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USA

The smoke thickens

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The smoke has cleared, or more accurately thickened, over the U.S. midterm election results. The result of the Georgia Senate runoff means that Democratic control of the Senate (51-49) will become a bit less razor-thin. Has the crisis of “our democracy” passed? Not by a long shot.

The rightwing intention going into the November election was evident: to complete the abortive January 6, 2021 quasi-“insurrectionist” riot by more systematic political means. The objectives were not only to establish large Congressional and Senate Republican majorities, but to elect candidates in the “battleground” state governments with authority to overturn future election results.

That project mostly crashed and burned, due to voter turnout in places like Pennsylvania, Michigan and Arizona — sometimes by decisive but some by very narrow margins. Rearguard rightwing attempts to block routine certification of election results, e.g. in Arizona and Michigan, fizzled — this time. Although the setback of this phase of the far-right power grab marks an important moment, the threat that these maneuvers revealed is by no means ended.

Republicans will take over the House of Representatives by a much smaller majority than had been expected. Democrats may extend a word of thanks to one of the most despicable human beings on the planet — Samuel Alito, author of the unhinged Supreme Court ruling wiping out a half century of federal protection for abortion rights. Alito had been waiting in the weeds for that moment ever since his 2006 confirmation hearings, where he said that Roe “deserved respect.”

While the right wing celebrated its triumph, women-led popular revulsion over that decision spear-headed the voter turnout that held back the anticipated reactionary “red wave.”

Will the Republican Party cling to the soiled coattails of Donald Trump, or cast him aside as he’s outlived his usefulness? How bloody the party’s internal war might be, whether Trump will face prosecution for his astonishing list of criminal acts, or who will be running for president in 2024 for either of the two capitalist parties — all of this will provide full-employment opportunities for commentators.

How gridlocked Congress may be for the next two years is another open question. Certainly, however, serious progress on fundamental issues shaping people’s lives in this crisis-ridden society will be extremely unlikely — whether on access to health care, on inequality and child poverty, on racial injustice at every level, on a potential stagflation recession, and above all on the ever-escalating climate catastrophe.

One outcome emerges clearly: the polarization and crisis of U.S. politics continues. There should not be illusions that the election results mean a “re-normalization” of business-as-usual political stability. The appearance of return-to-normality may result from the receding of immediate prospects of exploding post-election violence. But events like the Club Q mass shooting; a group of organized Proud Boys disrupting a drag storytime event in Columbus, Ohio; and the targeted attack on a North Carolina power system, possibly to cut power to a drag show — all illustrate the pervasive dangers facing especially vulnerable groups in society targeted by the far right.

The slim Republican control of Congress makes it now unlikely that they’d try to ram through a national abortion ban, or force a crisis over government funding. But the institutions of “stability” in this country remain frayed. As much as 40 percent of the population, and a majority of Republican voters, continue to inhabit the reality-free parallel

ideological universe of 2020 election denial, “white replacement” theory, extreme transphobia and other symptoms of collective insanity.

This craftily manipulated psy-chosis is on display at local school board and library commission meetings where the far right, trading under names like “Mothers for Liberty,” turn out to force removal of books deemed “sexually explicit” in depicting the lives of gay, lesbian or transgender kids. These are vicious and cynical attacks on the humanity of some of this society’s most vulnerable youth. Equally awful, these reactionaries have reached out to minority communities — in the case of Dearborn, Michigan for example, to Arab and Muslim residents — who are them-selves menaced by white Christian nationalism.

The spirit of the Capitol riot lives in the shadows. Despite the Republicans’ incipient internal civil war, or actually because of it, they can be expected to feed their base with road-to-nowhere Congressional “investigations” of everything from Hunter Biden’s laptop to the Afghanistan debacle to nullifying the Congressional January 6 inquiry.

What the Election Meant

Voters’ response to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* obviously stood out. In every state with abortion rights referenda on the ballot, women’s right to choose won. It shows the important role that these referenda can play in exercising the people’s will — and the obstacles to democracy in states that don’t allow them.

The outraged response of women, and of decent people in general, energized a voter turnout that blunted what was expected to be a wave of Republican victories. In Michigan where same-day voter registration exists, college students waited in line for hours to register, then cast their vote.

That turnout contributed to the passage of an expansive reproductive rights Michigan state constitutional amendment (Proposal 3). It won handily, as did the three women holding the top state offices — governor, attorney general and secretary of state — aided by the circumstance that the Republican challengers were rabid anti-choice, election-denial MAGA fanatics. All three incumbents (Gretchen Whitmer, Dana Nessel and Jocelyn Benson) ran on pro-choice platforms, including the governor’s court challenge to the state’s (now-dead) 1931 abortion ban and attorney-general Nessel’s vow not to enforce it.

Michigan voters also adopted proposals to ensure expanded voter access and candidate financial disclosures. For the first time in decades, thanks to nonpartisan redistricting, Republicans lost control of both houses of the state legislature. Rightwing gerrymandering had enabled all kinds of rightwing malicious mischief, including the noxious Emergency Manager laws that imposed bankruptcy on majority-Black Detroit and poisoned the water of Flint.

The national picture, as always, was a mixed pattern as the two U.S. parties of corporate capital battle for domination. The uninspiring Joe Biden did not drag down the Democratic vote, nor did the malignant magnetism of Donald Trump elevate the Republicans in critical battleground races. And it’s refreshing to note that money doesn’t rule everything: For example, the targeted assault on Summer Lee (in Pennsylvania District 12) by AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) failed spectacularly.

On the whole, the vaguely-defined “progressive” Democratic party wing appears to have held its own. Contrary to some left illusions, however, it represents no challenge to the firm control of the corporate-loyal party establishment. Regrettably, the independent left was not a factor in this election except for some on-the-ground presence — as in the exemplary case of Michigan in activist canvassing for ballot access signatures and then voter turnout for Proposal

3.

Clouded Prospects

That a feared wave of reactionary legislative onslaughts now seems less likely is the most positive and hopeful outcome of this nasty, brutish and long electoral cycle.

After the powerful pro-choice voter turnout, we'll have to see whether anti-abortion state legislatures seek to criminalize women's travel to states where abortion can be legally obtained, whether prosecutors will pursue doctors providing abortion medications, and other atrocities that will further inflame the national crisis of women's access to abortion.

Deeper issues remain, and here are a few of them:

1) Factors long regarded as pillars of guaranteed "stability" — such as the domination of two capitalist parties rhythmically and routinely alternating in power, the decentralization of much authority to the states, and the Supreme Court as a check on legislative "extremism" — have now become agents of destabilization. With or without Trump, the dominant wing of the formerly traditional-conservative Republican Party is now an essentially far-right purveyor of unrestrained plutocracy, Christian nationalism and white supremacy with a stranglehold on highly gerrymandered state legislatures.

2) As for the Supreme Court, even though its atrocious ruling on abortion has been slapped in the face by voters, its majority remains firmly a far-right White Supremacy Court of the United States (WSCOTUS). It will not necessarily sacrifice what remains of its legitimacy by protecting Donald Trump, precisely because it has bigger fish to fry. It has already destroyed the Voting Rights Act, is poised in this term to wipe out affirmative action, and will seriously consider an incredible doctrine enabling "independent state legislatures" to overturn future election results.

3) The stagflation recession (economic downturn coupled with persistent inflation, last seen in the mid-1970s) that is possible in 2023 will only exacerbate the profound ongoing dysfunctions in the United States, from health care and labor rights to housing, the social safety net and gun violence. Neither party has a serious response to the economic situation — since the Republican policy consists of tax cuts for the rich and vicious budget cuts for everyone else, while Democrats can't confront corporate price-gouging or take other measures against the wishes of their own mega-donor base.

4) The authoritarian and racist trend in U.S. politics is very much part of an international one. We can cite not only Viktor Orban in Hungary, the darling of U.S. white nationalists, and the now mercifully defeated Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, but also the new Israeli coalition government including parties that explicitly advocate ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and stripping their citizenship rights. There's also a pro-Putin wing of the U.S. Republican Party that's likely to become increasingly vocal as the war in Ukraine drags into a bitter winter.

In this connection we should note sadly that in this as in every U.S. election, and in every international upheaval — right now, the war resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its consequences for the global economy and food supplies — Palestine and its people are collateral damage. Even as the likes of AIPAC strive to crush any Congressional voices for Palestinian rights, Israel's daily raids and murders in occupied Palestine barely register in U.S. media. This can change only with a critical upsurge in grassroots pro-Palestinian activism.

The smoke thickens

5) Speaking of thickening smoke and rising floodwaters — the environmental collapse hangs over the future not only of U.S. politics but humanity. We don't know who will be running for president in 2024, or what the economy will look like, or whether the war in Ukraine will be over, or many other things — but we do know that wildfires, floods and droughts, species extinctions and habitat collapses will be even worse than they already are now.

6) Another sure thing: the estimated seventeen billion dollar expenditure on this election sets an all-time high, which will last all the way until the next one. Campaign spending records in U.S. politics fall faster than home-run marks during baseball's steroid era. That's both a symptom and a cause of systemic dysfunction.

The partial defeat of far-right misogynist and racist politics in the 2022 election is a reason for some relief, but not reassurance about the depths of the USA's political, social and racial crises. The biggest missing element is an independent left capable of addressing them at the roots. That issue requires urgent and collaborative discussion and action.

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