

American Election Amidst Turmoil and Travail

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The U.S. presidential election is taking place in unprecedented conditions. There is a surge of coronavirus overwhelming hospitals in several states; protests against police violence in others; and intimidation of voters by armed men in a few. In the country's large cities department stores have boarded up their windows and hired security guards to prevent looting and arson. The Republican Party has brought dozens of lawsuits in the states (each of which has different voting laws) to try to suppress the vote, since large numbers of voters generally favor the Democrats.

While the final day of the election is November 3, because of an enormous increase in early voting, mail-in voting, and drive through voting, it may take days to count the vote. If the vote is close, there is also the possibility of the election going to the courts and ending up in the Supreme Court, now with six conservative justices to three liberals.

The contest itself between Republican President Donald Trump and Democratic Party challenger Joseph Biden has become a referendum on the coronavirus, now in the midst of the greatest upsurge so far. The United States now has about ten million total cases, 100,000 new cases each day, and 1,000 deaths per day. President Trump's top aide announced, "We're not going to control the virus." He promised instead to quickly develop a vaccine and therapies and medicines to treat the disease.

Trump has been holding massive packed and mostly unmasked rallies in several key states where he tells his followers that the virus is disappearing. A Stanford University Study found that 18 Trump rallies had led to 30,000 COVID infections and 700 deaths. Trump has called public health officials "idiots" and he claims that doctors are reporting deaths due to coronavirus in order to increase their salaries. On the other hand, Biden promises that if elected he will work with the scientists to bring the pandemic under control.

Protests against police racism and violence have also become a campaign issue. Trump has condemned Black Lives Mattes as a violent movement, calling for law and order and support for the police. When on October 26 Philadelphia police were called because of a domestic dispute, they

found Walter Wallace Jr., a mentally ill man, wielding a knife. When he moved toward the police, they shot him several times, killing him. Thousands of Black people came out to protest in what became violent conflicts between the police and the community, accompanied by riots and looting. Trump declared the protests “the most recent consequence of the Liberal Democrats war against the police.” Biden has recognized the racism present in the society and in police departments and has called for reform, though he opposes “defunding the police,” the principal demand of the recent anti-racist demonstrations.

Voting is taking place not only amidst the virus, but also during the continuing economic depression with an official unemployment rate of 7.9 percent (in reality higher because of uncounted discouraged workers), that is, some 12.5 million jobless. Nevertheless, to avoid COVID and to ensure that their votes are cast and counted, thousands line up to vote early in cities around the country, wearing masks and keeping social distance. Some 95 million have already voted and more than 150 million are expected to vote, a record turnout. My wife, my children, and I voted at the Brooklyn Museum in a line of thousands that circled the enormous building three times to wait from two to four hours to make their voices heard. When night fell at the museum, volunteers distributed pizza and drinks were to the patient voters waiting in line.

The count may go on for days or even weeks, and between November 3 and January 20 when the next president takes office, we expect widespread protests and fear violence will erupt. Pro-Trump militias are mobilizing to ensure his election. The social movements and labor unions are organizing to defend the vote and democracy and to continue the fight for social justice.