

Summary: A changing U.S. electorate repudiates far right economic and social agenda and its racist, sexist, anti-immigrant politics. Austerity capitalism will nevertheless continue under Obama, barring a large-scale social upheaval -- Editors

U.S. Voters Repudiate Far Right, But Still Face Austerity Capitalism under Obama

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Los Angeles, CA -- A multiethnic, multicultural electorate has just given a sharp slap in the face to the extreme-right Republican agenda in the November elections in the U.S.

Barack Obama achieved a more decisive victory than even sympathetic pollsters had predicted. Voters rejected right-wing politics not only on economic grounds, but also in terms of gender, sexuality, race, immigration, healthcare, the “war on drugs,” and militarism.

At the same time, the slight turn to the Left by Obama during the campaign is by no means an indicator of where he will try to take the country in his second term. To be sure, Obama’s attacks on Mitt Romney’s ties to predatory finance capital, on his arrogant attitude toward the working people as expressed in the infamous “47%” remark, and on his ultra-neoliberal program of lowering taxes for the wealthy as a form of “job creation” did constitute an echo -- albeit a very faint one -- of the Occupy movement. But without the deepening and extension of such a movement, little but more of the same can be expected from a second Obama administration, which is sure to continue its austerity policies, albeit somewhat more gently than Romney would have done. While Obama’s very minimal healthcare plan will now survive, he is already negotiating with Republicans about deep cuts to social programs, pensions, and education, in return for a small tax increase on the wealthy.

A Leftward Turn, Undergirded by Demographic Shifts

As almost all commentators have noted, the changing ethnic composition of the U.S. played a decisive role in the outcome. This was seen most dramatically in the rapidly increasing number of Latino/a voters, who formed fully 10% of the electorate in 2012,

almost double their share in 2000 (6%). Stung by racist Republican attacks on immigrants, which included widespread attempts to obstruct or intimidate many U.S. citizens from voting, Latino/as mobilized in large numbers and gave Obama 71% of their votes.

The African-American share of the electorate also increased, to 13% of the whole, despite the fact that Black voters were also targeted by voting restrictions aimed at decreasing their turnout. They voted 93% for Obama. The Asian-American electorate, which has increased from 2% to 3%, went 73% for Obama as well.

This ethnic realignment meant that for the first time, only 73% of the electorate was white this year. Thus, while Romney held a 9% lead among white voters (even though 41% of whites, many of them members of the working classes, voted for Obama), this brought him up substantially short in terms of the electorate as a whole. Moreover, the politics of immigrant-bashing has not only failed, but totally backfired, and there is now a real opening for a pathway to citizenship for a substantial number of the 10-12 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be living in the U.S. today.

A huge gender gap also emerged during the election, as women voted 55% for Obama, somewhat above his overall margin of about 2.8% in the popular vote. Since men went slightly for Romney, this resulted in a gender gap of 12%. The impact of gender was seen most dramatically in the races for the Senate, however, where notoriously sexist comments about rape led to unexpected defeats for extreme-right Republicans like Todd -- "legitimate rape" does not lead to pregnancy -- Akin in Missouri. A similar defeat awaited Richard -- rape is "God's will"-- Mourdock in Indiana. Because of this, in a year when the electoral map was particularly favorable to Republicans, Democrats managed to actually increase their majority in the Senate.

And as will be discussed below, Hurricane Sandy brought out the objective reality of climate change during the last days of the campaign, despite efforts by both Romney and Obama to ignore the question.

At the state level, four solid victories for LGBT rights also resounded at a national level. In Maine, Maryland, and Washington State, voters supported gay marriage in referenda, by solid margins of around 5%. This was the first time gay marriage had been approved by voters in a direct election, a turnaround from previous setbacks, as in California in 2008. In addition, voters in Minnesota decisively defeated a referendum measure that would have placed a ban on gay marriage in the state constitution.

Also at the state level, voters in Colorado and in Washington State approved referendum measures legalizing the possession and sale of small amounts of marijuana, each by about 10% margins. Within days, prosecutors in several counties of Washington State dropped pending prosecutions for marijuana. If they were to become more widespread, such actions would serve to decrease the unconscionably large U.S. prison population, a true national shame. At an international level, several Latin American leaders announced that they would meet to consider the ramifications of marijuana legalization in these two U.S. states in terms of rethinking the failed “war on drugs,” which has led to tens of thousands of deaths in Mexico alone in recent years.

In California, where referenda are more common than in any other state, voters also showed a leftward direction on social and economic issues. An anti-labor measure that would have barred political contributions by trade unions was resoundingly defeated despite a multimillion-dollar campaign by the type of secret donors allowed under a recent decision by the reactionary U.S. Supreme Court. Voters also ratified a tax increase aimed in part at the wealthy in order to fund secondary and university education, again in the face of tens of millions of dollars in secret money for the other side, which was countered student mobilization in favor of the tax. California voters additionally approved – by a two-thirds margin -- a mitigation of the state’s notorious “three strikes” law, which mandates life in prison for a third criminal conviction, no matter how minor.

Limitations of the 2012 Elections

California also illustrated some of the limitations of the 2012 elections. A ballot measure to repeal the death penalty was defeated, although by only a 5% margin, smaller than in the past. In Michigan, a referendum question that would have made workers’ right to collectively bargain a part of the state constitution was resoundingly defeated, by a 13% margin, after a noisy campaign by anti-labor interests.

In the gerrymandered U.S. House of Representatives, a very right wing set of Republicans dominated by the Tea Party managed to hold onto a clear majority, despite the fact that the majority of voters nationwide in House races backed Democrats. These retrograde forces will retain power over the federal budget.

Very conservative Republicans continue to control state governments across the country, and they remain determined to stave off the effects of a changing electorate. Many of their efforts at voter suppression, which have been aimed at minority, immigrant, and youth voters, were overturned by the courts at the last minute, as seen in Pennsylvania and Texas. But many other of these anti-democratic laws remain in place and many more can

be expected in the future, especially in “swing states” like Ohio and Florida, both of them under Republican state governments.

Moreover, the campaign barely mentioned U.S. militarism or imperialism. After more than a decade of the “war on terror,” both Romney and Obama seemed to sweep this issue under the rug. Also, while Obama’s language about confronting Iran and uncritically supporting Israel was slightly less strident than Romney’s, each vied with the other to project an image of imperial “toughness.” Nor did the slightly less militaristic Obama even mention his 2008 promise to close down the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison and he gave every indication that he would continue with Bush-style military tribunals of accused terrorists.

There was even less debate over global warming and climate change. During the Republican Convention, Romney openly mocked the idea of staving off the warming of the oceans. And only once in the presidential debates did Obama mention climate change, tacking a brief reference onto his closing statement in the last debate. Both of them instead emphasized their support for the expansion of coal mining and hydraulic fracking for oil and gas. But reality offered a rebuttal to both candidates on the eve of the election, as Hurricane Sandy, swelled by the dramatic warming of the Atlantic Ocean, became a “Frankenstorm” that scored a direct hit on the global center of finance capital, lower Manhattan. In its aftermath, many of the Wall Street tycoons who have bankrolled the far Right seemed to have some second thoughts, as the waters reached over their plush doorsteps. Meanwhile, in several working-class neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens, young activists from the Occupy Movement were nearly the only relief workers in sight.

Austerity Capitalism and the Second Obama Presidency

If Romney would have cut social programs with enthusiasm, even glee, Obama will surely continue do so as well, albeit with a sadder mien and at a somewhat slower pace. But the overall direction of the U.S. economic and social system is clear. The deep and persistent economic crisis seems to have no end in sight. This conjuncture has been seized upon by the dominant classes as a whole -- both liberal and conservative -- as an opportunity to “rein in” the minimal welfare state the U.S. population has enjoyed based upon gains of the 1930s and 1960s like social security, unemployment compensation, and Medicare.

The retirement age is to go up, and pensions are to go down. Young people will continue to face astronomical debt should they go to college or university. Neither candidate offered even the pretense of a solution for the burgeoning housing crisis, which is displacing more and more people every day. Primary and secondary schools will continue

to be privatized as “charter schools.” And as to immigration, it should be noted that despite his campaign rhetoric, and his very limited reprieve from deportation for college-educated undocumented youth, the Obama administration has been deporting more immigrants per year than did the Bush administration that preceded it. And neither candidate mentioned the growing poverty that is gripping more and more communities.

These policies are grounded not only in the tight-fistedness of neoliberal politics, but also in objective economic reality. The U.S. capitalist system has been basically stagnant since the mid-1970s, despite speculative booms in housing and finance, combined with unheard of levels of public and private indebtedness, all of which created a veneer of prosperity during certain periods of the last two decades. That has now come crashing down and will not be rebuilt.

At a global level, with the U.S. as no exception, the working people and even the middle classes face years if not decades of high unemployment and austerity economics. As Marx noted some 150 years ago, “The only part of the so-called national wealth that actually enters into the collective possession of a modern nation is -- the national debt” (*Capital I*, Fowkes tr., p. 919). And capital intends on enforcing that right of “possession” to the limit.

Greece is of course the most dramatic example of the latter, with the working people forced to endure draconian cuts to their conditions of life and labor in order to secure the debts of the European banking sector’s loans to the Greek government. But all the countries of the global capitalist system are going through a similar crisis, albeit in less severe form, at least up to now.

Reversing that kind of trend would require a really massive social upheaval from below, in the spirit of the most revolutionary wings of the Occupy movement, the Spanish Indignados, the Greek protests, and the Arab revolutions. But even revolutionary intransigence will not be enough if it is not aimed in the right direction, at the capitalist system as a whole, at the abolition of the capital relation.

Nor must this contradiction be posed abstractly, as an “all or nothing” approach that would minimize the importance of real reforms that could, at least on a temporary basis, alleviate the suffering of the working people, as seen even in Obama’s minimal but significant health care law.

Nor can the struggle against capital be separated from the panoply of emancipatory movements against all forms of oppression, whether based upon class, race/ethnicity,

immigration status, or gender and sexuality. Some of the flavor of these contemporary movements was present in the U.S. election, which is something that should be applauded.

And it should also be noted that while the electorate is now 27% minority, the working class has a far greater representation of African-Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/as, especially once the undocumented parts of the working class are counted. This means that a working class struggle of today will often contain elements that respond not only to class and economic exploitation and alienation, but also to forms of oppression rooted in race, ethnicity, or citizenship status. This was already seen on May Day 2006 during the massive demonstrations of millions for immigrant rights that shut down whole economic sectors of the country, especially in states like California or Texas.

But at the same time, if these kinds of struggles -- whether by labor or other oppressed groups -- are to succeed, they need to be connected to the overall struggle against capital. In the absence of that, such struggles have, too often, resulted merely in the strengthening of capitalist rule, by making that rule more subtle, more flexible, and more palatable to subordinate populations, both at home and abroad.

In this sense, the re-election of Obama may actually strengthen the rule of capital in spite of those individual capitalists who opposed him in a diehard fashion. This is because Obama, far more than the plutocratic Romney, can put a more humane, more multicultural face on a dehumanized, warlike, and exploitative system. Should social unrest emerge on a large scale in the U.S. once again, would not Obama be in a position to ask people for more "patience," to please go home and allow the system to work?

Of course, the dialectic cuts two ways here, as always. For the other side of the above point is that Obama's re-election -- in the face of a massive well-financed attempt to install some very reactionary forms of politics -- has allowed the working people of the U.S. to flex their own muscles a bit, to get a sense of their numbers, their determination to have their voices heard, and their power and their potential unity. To the extent that this has allowed more of those oppressed by the system to gain a sense of hope and self-confidence in their own subjectivity, in their own power to shape things, it may also encourage some new social movements in a more revolutionary direction, especially among the youth.