation about a "divided nation." They are likely to have policy consequences, particularly harmful to the public in the domestic arena, and to the world with regard to the "transformation of the military," which has led some prominent strategic analysts to warn of "ultimate doom" and to hope that US militarism and aggressiveness will be countered by a coalition of peace-loving states, led by – China! (John Steinbruner and Nancy Gallagher, *Daedalus*). We have come to a pretty pass when such words are expressed in the most respectable and sober journals. It is also worth noting how deep is the despair of the authors over the state of American democracy. Whether or not the assessment is merited is for activists to determine.

Though significant in their consequences, the elections tell us very little about the state of the country, or the popular mood. There are, however, other sources from which we can learn a great deal that carries important lessons. Public opinion in the US is intensively monitored, and while caution and care in interpretation are always necessary, these studies are valuable resources. We can also see why the results, though public, are kept under wraps by the doctrinal institutions. That is true of major and highly informative studies of public opinion released right before the election, notably by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) and the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the U. of Maryland (PIPA), to which I will return.

One conclusion is that the elections conferred no mandate for anything, in fact, barely took place, in any serious sense of the term "election." That is by no means a novel conclusion. Reagan's victory in 1980 reflected "the decay of organized party structures, and the vast mobilization of God and cash in the successful candidacy of a figure once marginal to the 'vital center' of American political life," representing "the continued disintegration of those political coalitions and economic structures that have given party politics some stability and definition during the past generation" (Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Hidden Election*, 1981). In the same valuable collection of essays, Walter Dean Burnham described the election as further evidence of a "crucial comparative peculiarity of the American political system: the total absence of a socialist or laborite mass party as an organized competitor in the electoral market," accounting for much of the "class-skewed abstention rates" and the minimal significance of issues. Thus of the 28% of the electorate who voted for Reagan, 11% gave as their primary reason "he's a real conservative."

In Reagan's "landslide victory" of 1984, with just under 30% of the electorate, the percentage dropped to 4% and a majority of voters hoped that his legislative program would not be enacted.

What these prominent political scientists describe is part of the powerful backlash against the terrifying "crisis of democracy" of the 1960s, which threatened to democratize the society, and, despite enormous efforts to crush this threat to order and discipline, has had far-reaching effects on consciousness and social practices. The post-1960s era has been marked by substantial growth of popular movements dedicated to greater justice and freedom, and unwillingness to tolerate the brutal aggression and violence that had previously been granted free rein. The Vietnam war is a dramatic illustration, naturally suppressed because of the lessons it teaches about the civilizing impact of popular mobilization. The war against South Vietnam launched by JFK in 1962, after years of US-backed state terror that had killed tens of thousands of people, was brutal and barbaric from the outset: bombing, chemical warfare to destroy food crops so as to starve out the civilian support for the indigenous resistance, programs to drive millions of people to virtual concentration camps or urban slums to eliminate its popular base. By the time protests reached a substantial scale, the highly respected and quite hawkish Vietnam specialist and military historian Bernard Fall wondered whether "Viet-Nam as a cultural and historic entity" would escape "extinction" as "the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size" – particularly South Vietnam, always the main target of the US assault. And when protest did finally develop, many years too late, it was mostly directed against the peripheral crimes: the extension of the war against the South to the rest of Indochina – terrible crimes, but secondary ones.

State managers are well aware that they no longer have that freedom. Wars against "much weaker enemies" – the only acceptable targets — must be won "decisively and rapidly," Bush I's intelligence services advised. Delay might "undercut political support," recognized to be thin, a great change since the Kennedy-Johnson period when the attack on Indochina, while never popular, aroused little reaction for many years. Those conclusions hold despite the hideous war crimes in Falluja, replicating the Russian destruction of Grozny ten years earlier, including crimes displayed on the front pages for which the civilian leadership is subject to the death penalty under the War Crimes Act passed by the Republican Congress in 1996 – and also one of the more disgraceful episodes in the annals of American journalism.

The world is pretty awful today, but it is far better than yesterday, not only with regard to unwillingness to tolerate aggression, but also in many other ways, which we now tend to take for granted. There are very important lessons here, which should always be uppermost in our minds – for the same reason they are suppressed in the elite culture.

Returning to the elections, in 2004 Bush received the votes of just over 30% of the electorate, Kerry a bit less. Voting patterns resembled 2000, with virtually the same pattern of "red" and "blue" states (whatever significance that may have). A small change in voter preference would have put Kerry in the White House, also telling us very little about the country and public concerns.

As usual, the electoral campaigns were run by the PR industry, which in its regular vocation sells toothpaste, life-style drugs, automobiles, and other commodities. Its guiding principle is deceit. Its task is to undermine the "free markets" we are taught to revere: mythical entities in which informed consumers make rational choices. In such scarcely imaginable systems, businesses would provide information about their products: cheap, easy, simple. But it is hardly a secret that they do nothing of the sort. Rather, they seek to delude consumers to choose their

product over some virtually identical one. GM does not simply make public the characteristics of next year's models. Rather, it devotes huge sums to creating images to deceive consumers, featuring sports stars, sexy models, cars climbing sheer cliffs to a heavenly future, and so on. The business world does not spend hundreds of billions of dollars a year to provide information. The famed "entrepreneurial initiative" and "free trade" are about as realistic as informed consumer choice. The last thing those who dominate the society want is the fanciful market of doctrine and economic theory. All of this should be too familiar to merit much discussion.

Sometimes the commitment to deceit is quite overt. The recent US-Australia negotiations on a "free trade agreement" were held up by Washington's concern over Australia's health care system, perhaps the most efficient in the world. In particular, drug prices are a fraction of those in the US: the same drugs, produced by the same companies, earning substantial profits in Australia though nothing like those they are granted in the US – often on the pretext that they are needed for R&D, another exercise in deceit. Part of the reason for the efficiency of the Australian system is that, like other countries, Australia relies on the practices that the Pentagon employs when it buys paper clips: government purchasing power is used to negotiate prices, illegal in the US. Another reason is that Australia has kept to "evidence-based" procedures for marketing pharmaceuticals. US negotiators denounced these as market interference: pharmaceutical corporations are deprived of their legitimate rights if they are required to produce evidence when they claim that their latest product is better than some cheaper alternative, or run TV ads in which some sports hero or model tells the audience to ask their doctor whether this drug is "right for you (it's right for me)," sometimes not even revealing what it is supposed to be for. The right of deceit must be guaranteed to the immensely powerful and pathological immortal persons created by radical judicial activism to run the society.

When assigned the task of selling candidates, the PR industry naturally resorts to the same fundamental techniques, so as to ensure that politics remains "the shadow cast by big business over society," as America's leading social philosopher, John Dewey, described the results of "industrial feudalism" long ago. Deceit is employed to undermine democracy, just as it is the natural device to undermine markets. And voters appear to be aware of it.

On the eve of the 2000 elections, about 75% of the electorate regarded it as a game played by rich contributors, party managers, and the PR industry, which trains candidates to project images and produce meaningless phrases that might win some votes. Very likely, that is why the population paid little attention to the "stolen election" that greatly exercised educated sectors. And it is why they are likely to pay little attention to campaigns about alleged fraud in 2004. If one is flipping a coin to pick the King, it is of no great concern if the coin is biased.

In 2000, "issue awareness" – knowledge of the stands of the candidate-producing organizations on issues – reached an all-time low. Currently available evidence suggests it may have been even lower in 2004. About 10% of voters said their choice would be based on the candidate's "agendas/ideas/platforms/goals"; 6% for Bush voters, 13% for Kerry voters (Gallup). The rest would vote for what the industry calls "qualities" or "values," which are the political counterpart to toothpaste ads. The most careful studies (PIPA) found that voters had little idea of the stand of the candidates on matters that concerned them. Bush voters tended to believe that he shared their beliefs, even though the Republican Party rejected them, often explicitly. Investigating the sources used in the studies, we find that the same was largely true of Kerry voters, unless we give highly sympathetic interpretations to vague statements that most voters had probably never heard.

Exit polls found that Bush won large majorities of those concerned with the threat of terror and "moral values," and Kerry won majorities among those concerned with the economy, health care, and other such issues. Those results tell us very little.

It is easy to demonstrate that for Bush planners, the threat of terror is a low priority. The invasion of Iraq is only one of many illustrations. Even their own intelligence agencies agreed with the consensus among other agencies, and independent specialists, that the invasion was likely to increase the threat of terror, as it did; probably nuclear proliferation as well, as also predicted. Such threats are simply not high priorities as compared with the opportunity to establish the first secure military bases in a dependent client state at the heart of the world's major energy reserves, a region understood since World War II to be the "most strategically important area of the world," "a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history." Apart from what one historian of the industry calls "profits beyond the dreams of avarice," which must flow in the right direction, control over two-thirds of the world's estimated hydrocarbon reserves – uniquely cheap and easy to exploit – provides what Zbigniew Brzezinski recently called "critical leverage" over European and Asian rivals, what George Kennan many years earlier had called "veto power" over them. These have been crucial policy concerns throughout the post-World War II period, even more so in today's evolving tripolar world, with its threat that Europe and Asia might move towards greater independence, and worse, might be united: China and the EU became each other's major trading partners in 2004, joined by the world's second largest economy (Japan), and those tendencies are likely to increase. A firm hand on the spigot reduces these dangers.

Note that the critical issue is control, not access. US policies towards the Middle East were the same when it was a net exporter of oil, and remain the same today when US intelligence projects that the US itself will rely on more stable Atlantic Basin resources. Policies would be likely to be about the same if the US were to switch to renewable energy. The need to control the "stupendous source of strategic power" and to gain "profits beyond the dreams of avarice" would remain. Jockeying over Central Asia and pipeline routes reflects similar concerns.

There are many other illustrations of the same lack of concern of planners about terror. Bush voters, whether they knew it or not, were voting for a likely increase in the threat of terror, which could be awesome: it was understood well before 9–11 that sooner or later the Jihadists organized by the CIA and its associates in the 1980s are likely to gain access to WMDs, with horrendous consequences. And even these frightening prospects are being consciously extended by the transformation of the military, which, apart from increasing the threat of "ultimate doom" by accidental nuclear war, is compelling Russia to move nuclear missiles over its huge and mostly unprotected territory to counter US military threats – including the threat of instant annihilation that is a core part of the "ownership of space" for offensive military purposes announced by the Bush administration along with its National Security Strategy in late 2002, significantly extending Clinton programs that were more than hazardous enough, and had already immobilized the UN Disarmament Committee.

As for "moral values," we learn what we need to know about them from the business press the day after the election, reporting the "euphoria" in board rooms – not because CEOs oppose gay marriage. And from the unconcealed efforts to transfer to future generations the costs of the dedicated service of Bush planners to privilege and wealth: fiscal and environmental costs, among others, not to speak of the threat of "ultimate doom." That aside, it means little to say that people vote on the basis of "moral values." The question is what they mean by the phrase. The

limited indications are of some interest. In some polls, "when the voters were asked to choose the most urgent moral crisis facing the country, 33 percent cited 'greed and materialism,' 31 percent selected 'poverty and economic justice,' 16 percent named abortion, and 12 percent selected gay marriage" (Pax Christi). In others, "when surveyed voters were asked to list the moral issue that most affected their vote, the Iraq war placed first at 42 percent, while 13 percent named abortion and 9 percent named gay marriage" (Zogby). Whatever voters meant, it could hardly have been the operative moral values of the administration, celebrated by the business press.

I won't go through the details here, but a careful look indicates that much the same appears to be true for Kerry voters who thought they were calling for serious attention to the economy, health, and their other concerns. As in the fake markets constructed by the PR industry, so also in the fake democracy they run, the public is hardly more than an irrelevant onlooker, apart from the appeal of carefully constructed images that have only the vaguest resemblance to reality.

Let's turn to more serious evidence about public opinion: the studies I mentioned earlier that were released shortly before the elections by some of the most respected and reliable institutions that regularly monitor public opinion. Here are a few of the results (CCFR):

A large majority of the public believe that the US should accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and the World Court, sign the Kyoto protocols, allow the UN to take the lead in international crises, and rely on diplomatic and economic measures more than military ones in the "war on terror." Similar majorities believe the US should resort to force only if there is "strong evidence that the country is in imminent danger of being attacked," thus rejecting the bipartisan consensus on "pre-emptive war" and adopting a rather conventional interpretation of the UN Charter. A majority even favor giving up the Security Council veto, hence following the UN lead even if it is not the preference of US state managers. When official administration moderate Colin Powell is quoted in the press as saying that Bush "has won a mandate from the American people to continue pursuing his 'aggressive' foreign policy," he is relying on the conventional assumption that popular opinion is irrelevant to policy choices by those in charge.

It is instructive to look more closely into popular attitudes on the war in Iraq, in the light of the general opposition to the "pre-emptive war" doctrines of the bipartisan consensus. On the eve of the 2004 elections, "three quarters of Americans say that the US should not have gone to war if Iraq did not have WMD or was not providing support to al Qaeda, while nearly half still say the war was the right decision" (Stephen Kull, reporting the PIPA study he directs). But this is not a contradiction, Kull points out. Despite the quasi-official Kay and Duelfer reports undermining the claims, the decision to go to war "is sustained by persisting beliefs among half of Americans that Iraq provided substantial support to al Qaeda, and had WMD, or at least a major WMD program," and thus see the invasion as defense against an imminent severe threat. Much earlier PIPA studies had shown that a large majority believe that the UN, not the US, should take the lead in matters of security, reconstruction, and political transition in Iraq. Last March, Spanish voters were bitterly condemned for appeasing terror when they voted out of office the government that had gone to war over the objections of about 90% of the population, taking its orders from Crawford Texas, and winning plaudits for its leadership in the "New Europe" that is the hope of democracy. Few if any commentators noted that Spanish voters last March were taking about the same position as the large majority of Americans: voting for removing Spanish troops unless they were under UN direction. The major differences between the two countries are that in Spain, public opinion was known, while here it takes an individual research project

to discover it; and in Spain the issue came to a vote, almost unimaginable in the deteriorating formal democracy here.

These results indicate that activists have not done their job effectively.

Turning to other areas, overwhelming majorities of the public favor expansion of domestic programs: primarily health care (80%), but also aid to education and Social Security. Similar results have long been found in these studies (CCFR). Other mainstream polls report that 80% favor guaranteed health care even if it would raise taxes – in reality, a national health care system would probably reduce expenses considerably, avoiding the heavy costs of bureaucracy, supervision, paperwork, and so on, some of the factors that render the US privatized system the most inefficient in the industrial world. Public opinion has been similar for a long time, with numbers varying depending on how questions are asked. The facts are sometimes discussed in the press, with public preferences noted but dismissed as "politically impossible." That happened again on the eve of the 2004 elections. A few days before (Oct. 31), the NY Times reported that "there is so little political support for government intervention in the health care market in the United States that Senator John Kerry took pains in a recent presidential debate to say that his plan for expanding access to health insurance would not create a new government program" – what the majority want, so it appears. But it is "politically impossible" and has "[too] little political support," meaning that the insurance companies, HMOs, pharmaceutical industries, Wall Street, etc., are opposed.

It is notable that such views are held by people in virtual isolation. They rarely hear them, and it is not unlikely that respondents regard their own views as idiosyncratic. Their preferences do not enter into the political campaigns, and only marginally receive some reinforcement in articulate opinion in media and journals. The same extends to other domains.

What would the results of the election have been if the parties, either of them, had been willing to articulate people's concerns on the issues they regard as vitally important? Or if these issues could enter into public discussion within the mainstream? We can only speculate about that, but we do know that it does not happen, and that the facts are scarcely even reported. It does not seem difficult to imagine what the reasons might be.

In brief, we learn very little of any significance from the elections, but we can learn a lot from the studies of public attitudes that are kept in the shadows. Though it is natural for doctrinal systems to try to induce pessimism, hopelessness and despair, the real lessons are quite different. They are encouraging and hopeful. They show that there are substantial opportunities for education and organizing, including the development of potential electoral alternatives. As in the past, rights will not be granted by benevolent authorities, or won by intermittent actions – a few large demonstrations after which one goes home, or pushing a lever in the personalized quadrennial extravaganzas that are depicted as "democratic politics." As always in the past, the tasks require day-to-day engagement to create – in part re-create – the basis for a functioning democratic culture in which the public plays some role in determining policies, not only in the political arena from which it is largely excluded, but also in the crucial economic arena, from which it is excluded in principle.

Noam Chomsky
2004 Elections
November 29, 2004

Retrieved on 7th September 2021 from chomsky.info
Published in *ZNet*.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net