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In commenting on the November 2000 elections (*Z* January), I only hinted at important considerations that lend further insight into the functioning of contemporary democracy: patterns of voting and abstention. Useful information on these matters has since appeared; particularly valuable is an analysis by Ruy Teixeira (*American Prospect*, December 18), on which I rely for data.

As usual, almost half the electorate did not participate and voting correlated with income. It remains true that "voter turnout is among the lowest and most decisively class-skewed in the industrial world" (Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers). This feature of so-called "American exception- alism" has been plausibly attributed to "the total absence of a socialist or laborite mass party as an organized competitor in the electoral market" (Walter Dean Burnham).

Higher-income voters favor Republicans, but class-skewed voting does not come close to accounting for the ability of the more openly pro-business party to garner half the vote. The voting bloc that provided Bush with his greatest electoral success provided the crucial contribution: middle-to-lower income white working class, particularly men, but women as well. By large margins they favored Gore on major policy issues, and among voters concerned more with policy issues than "qualities" Gore won handily. But the genius of the political system is to render policy irrelevant. Voter attention is to be focused on style, personality—anything but the issues that are of primary concern to the concentrated private power centers that largely finance campaigns and run the government. Their shared interests are off the agenda, in conformity with Ferguson's well-supported "investment theory of politics."

Crucially, questions of economic policy must not arise in the campaign. These are of great concern both to the general population and to private power and its political representatives, but with opposing preferences. The business world, not surprisingly, is overwhelmingly in favor of "neoliberal reforms," corporate-led "globalization," the investor-rights agreements called "free trade agreements," and other devices that concentrate wealth and power. Also not surprisingly, the public is generally opposed. It follows that such issues are not appropriate for political campaigns.

For the public, the U.S. trade deficit had become the most important economic issue facing the country by 1998, outranking taxes or the budget deficit; people understand that it translates into loss of jobs, for example, when U.S. corporations establish plants abroad that export to the U.S. market. For the business world, a high priority is free capital mobility: it increases profit and also provides a powerful weapon to undermine labor organizing by threat of job transfer—technically illegal, but highly effective, as Kate Bronfenbrenner demonstrates in an important study extending her earlier research ("Uneasy Terrain: The Impact of Capital Mobility on Workers, Wages, and Union Organizing," Cornell 2000). Such threats contribute to the "growing worker insecurity" that has been hailed by Alan Green- span and others as a significant factor in improving economic health by limiting wages, benefits, and inflation that would be unwelcome to financial interests. But such matters are not to intrude into the electoral process: the general population is induced to vote (if at all) on the basis of peripheral concerns.

This pattern too is familiar; I mentioned the example of 1984, when Reagan won a "landslide victory" while voters opposed his legislative program by a margin of 3–2. Such voting against interest is understandable among people who feel powerless, taking for granted that government is run by "a few big interests looking out for themselves"; half the population in 1984, rising to over 80 percent a few years later as the "neoliberal reforms" were more firmly instituted.

These "reforms" have the natural consequence of marginalizing the majority of the population, as decision-making is transferred further to unaccountable private power systems, while a "virtual Senate" of investors and lenders can exercise "veto power" over government decisions, thanks to financial liberalization. Regulation of capital flow and exchange rates under the Bretton Woods system established by the U.S. and Britain in the mid-1940s allowed for a form of "embedded liberalism," in which social democratic policies could be pursued within a liberalized international economy. The dismantling of the system 30 years later was one important element of the campaign to reverse the feared "excess of democracy" of the 1960s (to borrow the rhetoric of the 1975 Trilateral Commission report on "the crisis of democracy"), and to restore the population to passivity and acquiescence, perhaps even renewing the good old days when "Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers," as the American rapporteur, Samuel Huntington, recalled with nostalgia.

The constitutional system was originally designed "to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority," in the words of the leading framer, James Madison. Political power, he explained, must be in the hands of "the wealth of the nation," men who can be trusted to "secure the permanent interests of the country"—the rights of the propertied—and to defend these interests against the “leveling spirit” of the general public. If the public were allowed to participate freely in elections, Madison warned his colleagues, their “leveling spirit” might lead to measures to improve the conditions of those who “labor under all the hardships of life, and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings.” Agrarian reform was the primary threat that Madison perceived; by now, it is much broader.

In a modern version, the general public are considered “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” who should be mere “spectators of action,” not participants (Walter Lippmann); their role is only periodic choice among the “responsible men,” who are to function in “technocratic insulation,” in World Bank lingo, “securing the permanent interests.” The doctrine, labeled “polyarchy” by democratic political theorist Robert Dahl, is given firmer institutional grounds by the reduction of the public arena under the “reforms.”

Democracy is to be construed as the right to choose among commodities. Business leaders explain the need to impose on the population a “philosophy of futility” and “lack of purpose in life,” to “concentrate human attention on the more superficial things that comprise much of fashionable consumption.” People may then accept and even welcome their meaningless and subordinate lives, and forget ridiculous ideas about managing their own affairs. They will abandon their fate to the responsible people, the self-described “intelligent minorities” who serve and administer power —which of course lies elsewhere, a hidden but crucial premise.

From this perspective, conventional in elite opinion, the latest elections do not reveal a flaw of American democracy, but rather its triumph.