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USA

Sound, Fury and the Midterms

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The much-discussed results of the U.S. midterm elections represent, in this writer's view, a "rebalancing" rather than something "transformative." It is of course significant that the far-right Republican stranglehold on both houses of Congress as well as the presidency will be broken by the new Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. But after the sound and fury, it's also important to understand some sharp limitations.

Election results handwritten on a chalkboard

To begin with, let's imagine the scenario if the 2016 election hadn't produced the rather fluky Electoral College victory of Donald Trump. In that case, following two years of the stagnant neoliberalism of an unpopular Hillary Clinton presidency, we'd likely have been looking at a massive "red wave" of Republicans consolidating very large Congressional and state house majorities (especially with over two dozen Democratic Senate seats on the line).

Instead, the key factor this November was certainly mass revulsion against the grotesque performance of the Trump regime – a show that his base loves, but repels pretty much everyone else. It's important that the African American and Latinx voter turnout expanded, reacting against racist voter suppression and Trump's anti-immigrant atrocities, along with an impressive youth turnout that holds progressive potential for the future. The Republicans' plans to "reform" (destroy) Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid and wipe out what remains of health care protections under Obamacare were obvious huge factors in their defeat.

The increase in women elected to Congress is positive, of course, even if their proportion there remains pitiful by the standards of most "advanced" countries and some "Third World" nations too. What would be essential for an electoral result to be seen as transformative, however, is a context of powerful social mobilization. That's what wasn't happening in this election.

Despite the heroic turnouts against Trump's Muslim travel ban, the Women's Marches and #MeToo, the Movement for Black Lives, pro-immigrant actions and more, these have mostly been episodic upsurges that haven't yet generated powerful self-sustaining campaigns. Most important, there isn't a backdrop of massive labor militancy, even though the teachers' strikes, the UPS rank and file rejection of a rotten contract, the widespread Fight for \$15 and other organizing efforts are very hopeful vital signs.

The fact that a sizeable sector of white working class voters remain in the Trump camp remains a sobering political reality, for which the corporate-driven Democratic Party has no meaningful alternative message.

On the other hand, the fact that voter suppression is now recognized and openly discussed, after flying under the radar for so long, in my opinion is a major development. At this writing one major election – the Georgia governor's race – has been successfully stolen by the fraudulent removal of tens of thousands of Black citizens from the voter rolls. Under the glare of public exposure, it should be harder to repeat that level of blatant cheating despite the Supreme Court's gutting of the Voting Rights Act.

Whatever the contested results in Florida turn out to be this time, the restoration of voting rights to ex-prisoners will change the voter demographics of that state. In my home state Michigan, ballot proposals to ensure access to voting, and ending absurd partisan gerrymandering of legislative districts, passed by large margins (as did legalization of recreational marijuana). Whether the defeat of the execrable Wisconsin governor Scott Walker might open the question of voter suppression there remains to be seen.

The overall reality of this midterm's rebalancing is that the voters that Democratic strategists foolishly depended on in 2016 – those somewhat caricatured “suburban college-educated white women” – did break for them this year after two years of the Trump spectacle. What flipped in 2018 can flip back next time, of course – but just now, thinking about scenarios for 2020 is more than this writer's stomach can handle.

For an incisive overview of the mixed midterm results and what they may portend, a useful piece by Matt Karp appears in JACOBIN.

The Left and the Future

What about the left in these elections? With regret, we must note that the Green Party didn't do well, although the socialist Green candidate for New York governor, Howie Hawkins, is to be congratulated for maintaining the party's ballot status.

An assessment from the Democratic Socialists of America celebrates a modest breakthrough in the election victories of more than a dozen DSA members, including U.S. House candidates Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in New York and Rashida Tlaib in Michigan, as well as a substantial list of DSA-endorsed state and local candidates.

The presence of a handful of self-declared democratic socialists, along with substantial numbers of left-leaning liberals, means that the “progressive wing” of the Democratic Party will have a firm niche in the party. They will offer an attractive face to part of its voting base, and may be allowed a significant role in drafting that most meaningless of documents, the 2020 Party Platform.

None of this will change the reality that the Democratic Party in practice is subservient to, and a tool of, corporate power and Wall Street. Its relatively progressive stances (i.e. relative to the vicious Republican policies pandering to the religious fundamentalist right) on social issues only disguise that underlying fact.

We'll need to watch to see whether progressive Democrats, and any other politicians who take the First Amendment seriously, will revolt against the pending Israel Anti-Boycott Act that aims to cripple and criminalize campus and community BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) activism.

No doubt this election will be followed by escalating cacophony around the daily antics of the big twit in the White House, civil wars in the West Wing, attempts to shut down the Mueller investigations, empty noise about impeachment, and all the rest. What mustn't be forgotten is that the day after the election, whenever the vote recounts and lawsuits are over, and next January when the new Congress convenes, the fundamental crises remain.

Under the impact of climate change-driven disasters, California is burning and towns in Florida and the Carolinas are still staggering from hurricane destruction, as does the entire island nation of Puerto Rico. At the U.S. border, world-class crimes are committed against asylum seekers confined in detention camps while ICE's reign of terror sweeps immigrant communities. Children in Yemen die from starvation by the hundreds every day under U.S.-supplied Saudi Arabian bombs and planes. College students are drowning in debt, families are devastated by housing foreclosures and water shutoffs, and wages stagnate even as official unemployment reaches “record lows” and corporate profits soar.

Elections don't change these realities – certainly not automatically. It takes sustained mobilization and mass action to do so.

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Source [Solidarity](#).

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