

USA: The Election and What's Ahead

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WHAT WAS THE 2012 election about – and what did it ultimately show? Many fundamental issues were never even raised – climate change and environmental catastrophe, poverty and inequality, to name a few. On issues that were debated, like the economy and the deficit and the endless and endless chatter about “middle class jobs,” the presidential candidates largely avoided presenting their real positions. On the right of the United States to rule the world, their positions were almost interchangeable.

Among the issues never openly discussed, obviously, was race. But if this election turned out to be about one thing above all, it was race. African Americans came out in massive numbers, fully aware of the vicious voter suppression laws and redistricting that had been put in their way by right-wing state legislatures. In Detroit, where the population is 85% African American, it is estimated that fully 65% of the eligible voters came out to the polls, with 92% voting to re-elect President Obama. In fact, 13% of all Detroit voters cast absentee ballots before Election Day.

It was interesting to see African Americans reminding those who didn't have an “I voted, have you?” sticker about the need to get to the polls. They did so recognizing how much of the anti-Obama vote was racially fuelled. They understood exactly what Mitt Romney's notorious statement about “the 47% government dependents” meant – even though, of course, a majority of recipients of government assistance (what remains of it) are white people.

President Obama carried a majority of white votes in only six states – all of them states with small Black populations (and so perhaps where white voters feel less “threatened”). He also won over 70% of the Latino, Arab American and Asian American vote. After this administration actually deported more people than the George W. Bush regime in the previous four years, how bad did the Republicans have to be on immigration to lose the Latino vote so heavily?

Women and youth, with their eyes open, voted disproportionately for Obama. In Missouri and Indiana, facing the hideous Republican Senate candidates Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock (“legitimate rape” and pregnancies from rape as “God's will”), the female body politic showed indeed “it has ways of shutting that whole thing down.” Even though Mitt Romney turned verbally “toward the center” once he'd won his party's nomination, women and young people had no trouble seeing him and his running mate Ryan – a Tea Party favorite out to destroy Medicare and Social Security – as blatant representatives of the 1%. The fact that the President and the Democrats answer to those same interests is unfortunately less obvious to many.

Changing demographics – and certainly in Michigan and Ohio, the auto industry bailout derided by Romney – reelected a president who has presided over a very weak recovery from a massive financial meltdown and economic downturn. Although unemployment and under-employment remain disastrously high, when faced with the prospect of Romney-Ryan the majority chose to stick with a president who preaches a rhetorical populism that lacks substance.

The vote for all independent candidates in 2012 was less than Ralph Nader's 2008 vote. Despite her admirable activist campaign, Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate, received just over 400,000 votes. Dr. Stein and other candidates on the left ran on issues – peace and justice, genuine universal health

care, quality education, full employment and real action on climate change – that many millions of people think they're voting for when they vote Democratic, but the two capitalist parties tragically retain their political stranglehold as "the only choices we have" in most folks' minds.

The changing demographics and declining power of reactionary social conservatism were revealed even more sharply in many of the 175 state ballot initiatives. For the first time, four states (Maine, Minnesota, Virginia and Washington) voted to eliminate the barriers for same sex marriage. Michigan voters vetoed the Emergency Manager legislation that took over cities and school districts, selling off their assets, cutting wages and benefits while laying off teachers and a whole range of public workers. The states of Washington and Colorado, along with several cities, approved of decriminalizing marijuana for personal use —defying the federal ban.

This first post-Citizens United election was even more awash in money than previous campaigns. With an acknowledged \$6 billion poured into the federal races alone, most wonder how much better the money could have been spent. The results were a mixed bag. In California, corporate money was able to convince the electorate to vote against labeling of genetically modified (GMO) food, but in Michigan Matty Moroun, the owner of the Ambassador Bridge, which is the most trafficked crossing between the United States and Canada, spent something like \$50 million trying to prevent a second, publicly funded bridge to be built nearby—and his measure went down to defeat. Following the Indiana legislature's initiative to make their state a "right to work" state, UAW president Bob King launched a proposal to enshrine collective bargaining in the Michigan constitution. While many questioned labor's focus on this issue at the same time that the Emergency Manager legislation was about to be placed on the ballot, King responded that if the collective bargaining referendum won, then that would "solve" the issue for state and city workers. He never seems to have pondered what would be the result of a loss.

Last spring union members worked hard to collect the signatures and get the collective bargaining proposal on the ballot. But while the unions spent \$22 million campaigning for a yes vote, corporations spent \$28 million opposing it. Ultimately the corporate ads and the campaigning of public officials, including the Republican governor, were successful in sending the amendment down to a 3-2 defeat. One wonders what political difference it might make if the unions had spent their money organizing.

It's most critical to understand that all the fundamental issues remain on the table. The fight over voter suppression has only begun, with a looming Supreme Court decision that might abolish or cripple the Voting Rights Act. The contrived "fiscal cliff" crisis is likely to be the pretext for a "bipartisan bargain" that slashes crucial programs while leaving a bloated Permanent War military budget intact. Meanwhile, our entire civilization is already heading over the all-too-real "climate cliff." Unions continue to shrink under corporate and state legislative assaults. There is no strong or sustained economic recovery on the horizon, in the United States or Europe. Asia is not immune either: Japan's GDP growth turned negative last quarter, and China's exports, the engine of its economy, have declined. The U.S. -dictated "war on drugs" is destroying Mexico through mass killing, and our own communities through mass incarceration. Public education is being gutted with the spreading cancer of corporate charters. Drone aircraft strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen strike civilian villages and recruit ten more al-Qaeda supporters for every "militant" they kill.

The most important lesson of the 2012 elections is this: Unless powerful social movements and resistance emerge in the next four years, and at least the beginning of a serious political alternative to corporate power, the 2016 election will be incomparably worse and more dangerous.

Dianne Feeley & David Finkel, November 15, 2012

P.S.

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