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USA

US Presidential Candidates offer little to the 99%

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The US presidential election has been upended this summer by a series of dramatic events that reversed the electoral fortunes of the Democratic and Republican parties while left-wing third-party candidates such as Green Party USA Ecosocialist candidate Jill Stein and radical intellectual Cornell West fight for ballot access in many states.

A disastrous debate performance by Biden on June 27 raised questions about the cognitive abilities of the eighty-one-year-old Biden and led to a growing and ultimately successful chorus of Democratic party leaders and pro-DP journalists for him to step aside. A failed assassination attempt against Trump was followed by a well-scripted Republican national convention where Trump's total domination of the party was clear. Then there was the withdrawal of Biden and the rapid ascension of his vice-President Kamala Harris as presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. While polls showed that Biden and Trump were both unpopular, it seemed after the convention that Trump had the wind in his sails, elevating Republican hopes that they could not only win the presidency, but also increase their majority in the Senate and even win a majority in the House of Representatives.

However, when Biden bowed to pressure from party heavyweights like Nancy Pelosi and Barack Obama and big donors who had begun to scale back their financial contributions to the campaign, and passed the torch to his vice-President Kamala Harris, the Democrats found a surprising burst of energy. When Harris announced her running mate, Democratic governor Tim Walz, a left of center politician tapped to appeal to midwestern voters, her campaign saw a further boost in enthusiasm and donations including a 200 million dollar haul in the week following Biden's withdrawal. By the eve of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that opened on August 19, polls show Harris slightly leading Trump nationally and in key states. The Democratic National Convention (DNC) was a great show of unity and positive energy. Trump's extremism gave the DNC an opening to present Harris and Walz as a bulwark against returning to a pre-civil and women's rights US under the slogan, repeated by numerous speakers, "We won't go back" while offering no break with Biden's politics.

Harris's policy statements are more populist than progressive. At the convention Harris and others spoke in favor of defending reproductive rights which had suffered a severe setback in the summer of 2023 when the US supreme court issued its *Dobbs v. Jackson* ruling that overturned the 1973 decision *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion. But Harris and others also made tough-on-crime statements and promises to implement tough border controls, usually associated with the Republican party. Harris herself is a former San Francisco prosecutor, and a police chief spoke from the convention floor. While Trump and right-wing pundits seized on Harris' calls for price controls to fight inflation to brand Harris as a "communist", the proposal is populist rather than anti-capitalist. There is precedent as well. Republican president Richard Nixon instituted a ninety-day wage and price freeze in 1971.

While the Harris-Walz ticket began to pick up steam, Trump has been unable to effectively switch from running against Biden, who he chided as too old and feeble, to mounting a campaign against Harris, a much younger (59) candidate, and is widely seen as flailing about to find his footing. He has been counseled by his advisors and various Republican leaders to strike a unifying tone, stop blatantly racist and sexist attacks on Harris, a biracial woman whose father was Jamaican immigrant and mother, an immigrant from India and focus on policy differences. However, he seems to be unable to move past name calling and conspiracy theory peddling, such as claiming that Harris rally crowd sizes were inflated by AI technology. He attempts to brand Harris and Walz as "communists" also falls flat given Harris' conservative past as prosecutor, but also because Muslims and immigrants have long replaced communism as the conservative bogeyman.

Trump also attacked the Republican governor of Georgia, Brian Kemp during a rally in that state as part of a vendetta against Kemp for not supporting his attempt to steal the 2020 election. It is possible that Trump's growing

unpopularity and loss of support among undecided voters could drag down “down ballot” Republican campaigns for the many congressional seats that will also be contested next November 5.

There is plenty of course to expect from Trump should he win in November. Trump threatens “retribution” and has stated that he will act as a dictator “only on day one.” He regularly scapegoats immigrants for non-existent crime waves and has encouraged far right Christian nationalists. The Democrats have seized on a 900-page document, Project 2025, prepared by a right-wing “think tank” called the Heritage foundation and dozens of ex-Trump staffers from his presidency, that is a wish list of reactionary policies. Those watching the Republican national debate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin saw delegates at the convention waving signs calling for Mass Deportation Now and speakers blamed Biden and immigrants for the fentanyl deaths of loved ones. There was no mention of climate change. Project 2025 also calls for the replacement of tens of thousands of civil service bureaucrats with pro-Trump political appointees.

Trump’s choice of a reactionary first term Republican Senator from Ohio, venture capitalist JD Vance however, was a choice that reflected Trump’s confidence that he could win against Biden without the regional, demographic, or political bridge-building that a different vice-Presidential candidate could have represented. Since being named Trump’s running mate, much media attention has been focused on Vance’s past statements attacking childless women and suggesting that citizens with children should have more voting power than childless people, that the “purpose” of post-menopausal women is to take care of grandchildren in a sort of warmed over twentieth century fascistic natalism. During the summer Olympics in Paris, he sent nasty, transphobic comments over Twitter against Algerian cis-gender woman boxer Imane Khelif who won a gold medal in her boxing event.

Harris’s Gaza Achilles Heel

Both campaigns face a programmatic challenge on a key issue that could be decisive for each campaign. Harris is associated with Biden’s support for Israel’s murderous assault on Gaza which has damaged the Democrat’s standing with Arab-Americans and youth as seen in the “uncommitted” abstentions during the Democratic party primaries. Confronted with pro-Palestinian demonstrators at one of her first campaign events as presidential candidate, Harris responded by curtly by asking if they wanted Trump to win. A few days later, she did better, stating support for a cease fire in Gaza and the return of Israeli hostages. But as this was happening, Biden approved a 3.5-billion-dollar military aid package for Israel to buy advanced technology armament. While the DNC seemed unified, there was a series of pro-Palestinian, reproductive rights, and LGBTQI marches and events in the streets. But these were disappointingly small. A demonstration on the eve of the convention drew under 1,000 demonstrators. A demonstration called for by the Coalition to March on the DNC that took place on the first day of the convention drew around 3,000. The organizers had hoped for a turnout of 30,000 given that there are 50,000 Palestinian Americans in the Chicago area, the largest in the US. The reasons for the disappointing turnout include the difficulty in getting the city of Chicago to approve march permits, as well as the sectarian approach to the marches by the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) who tightly controlled the organization of the marches.

The pro Palestine movement is demanding a cease fire in Gaza and an arms embargo against Israel. While it will take a much larger and more powerful movement to stop the US from arming Israel, a cease fire is possible. If a cease fire agreement were to be reached, Harris could win back some of the voters who turned away from Biden for his support for Israel’s assault on Gaza. Another factor in that equation will be the return of students to classes in late August and early September, including at the one hundred universities where students set up pro-Palestine encampments last spring. It remains to be seen however, if Harris’ more sympathetic tone and a possible cease fire will be enough to win back some of the thousands of “uncommitted” Democratic voters angry at “Genocide Joe” Biden for this support to Israel and demobilize campus protests.

Trump and Reproductive Rights

Trump has a similar dilemma regarding reproductive rights. There is a very strong anti-abortion current in his party, but Trump understands that access to abortion is favored by a majority of Americans, including Republicans. He has tried to navigate the contradiction by claiming that the question should be decided at the State level. This attempt to appear pro-life to the anti-abortion wing of his party without alienating pro-choice Republicans and independents seems to be backfiring. The hard-core anti-abortion wing of the Republican party that dreams of a national abortion ban, feels that he has abandoned their cause. Vance recently told a journalist that Trump would veto a nation-wide abortion ban, while pro-choice Republicans point to how he has proudly taken credit for the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion through the three appointments he made of reactionary judges for the nine-person court.

Battleground States

The US presidential electoral system which was established shortly after the American colonies won their independence from Britain in the 1790s, is based on the winner-take-all electoral college. Each state has a number of electoral college votes determined by its population. The party that receives a simple majority of a state's votes is awarded all of that state's votes. The candidate that receives a majority-270 out of the 538 electoral college votes-wins the presidency. In recent elections, many states have become lopsidedly Republican (red in current US political parlance), or blue Democratic States that are close enough to go either way, sometimes referred to as "purple", play an outsized role in close national elections. A key factor in the election will be if the Democrats can win back working class voters in battleground states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, where many workers have abandoned the Democratic party which had union support until their failure to provide a solution to the widespread plant closings that decimated unions and working class communities and living standards beginning in the 1980s. Trump's winning the industrial and formerly blue state of Michigan was central to his victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Unions and the Elections

US unions have been a mainstay of the New Deal coalition of the Democratic party, along with Black civil rights organizations that was assembled under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in the 1930s. In spite of the little that unions have received in return for their support to the DP, union bureaucrats have stuck with the DP and have opposed efforts to break with the DP. Sean O'Brien, president of the Teamsters driver's union (IBT), was roundly denounced in progressive labor circles for speaking at the Republican convention. O'Brien was not invited to speak at the Democrats' convention in Chicago.

United Auto Workers union (UAW) president, Sean Fain a militant class struggle unionist who has emerged as a leader of the US working class initially withheld support for any candidate, but later endorsed Harris on behalf of the union. Fain pointed out that Biden walked a union picket line and gave verbal support to the strikers during a UAW-led auto strike earlier this year, while Trump held rallies with non-union workers. Fain began to publicly denounce Trump as an anti-working-class representative of the "billionaire class". Trump made clear his anti-union views in an interview with venture capitalist Elon Musk on X, formerly Twitter, which Musk owns. Trump congratulated Musk for firing pro-union workers which led to an unfair labor practices suit filed by the UAW the next day. He is of course right about Trump and the Republican party, but while Biden, Harris, and Walz are far from being billionaires themselves, the Democratic party is also controlled by the 1%. Along with the UAW, some of the biggest unions in the US, like the Service Employees International Union, (SEIU), the American Federation of State, County

and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as well as the AFL-CIO union federation have endorsed Harris and Waltz.

Independent Political Action or “Lesser Evilism”

The US remains the only advanced industrial country without some sort of mass workers, labor, socialist or communist party with institutional ties to the labor movement. The left has debated “lesser-evil” strategies (voting for the Democrats as a lesser evil) for decades. Proponents argue that the historically openly pro-business, anti-union Republican party is qualitatively worse for workers and the oppressed than DP rule. Opponents of that strategy emphasize the importance of independent working-class politics, that is outside of the DP by supporting left-wing third-party candidates who run propaganda campaigns and build support for current labor and social movement struggles and a break with the Democrats. For the 2024 elections, lesser evil proponents point to the dangers of a new Trump presidency. Some on the left have proposed vote-switching schemes by which a Harris voter in a “safe” DP majority state would agree to vote for Jill Stein in exchange for a Stein supporter’s promise in a battleground state to vote for Harris.

The largest socialist organization in the US, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has resisted the lesser evil impulse and had not endorsed a candidate. In the 2020 presidential elections, Solidarity, sympathizing organization of the Fourth International, endorsed Green Party candidate and Solidarity member Howie Hawkins. This year there has been very little support in Solidarity for a lesser evil vote for Biden. The revolutionary socialist organization, the Tempest Collective has not endorsed a candidate but has run articles against lesser evilism on its webpage.

Jill Stein, who was also the Green Party USA candidate in 2012 and 2020, has called for a cease-fire in Gaza and an arms embargo against Israel, has won her impressive support in Arab American community. A recent poll showed an impressive forty-three percent of Michigan Arab Americans support Stein. Other polls show her supported by 1% of all Michigan voters. Stein looks to be on the ballot in around 35-40 of the 50 states. In several states, the Democratic party has worked hard to exclude Stein and others from the ballot, while the Republicans have cynically petitioned to get progressive Black intellectual, Cornell West on the on the ballot. West, who recently won a battle to appear on the ballot in Michigan, has only won ballot access in a handful of states.

As Trump’s prospects for retaking the White House appear to fade, he has begun to lay the groundwork for claims the 2024 was stolen by the Democrats. While all of Trump’s lawsuits alleging voter fraud in 2020 failed, there remains the danger that Republican-controlled state legislatures would refuse to certify a Harris victory as they did for Biden in 2020. In 2020 however, Trump was the incumbent but this year the reins of power will be held by Biden.

If Trump does prevail in November, we can expect vicious attacks on immigrants and LGBTQI people, an attempt at a nation-wide abortion ban, encouragement of White Christian nationalist misogyny and racism, attacks on unions and minority voting rights, the lifting of worker safety and environmental protections, and increased fossil fuel exploration. While the left will breathe a sigh of relief if Harris defeats Trump, there will still be US support for Israel, a severe housing crisis, huge social inequality, and the historic task of building a mass working class political movement and party independent of the parties of the 1%.

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