

Did the System Work? Aftermath of the 2020 Election

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December 30, 2020

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Among Democrats, liberals and more “moderate” types, there has been a huge sense of relief—even in spite of Trump’s post-election shenanigans. Whatever Joseph Biden’s imperfections they say, the crazed, corrupt, vicious, and incompetent Donald Trump has been thrown out of office. He lost both the popular and Electoral College votes by significant margins. And despite his post-election campaign to overturn the results (with court cases, pressure on state officials, and even threats of martial law), he has failed miserably to change the outcome. So the system worked. Thank God for “democracy”!

I cannot see it that way. To some extent this view is like being blinded by the fact that covid-19 vaccines have been developed. See, our system of health care works! But the only reason we are glad for the vaccines is that we had the pandemic. The pandemic was exceptionally awful in the U.S. due to our lack of universal health care plus the incompetence of the Trump administration. Millions of U.S. people were deliberately misled to oppose reasonable health measures. Even with the vaccines, an effective system of producing and distributing vaccines has yet to be implemented. Worst of all, is the probability that other pandemics will come. This is due to capitalism’s policies of industrializing agriculture, spreading urbanization, violating boundaries of jungles and forests, as well as the effects of global climate change on world ecological balance. So, yes, it is great that vaccines have been developed, just as it is good that Trump has been ejected from office. But don’t say, the system has worked.

Trump’s 2016 election was an example of the system breaking down. Obviously incompetent and bizarre, he beat some 14 other candidates for the presidential nomination of the Republican Party. The establishment of the party did not want him, nor did most of the big donors behind them. But they had so miseducated their base, that the Republican base saw no reason to reject someone who seemed likely to carry out their fantasies. Given that our politics are geared to only two parties (so if you don’t like one you have to support the other), and that U.S. people are educated to look for a great leader to solve their problems (whether Obama or Trump), he fit the bill.

Hillary Rodham Clinton was seen as—and was—more of the same-old same-old establishment which had left unemployment, poverty, and misery in vast stretches of rural and semi-rural industrial regions. Trump seemed as different as could be. Deeply “religious” evangelicals and others liked his opposition to abortion. And he was open about his racism and nativism, which attracted many (other supporters were not attracted by his racism but were not sufficiently bothered by it either). He talked a good game and was entertaining.

And so Trump lost the 2016 election. By about three million, he lost what is charmingly called the “popular vote” (which in most countries is simply “the vote”). But the geographical distribution of the votes was such that he won the Electoral College. The Electoral College is only one of the many undemocratic elements which are baked into the U.S. political system. Others are the Senate where every state, no matter its size or population gets two senators, elected for six years. The majority of the Senate represents a minority of the country. The judiciary is appointed for life. The House of Representatives is elected through highly gerrymandered districts, so incumbents are hard to get rid of. And don’t get me started on the structures of the state governments! This is even before considering the role of big money in elections. These undemocratic aspects are obvious and difficult to defend, but nothing is done about them. They all serve to limit the democratic elements of the system and to strengthen the actual rule of the capitalist elite.

Trump's Rule

Having been legally “elected” (much to his own surprise), Trump proceeded to wreck the government and country. He pleased the corporate rich and their Republican minions by signing a huge tax cut for them, as well as cutting business regulations. He appointed hundreds of pro-business judges to every level of the federal judiciary. These actions led the capitalists and the Republicans to put up with his otherwise odd and destructive behaviors. He waged war on the environment (threatening the future of humanity). To the dismay of the imperialist establishment, he antagonized U.S. allies and cozied up to various opponent strongmen rulers, especially Putin. He betrayed the Kurds. He separated children from their parents at the border and threw them into cages. He degraded Congress by ignoring its subpoenas and oversight; he de-professionalized and politicized all aspects of the executive branch, from the FDA to the FBI, from the Department of Justice to the weather bureau. By actions and rhetoric, he whipped up racial and other divisions among the people. And he constantly, incessantly, and blatantly lied about everything. This last seems to be not just a strategy but a deeply ingrained personality defect. (This is a mere sample of the terrible things Trump did.)

In response, the Republican Party threw its support almost totally behind him, backing every vicious action and unhinged behavior. The Democrats chose to impeach him, using their majority in the House, on the basis of one of his lesser crimes. They made an overwhelming case for his conviction, but the Republican-controlled Senate rejected it without serious consideration. So he went on trashing and crashing the government and country. Even the ruling corporate rich got tired of him and worried about the costs to their country (and their investments in it). By the 2018 mid-term elections, his party was routed in the House—but kept, and even expanded, its majority in the Senate.

Then came the coronavirus. Donald Trump's management of government responses to the pandemic was remarkably stupid, incompetent, dishonest, and just plain wacky. Other countries with conservative leaders managed to deal with the plague in more-or-less effective ways. But Trump went from denying its existence, to advocating weird treatments (injections of bleach!), to holding super-spreader events, to interfering with the scientists and doctors at the FDA and CDC, to simply ignoring the issue by the end of his term. The sickness and death rates of the U.S.A. led the world. The economy, which had continued a brittle “recovery” since the Great Recession, plunged downward.

Trump's policies accelerated political trends in the country: the dissolution of a “moderate” middle. The Republicans, once a “moderate” center-right party, now developed into a far-right cult with a fascist fringe. There has been a growth of out-and-out fascists, U.S. Nazis and other white nationalists, who carry guns to rallies and advocate overthrowing the government.

The Democrats had been slowly moving to the right, until they became the new center-right party. But they had to accommodate an upsurge on their left. There were big demonstrations by young adults against global warming. Polls showed large numbers of young people identifying as “socialists.” Bernie Sanders twice ran for president within the Democrats, as a “democratic socialist.” (By this he meant something like the liberal-capitalist Nordic countries, such as Denmark or Sweden.) Sanders lost both times. The right wing of the party (“moderates”) threw its weight behind Clinton and then Biden, to deny Bernie the nomination. Yet a large part of the country's youth has come to regard themselves as some sort of “socialist.” The Democratic Socialists of

America surged to around 85 thousand. Meanwhile there has also been an expansion of people attracted to anarchism. All this signifies a swing to the left.

Then there was the explosion of mass protest over the police murder of George Floyd. Declaring Black Lives Matter, the demonstrations occurred all over the country, in spite of the pandemic, in cities, towns, and villages, raising issues of justice for African-Americans, with a large participation of white people. The left wing of the movement called for “Defunding the Police,” or even abolition of the police and prisons—really anarchist demands, since they would be impossible under capitalism and its state. The Democrats did all they could to channel the movement into the election. They opened up a “progressive wing,” for the admirers of Sanders, AOC, and Elizabeth Warren, to corral the frustrated leftists. To a degree this worked. But the anger and militancy has not gone away.

Would There Be a Coup?

It was highly probable (not inevitable) that Trump would lose his re-election bid. He had been unpopular since the beginning of his term (although there was a strange wide-spread belief that he had been good for the economy). Most of the capitalists had had enough of his incompetence and weirdness. They showed this by making most of their donations to Biden, by about two to one. (Had the Democratic nomination gone to Sanders or Warren, they might have felt differently—which is largely why Biden was chosen.) Their agents in the establishment felt similarly. Day after day, leading generals, civil service officials, national security specialists, and former Trump officials, declared their opposition to Trump.

As it became increasingly obvious that Trump was losing, he retreated ever deeper into denial and lying, insisting that he was winning, and indeed had won by a landslide. Republican efforts at voter suppression failed to overcome the popular vote (despite sabotaging the postal service to interfere with mail-in ballots). Trump and his minions sunk deeper into denial and farce. They were not just asking for recounts here and there but the overturning of the election. They asked for judges to annul various states’ popular votes. They called on state legislatures to cancel the results of their people’s votes and to create their own pro-Trump electors for the Electoral College. There was talk at the highest levels of Trump’s supporters, and Trump himself, of declaring martial law, seizing ballot boxes, and calling “new elections” (under the guns of the soldiers and police).

Despite hysteria among some liberals, a Trumpist coup was unlikely to be attempted. Trump had antagonized the leadership of all branches of the military as well as most of the “intelligence community” (FBI, CIA, NSA, etc.). It is difficult to make a coup without the support of the military and national police. The capitalist class did not want it. All the big lawyers who were the top representatives of the capitalists stayed away from Trump’s legal comedy acts, and conservative judges threw his cases out with scorn. The majority of the population, which had voted for Biden, certainly did not want a coup, nor even, when it came down to it, did most of those who had voted Republican. However, it was important that the militant wing of the left (even some unions) prepared to call demonstrations, civil disobedience, and strikes, in case Trump made a serious attempt..

What Trump gained by his campaign of denial (aside from his perverse psychological need to insist that he won) was the support of a huge minority of the population, which believes his lies

about a stolen election. He may use them in the future. And a lot of money, which the old con man had grifted from his large base of suckers for his supposed “defense.”

While Trump’s coup attempts failed miserably, they exposed **the fault lines through which a future coup may be more effectively attempted** one day. Suppose the crises repeat until there is a mass movement calling for taking away the wealth and power of the capitalist class and creating a radically democratic political and economic system—a movement led by a united front of radical socialists and anarchists. Fearing for their wealth and status, the capitalists and their politicians (of both parties) will use the methods which Trump tried to use. They will overturn elections and ban popular protests, using their judges and gerrymandered state legislatures. Using the Insurrection Act, they will declare martial law. They will also mobilize a base of tens of thousands of hysterical, deluded, white people into an organized armed movement. Whether these methods will succeed (as they did in fascist coups in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Chile, among other places) depends heavily on whether the left-led mass movement has the militancy and organization to fight back in a revolutionary manner.

What Next?

The “progressive wing” of the Democrats is already disappointed by the Biden-Harris administration. Others have praised Biden for his appointment of experienced old timers (compared to the Trump circus of crooks and arrogant incompetents)—but this also means continuing old policies and worldviews. Biden has tried to make this look good by choosing people with a variety of “identities”: not only straight white men but women, African-Americans and Latinx people, at least one Gay man, a Native American woman to head the Department of the Interior, children of immigrants, and so on. In itself, this looks good, but does not really make up for a limited range of political philosophies and policies. Sanders has already complained about the lack of progressives among Biden’s appointees. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has been denied a seat on the House committee which handles the environment. The BLM organization has complained about being left out of conferences between Biden and Black “leaders.”

When issues come up in Congress, we can expect the progressives to lose out. They will be told that there is a need to compromise with the Republicans, who are intransigent about rejecting progressive policies. Further, there is a need to work with the more conservative “purple state” Democrats. These are already complaining about the effects of having socialists in their party, and about calls to “defund” their friends the police. They will insist on downplaying progressive demands in order to get re-elected. Unfortunately, these establishment arguments against liberal programs are not unreasonable, from a “realistic” political view. It was the progressives who believed in working within the system and moving things forward by using elections and offices—as opposed to working from outside and pressuring the centers of power through militant popular action from below. Now they must live with the consequences.

To understand the present political moment, it is necessary to look at **the pattern of presidential elections**. Start with Richard Nixon, a terrible but intelligent person, who was forced out of office over Watergate. This was widely seen as a great victory and the return of normalcy. His appointed successor Gerald Ford was defeated by Jimmy Carter, part of the return of goodness. But Carter lost his re-election campaign to Ronald Reagan, a charming but fairly stupid reactionary. Reagan lasted for two terms, plus got his vice president, George H.W. Bush, elected.

But after one term, Bush was replaced by Bill Clinton. Once again, liberals felt that the country had turned from darkness toward the light. Clinton had his two terms and then his vice president, Al Gore, ran but was defeated by the not-bright conservative, George W. Bush (actually Bush probably lost the popular vote but was crowned by the Supreme Court majority and the Electoral College). After his second term, Bush was succeeded by Barack Obama. Yet again, there was great rejoicing among liberals and leftists. A new day had dawned, so they thought. African-Americans were ecstatic (although few bought the claim that the U.S. had entered into a “post-racial” condition). But then Obama was followed by the vile and stupid Donald J. Trump.

During this time, progressives were mostly disappointed by the performance of the Democratic presidents. I won’t go into that. Even if they had been heroes of liberty, equality, and peace with all nations, my point is that **the Democrats were invariably followed by reactionary Republicans**. In fact, the reactionary presidents got more and more reactionary and more stupid and incompetent, as history rached downward.

The problem, then, was not just Trump—although he was uniquely awful. Nor is it the Republican Party, although it has turned into a highly organized minority party with extremist reactionary views and a deluded hard base of followers. (There have been similar far-right, pseudo-populist, authoritarian, movements in other nations around the world, despite differing political traditions and personalities.) Nor is it simply the Democratic Party, as held by some leftists who want to build a new, third, political party. It is the system as a whole which is in crisis.

Overall, the capitalist economy has been increasingly stagnant and declining, since about 1970, with the end of the post-World War II prosperity. The capitalist class and its agents have sought to prop themselves up by lowering the living standards of the working class and by attacking the environment. Old evils, such as racism, cannot be overcome. Whatever gains have been made in the past are being driven back. This means increased suffering for masses of people—even among former (relatively) well off white workers and middle class people. It means wars and threats of wars. It means continuing danger of pandemics. And it means the emergency of global climate change, which threatens the ability of the earth to sustain its human and animal populations.

Under these conditions, people will not be satisfied by either of the two semi-official parties. They will vote for one, to get “change,” and next time vote for the other—also for “change.” That is, “change” within the limits of what has been accepted as political reality. Not socialism. Not anarchism. Therefore electing Democrats, no matter how liberal, will not solve anything because they cannot stop the people’s dissatisfaction, which will continue to increase. Voters will continue to shuffle between the two parties (those that bother to vote, or who are not prevented from voting).

While Biden won with a solid majority, there was no “blue tsunami” as the Democrats had hoped. Trump still got tens of millions of U.S. people to vote for him. Many of them live in the political bubble of Trump’s lies and the propaganda of Fox News and similar media outlets, if they aren’t sucked into the fascist delusions of Q-anon. Many of these believe that the state and the media are illegitimate. Thus includes the majority of white men in the upper working class and lower middle classes. In other countries and in other times, such layers supported either revolutionary socialist movements or overt fascism. With de-industrialization and the decline of unions, their current leanings are to the hard right. This might change if they are offered a real choice.

Non-electoral alternatives will continue to grow at the edges of “respectable” politics. On the one side fascism will expand. On the other is the growth of various socialists, revolutionary

anarchists, African-American activists, climate justice militants, new feminists, immigrant organizers, Native American warriors, and rank and file labor organizers. If they can avoid sinking into the tar sands of the Democratic Party and electoral politics, these and others offer hope of a way out toward a new society.

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Retrieved on 31st December 2020 from www.anarkismo.net

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