A Political Paradox

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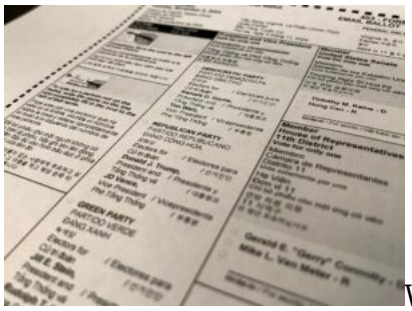 Why did American voters, who by substantial majorities favor progressive economic, social, and international policies, elect a plutocratic, racist, America First jingoist as President?

From an examination of election results, exit polls, and other public opinion polling, I draw three conclusions about this paradox:

The economy was the top issue. Trump focused on it and Harris did not.

People of color were the swing vote. Trump did not expand his white base so much as Harris lost hers among people of color.

The majority of Americans favor progressive policies, which should encourage us to keep organizing during the second Trump administration.

Voters wanted change to address the economic concerns they were feeling. Trump posed as the change agent—"Trump will fix it." Harris posed as the candidate of stability and the status quo—"We're not going back."

Trump did not expand his white working-class base, as much commentary would have it. He mainly mobilized the pre-existing cross-class, white-supremacist base that Republicans have built since the white backlash against racial equality began in the 1960s. Meanwhile, Harris gained 2.7 million more white votes than Biden had received in 2020 but lost 8.9 million votes of people of color that Biden had won. Trump won 2.0 million more votes from people of color than he had in 2020, but many more people of color, 6.9 million of them, did not vote for either Trump or Harris. Economic concerns were the top issue for people of color.

The far-right Trump Republicans may have captured the whole federal government—President, Supreme Court, House, and Senate—but strong majorities of Americans still favor progressive policies, which should give us hope as we organize progressive political alternatives during four more years of Trump.

In the rest of this article, I will present the data and arguments that support my conclusions and discuss the paradox of the election of a right-wing government by a progressive-leaning electorate.

It's the Economy, Stupid!

James Carville, who coined this campaign mantra, believes it was still true in 2024 and the polling data backs him up.[1]

Trump's 312 to 226 Electoral College vote has been called "decisive"[2] and even a "landslide."[3] However, if just under than 115,000 votes in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin had been cast for Harris instead of Trump, Harris would have won the Electoral College count.[4] The anti-majoritarian distortions of the Electoral College do not give us a good sense of what voters wanted in this election.

Looking at the national popular vote gives us a more accurate sense of voters' hopes. The first thing to note is that only 31.7 percent of the estimated 244 million eligible voters[5] cast their ballot for Trump.

A slight majority of the 63.9 percent of eligible voters who actually cast ballots elected Trump by a narrow margin of 1.5 percent of the popular vote—49.9 percent for Trump over 48.4 percent for Harris. Trump's vote of 77.3 million was 3.1 million votes more than he received in 2020. The difference, however, came down to 6.3 million fewer votes for the Democratic candidate, from 81.3 million for Biden in 2020 down to 75.0 million for Harris in 2024.[6]

How did the Democrats lose 6.3 million voters? The two major exit polls,[7] which I will refer to here as the CNN and Fox polls, indicate that the economy was the top issue for voters and that Harris lost those voters by large margins. The CNN poll showed that 32 percent of voters ranked the "economy" as their top issue and Harris lost those voters by an 80 to 18 percent margin. The AP poll showed that 39 percent ranked the "economy and jobs" as their top issue and Harris lost those voters by a 62 to 37 percent margin. The CNN poll showed that the top issue for voters was democracy at 34 percent, which Harris won by 81 to 18 percent. Democracy was not an option in the Fox poll. All other issues were far behind the economy and democracy. This polling indicates that Harris lost enough traditionally Democratic voters worried about the economy to lose the election.

The 2024 election was a change election. Many working class and lower-middle class Americans are angry at the economic precarity that the powers that be have given them after five decades of corporate neoliberalism. Trump presented himself as the outsider, anti-establishment, change candidate, while Harris ran as the candidate of stability and the status quo.[8] The swing vote was the 8.9 million 2020 Biden voters among people of color who Harris lost, not so much to Trump as to disaffection and abstention from voting for the incumbent Democrats that Harris personified.

The exit polls indicate that those 8.9 million 2020 Biden voters who did not vote for Harris in 2024 may have come out for a Democrat who campaigned as a change candidate on a progressive populist economic agenda. Instead, Harris limited her progressive appeals to abortion and democratic rights while campaigning with Republican celebrities for center-right voters, touting the billions she had raised from wealthy donors, and projecting "joy" when so many Americans were hurting. She was tone-deaf to the economic problems of working-class and lower-middle-class Americans. Nearly 80 percent of Americans report living paycheck to paycheck and over 70 percent have less than $2,000 in savings to cover emergency expenses.[9] Payroll jobs are being replaced by gig jobs. Pensions are disappearing. Earning a college degree requires debt for all but the most affluent. In 67 percent of two-parent families both spouses are employed, while in single-parent households, 85.6 percent of fathers and 76.2 percent of mothers are employed, making childcare a major expense for most families with children.[10] Real wages adjusted for inflation had declined 1.8 percent during the Biden years as the election approached.[11] Yet Harris championed no progressive populist economic reforms that could give people living these experiences hope for a better future.

By 2020, after 50 years of neoliberal economic policies, wealth inequality in the United States was at an all-time high, surpassing that of the Gilded Age of the 19th century Robber Barons, according to research by an economist specializing in economic inequality, Gabriel Zucman.[12] The wealth of the top 1 percent jumped up nearly $15 trillion during the first three years of the Biden/Harris

administration, from $30 trillion at the end of 2020 to $44.6 trillion at the end of 2023, according to the Federal Reserve.[13]

Trump's narrative blamed those toward the bottom of the class hierarchy for the problems that working-class and middle-class Americans were feeling. He punched down and scapegoated immigrants, people of color, disabled people, trans people, news organization, and social and climate justice demonstrators. Instead of punching up at the giant corporations and the superrich oligarchs who have enriched themselves through neoliberal economic policies, Harris welcomed them into her coalition. Nor did she forthrightly defend the people Trump was targeting. Instead, she reinforced Trump policy narratives by saying she could do them better. She ran as a tough-on-crime former prosecutor against Trump the felon. She campaigned on doing better at restricting immigration than Trump because she would sign the mean-spirited Republican-drafted anti-immigrant bill that the Biden administration had acquiesced to 2024, but which Trump then told Republicans to kill because he wanted to campaign on the immigration issue. The Democrats' accommodation to this anti-immigrant bill was one of many cases where the Democrats legitimized the Republican policy agenda instead of fighting it. Harris also reinforced the Republican narrative on energy and climate change by answering the question about climate in the presidential debate by boasting that the Biden administration had produced more oil and gas than the Trump administration had and highlighting her commitment to fracking.[14]

Some have argued that Harris' belligerent militarism and unwavering support for the U.S.-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza lost her many voters. If Harris' had said she would condition arms to Israel on adherence to human rights, which is U.S. law and supported by a majority of Americans,[15] would she have won over the votes of progressives and especially Muslims who were angry at Harris' position on the war in Gaza? She may have gained some voters if she had, but the polling indicates the war in Gaza was not a central issue for many voters. About 1 million of the 1.5 million Muslim registered voters voted in 2020 and at least that number was expected in 2024. The exit poll evidence for how Muslims voted is contradictory. A much-publicized exit poll by the Council for American Islamic Affairs (CAIR) found that the Muslim vote went 53 percent for the Green Party's Jill Stein, 21 percent for Trump, and 20 percent for Harris. An arms embargo on Israel was the signature policy of the Stein campaign. If the CAIR poll is right, Stein would have received around 500,000 Muslim votes out of her total of around 860,000 votes, which would mean a steep drop-off of traditional Green voters that seems unlikely. The Fox poll, on the other hand, found that the Muslim vote went 63 percent for Harris, 33 percent for Trump, and 4 percent for "other," which presumably means mostly for Jill Stein. According to the 2020 Fox exit poll, Biden won the Muslim vote over Trump by a similar 64 percent to 35 percent margin as Harris. In any case, polling indicates that the war in Gaza was a top issue for only a small group of voters. A mid-October Harvard-Harris poll asked voters for their most important issues and found that the Israel-Hamas conflict was ranked 15th on the list at 6 percent and at only 3 percent when asked for the most important issue for the voter personally. The war in Gaza ranked far behind inflation at 39 percent and the economy and jobs at 29 percent in the Harvard-Harris poll. The polling evidence indicates that the economy, not the war in Gaza, was the motivating issue for far more voters.[16]

The Swing Vote Was Black and Latino

The conventional mass media narrative holds that the Trump electoral coalition is based in the white working class. The data, however, show that the political realignment of conservative white working-class voters from the Democratic Party into the Republican Party that began in the 1960s has stalled under Trump.[17] The big jump of white working class and middle class voters to the Republican column began six decades ago with the white backlash to civil rights, school desegregation, fair housing, and affirmative action by white people fearful of competition from below by people of color

for good jobs, college educations, and favored status. Goldwater's campaign for "states' rights" against federal civil rights and desegregation policies began the political realignment, with the Republicans winning the five Deep South states for the first time since 1880. Running coded white backlash campaigns in 1968, Nixon with his "southern strategy" and Wallace with his pro-segregation "states' rights" message received a combined 64 percent of the white working-class vote. Nixon received 70 percent of that vote in 1972.[18] Carter did recover enough of the conservative white vote in 1976 to win all the southern states with his talk of "ethnic purity," "black intrusion," and "alien groups" in reference to neighborhood and school integration.[19] Clinton in 1992 again recovered a substantial portion of the conservative white vote and won several southern states with his racial dog whistling about being tough on crime and welfare.[20] But rather than stemming the flow of white voters to the Republican Party, the messaging of Carter and Clinton served to normalize the Republicans' racial messaging to white voters.

The white supremacist Republican base for Trump, which includes a section of white working-class voters, pre-existed Trump. The overall trend in racial attitudes among whites since the 1960s has been the other way, toward more egalitarian racial attitudes,[21] a trend that has continued in the Trump years.[22] The declining but still significant portion of whites who oppose racial equality in principle and especially in policy and practice are now concentrated in the Republican Party.[23] Trump's racially coded message seems to appeal to white people of all classes who are more racially intolerant. But his levels of support indicate that the white supremacist vote has declined substantially since the Nixon years.

Race remains a major factor in the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans, but what about class? Occupation would provide the clearest indication of working-class voters, who are those who earn a living doing non-supervisory manual, service, and clerical jobs. Exit polls, however, have not asked about occupation. Their data do cover educational attainment and income, which we have to use as rough proxies for class.

Using educational attainment, the CNN exit polls since 2016 indicate that Trump has not gained votes among working class whites. White voters without college degrees voted for Trump by 66 percent in 2016, 67 percent in 2020, and 66 percent in 2024. White male working-class voters for Trump measured by lacking a college degree have hardly changed either, from 71 percent in 2016 to 70 percent in 2020 to 69 percent in 2024.

Trump won 56 percent of all voters without a college degree, which brings Trump's non-college degree vote to 49.5 million, or 64 percent of his 77.3 million total. It is impossible to know from the exit polls exactly how many of these non-college degree people are working class or middle class. But it is safe to say that a large portion of Trump's non-degreed base is middle class because there are tens of millions of middle-class people without college degrees who are small business owners and their spouses (an estimated 16 million people[24]); supervisors and middle managers in factories, trucking, warehousing, construction, and services; police, prison guards, and border patrol; and other middle-class occupations.[25]

People of color, who are about two-thirds working class[26] and account for a third of the presidential vote, were the swing vote in this election. Trump received 1 percentage point less of the white vote in 2024 compared to 2020 (57 to 58), but he received 1.3 percentage points more of the people of color vote in 2024 compared to 2020 (9.7 to 8.4). Even more important in the decline in support of people of color for Harris was the 10 percent decline in both the Black and Latino turnout. These people did not vote for Trump or Harris. People of color still supported Harris over Trump by a 64 percent to 33 percent margin, but that was a significant decline from the Biden over Trump margin of 71 to 26 percent in 2020 and the Clinton over Trump margin of 74 to 21 percent in 2016.

Black and Latino voters are not broken down by education separately from all people of color in the CNN exit polls, which could give us a sense of their vote by class. But gender is identified and Trump gained significantly among both Black and Latino men. For Black men, the Trump vote was 13 percent in 2016, 12 percent in 2020, but jumped nine percentage points to 21 percent in 2024. For Latino men, the Trump vote was 32 percent in both 2016 and 2020, but jumped up 22 percentage points to 54 percent in 2024. The vote of Black women for Trump has remained below 10 percent, with Trump getting 4 percent in 2016, 9 percent in 2020, and 7 percent in 2024. The vote of Latino women for Trump, however, has increased, from 25 percent in 2016 to 30 percent in 2020, to 39 percent in 2024.

The numerical vote totals by race in 2020 and 2024 shows more clearly how people of color were the swing voters in 2024 who voted for Trump or, in much larger numbers, did not vote for either Trump or Harris. The numerical vote totals show us from which groups Trump gained 3.1 million votes and Harris lost 6.3 million Democratic votes from what Biden received in 2020. Among white voters, Trump gained 1.1 million votes while Harris gained 2.7 million votes in 2024 compared to Biden in 2020. Among Black voters, Trump gained only 0.1 million votes in 2024 over 2020. But Harris received 0.2 million fewer Black votes in 2024 than Biden did in 2020 (dropping from 14.9 million to 14.7 million). Among Latino voters, Trump gained 1.0 million voters while Harris lost 4.7 million votes in 2024 compared to Biden in 2020 (dropping from 13.4 million to 8.7 million). Among Asian voters, Trump gained 0.2 million votes and Harris lost 0.5 million votes. Among other people of color, Trump gained 0.7 million votes while Harris lost 0.7 million votes. Comparing the total votes of white people to all people of color, Trump garnered 1.1 million more white votes and 2.0 million more people of color votes, which accounts for all of Trump's total of 3.1 million more votes in 2024 compared to 2020. Harris gained 2.7 million white votes but lost 8.9 million people of color votes, a net loss of 6.2 million votes.[27]

The main story of the election results is not that white voters, let alone the white working class, rallied to Trump, but that people of color voted in significantly lower numbers for Harris compared to Biden four years before. Compared to 2020, Black turnout was down 3.5 million and Latino turnout was also down 3.5 million. Trump's additional 2.0 million people of color votes is 65 percent of his 3.1 million increase in total votes.

While people of color have been voting by large majorities against Trump, polling indicates that his somewhat increased appeal in 2024 as well as the lower voter turnout by Black and Latino voters is due to economic concerns. The CNN and Fox exit polls did not report what the top issues were for Black and Latino voters separately from voters as a whole. But other polls indicated that the economy and health care were the top two issues for Blacks and Latinos. An AP poll found that Black voters considered the economy (79 percent) and health care (56 percent) to be the two most important issues.[28] A Pew Research Center poll found similar results among Latino voters, with 85 percent of Latino voters saying the economy was very important to their vote in the 2024 presidential election, followed by health care (71 percent).[29] The conclusion to draw from this data is that economic issues were an important factor moving some Black and Latino voters either to Trump as the change candidate promising economic improvements or to not voting for Harris as they did for Biden because she did not offer a compelling message on the economy.

Income is a weak indicator of class because many people in middle-class occupations as well as working-class occupations make family incomes in the middling $30,000 to $100,000 a year range, who accounted for 48 percent of all voters in 2024. The CNN exit poll found that Trump won these middle income voters 52 percent to 46 percent in 2024, while Harris won the 11 percent of voters with family incomes below $30,000 by a 50 to 46 percent margin and won the 41 percent of voters with family incomes over $100,000 by 51 to 47 percent.[30] Given these small margins up and down

the income scale, which were similar in Trump's previous races in 2016 and 2020, it is clear that income classes were not a good predictor of voter choices and that the white working class is not Trump's primary voting base.

Another indicator for class would be the union vote. The CNN exit poll found that union voters preferred Harris over Trump by a margin of 53 to 41 percent. This margin is similar to Biden's 56 to 40 percent and Clinton's 52 to 42 percent margins over Trump. The union vote spans the occupational spectrum from low-wage manual, clerical, and service jobs to middle-income jobs requiring college degrees, including teaching, nursing, and many jobs in government agencies. These degreed jobs have traditionally been considered professional middle-class jobs because they had a degree of autonomy and authority not found in working-class occupations. But with the expansion of corporate-style hierarchies with intrusive supervision in both the private and public sectors, these degreed jobs have become more like traditional working-class jobs. With unionized workers representing only 10 percent of the overall workforce and just 6 percent of the private sector workforce,[31] these margins in favor of the Democrats tell us more about the political culture and member education of unions than about the working class as a whole.

One more factor to consider is non-voters. They are disproportionately young, not college educated, lower income, working class, and people of color. Their political preferences, according to a 2020 study, were 33 percent Democratic, 30 percent Republican, and 18 percent third party, reflecting the close division of the nation as a whole, but also their distrust of the major parties and the efficacy of voting, which is reflected in their relatively high 18 percent identification with third parties.[32]

This disaffection from the major parties extends to those who do vote. Voting for the lesser evil is widespread. The CNN exit poll found that 48 percent of Harris voters voted "mainly" against Trump and 38 percent of Trump voters voted "mainly" against Harris. In 2020, 60 percent of Biden voters voted "mainly" against Trump and 30 percent of Trump voters voted "mainly" against Biden. The question was not asked in 2016. These results are consistent with annual Gallup Polls, which show the percentage of people who want a third major party hovering around 60 percent for the last decade.[33]

What all this polling data indicate is that race and education, not class, are the principal social divisions motivating party preference. White people and people without a college degree tend to vote Republican. People of color and people with college degrees tend to vote Democratic. Class is not much of a factor. The Trump Republicans have not become a working-class party as some pundits would have it, but remain a cross-class coalition as the Republicans have always been, as have the Democrats. The party elites for both of them are the wealthy and corporate funders and the middle-class professionals who populate the parties' state and national committees, the politicians' campaign and public office staffs, and the parties' associated think tanks, public relations firms, law offices, advocacy nonprofits, and, for the Democrats, union bureaucracies, and for the Republicans, white Evangelical and Catholic churches. Regular working-class and middle-class people have little say in determining policy platforms and choosing the nominees other than voting in primaries and general elections among the candidates that have been pre-selected by party elites.

Progressive Majority

If regular working-class and middle-class people have little say in party politics and elections, we can get an indication of where they stand politically from how they voted on ballot initiatives in 2024. Trump Republican majorities in control of the presidency, Supreme Court, and U.S. House and Senate may mean rightwing control of the federal government, but when voters had a chance to vote directly on policies, they tended for vote for progressive positions on economic and cultural issues.

Voters approved seven out of ten initiatives to establish a state constitutional right to abortion. All three "school choice" initiatives for public vouchers for private schools failed in Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska. Utah voted to increase public school funding. Massachusetts voted to eliminate high-stakes testing in public schools. California repealed a ban on municipal rent control. Pro-unionization measures passed in Massachusetts and Oregon.[34]

Minimum wage increases passed in Alaska, Missouri, and Nebraska, but lost narrowly in California 51 to 49 percent and lost in Massachusetts for tipped workers. An Arizona initiative to cut the minimum wage of tipped workers was defeated. Throughout 2024, minimum wages were increased in 88 jurisdictions — 23 states and 65 cities and counties; 70 jurisdictions raised the minimum wage to $15, including 53 jurisdictions to $17 an hour or more. The federal minimum wage has been $7.25 since 2009 and remains so in 20 states.[35]

A dozen measures related to ranked choice voting (RCV) were on the ballot. RCV is of particular interest for independent political action because its single-seat form eliminates the "spoiler problem" for third party candidates and its multi-seat form also creates proportional representation that would give the independent left its fair share of representation and power in legislative bodies. RCV is a reform whose momentum was accelerating going into the 2024 election. In 2000, just two municipalities still used RCV in its proportional form that had been instituted in two dozen cities by progressive reformers between the 1910s and 1940s. By 2020, RCV was again practiced in two dozen cities and two states. Going into the 2024 elections, RCV was used in 51 jurisdictions, including 2 states, 3 counties, and 46 cities, several of which have proportional RCV.[36]

Two measures to repeal RCV were rejected (Alaska and Bloomington, Minnesota). Four measures in support of RCV were adopted (Washington, D.C., Richmond, California, and Oak Park and Peoria, Illinois).

All five initiatives that proposed statewide RCV failed. The Oregon initiative was simply for RCV for all state and federal offices. It lost decisively 58-42 percent, which was a disappointment for RCV advocates in a state where two counties and two cities already use RCV, including the largest city, Portland, which uses the multi-seat proportional representation form of RCV for its city council. RCV advocates were divided on whether to support the other four initiatives because they combined all-comers primaries where the candidates receiving votes among the top four or top five advance to the RCV general election. These proposals failed in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, and Nevada.

A Missouri initiative to prohibit RCV passed, but it also prohibited non-citizen voting, the part of the measure that its proponents featured. Seven other states passed prohibitions on non-citizen voting. These bans on non-citizen voting seemed designed more to mobilize the anti-immigrant Trump base with the false narrative that non-U.S. citizens are somehow participating in U.S. elections in large numbers. While legal non-citizen residents are allowed to vote in school board and/or municipal elections in a small number of municipalities in three states—two in California, three in Vermont, and 16 in Maryland—there was no movement for non-citizen voting in the states where the bans did pass— Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Wisconsin.[37]

Many advocates of RCV opposed the RCV initiatives that included top four or top five all-comers or jungle primaries.[38] I opposed them with the slogan of "Ranked Choice Voting, Yes! Jungle Primaries, No!" The advocates for top four or five primaries call them open primaries, but that is branding, not an accurate description. Many states already have open primaries where voters can choose which party primary to vote in on primary election day. The jungle primaries eliminate party primaries. They put the candidates of all parties in one all-comers primary. This strips parties of their right to choose their own nominees. Voters of every party and no party are voting for the top four or five who move on the RCV general election. Parties are important for democracy. It is how ordinary people

can associate to discuss their problems, formulate policies to remedy those problems, and organize activities and nominate candidates to advance their remedies. This kind of participatory democracy is of particular concern for those of us who want a principled and democratically-accountable independent party of the left.[39]

On economic and class issues, polling shows that strong majorities of Americans support social democratic policies for more economic security and fairness.

62 percent want a Job Guarantee[40]

62 percent want a Minimum Income Guarantee[41]

60 percent want Medicare for All[42]

65 percent want a Green New Deal[43]

68 percent want Rent Control[44]

63 percent want More Public Housing[45]

86 percent want to Raise the Minimum Wage[46]

64 percent want a $17 Minimum Wage[47]

73 percent want Universal Free Childcare[48]

57 percent want Tuition-Free Public College[49]

78 percent want to Increase Social Security Benefits[50]

79 percent want to Tax the Rich and Big Corporations[51]

70 percent approve of Labor Unions[52]

On cultural issues, polling also shows majorities on the progressive side of the culture wars supporting anti-discrimination, equal rights, and pro-democracy reforms that protect social and political minorities.

53 percent want a path to Citizenship for Undocumented Immigrants[53]

63 percent want Abortion to be legal in all or most cases[54]

71 percent want Same-Sex Marriage to be legal[55]

74 percent want Transgender People treated with respect[56]

63 percent want to Abolish the Electoral College[57]

61 percent want Ranked Choice Voting[58]

On foreign and military policy, public opinion is complicated from a progressive point of view. 77 percent hold a progressive internationalist view that “America has a moral obligation to stand up for human rights and democracy around the world.”[59] However, human rights and democracy are not top foreign policy priorities for a majority of Americans. In one poll, that view is the top foreign

policy priority among five options for only 15 percent of Americans, behind physical defense (30 percent), international cooperation (24 percent), and economic gains (20 percent), and ahead of constraining aggressors (9 percent).[60] In another poll with four options for the most important obligation of the U.S. government, promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the globe was the second priority (25 percent), behind maintaining constitutional rights (41 percent) and ahead of protection from foreign threats (24 percent) and promoting economic prosperity (10 percent).[61]

Polls indicate that a majority takes a pro-human rights position on the two major contemporary wars in which the United States is involved. Polling showed a growing majority opposing military aid to Israel as the Gaza genocide continued, increasing from 52 percent in late October 2023 to 61 percent in early June.[62] A 61 percent majority of American support still favor military aid for Ukraine's defense against Russia's invasion, although support is sharply divided between Democrats (89 percent), independents (64 percent), and Republicans (32 percent).[63]

Where majority opinion departs from the progressive position is its strong support for high U.S. military spending. 67 percent agree with the statement "America must remain the world's greatest military power, no matter the cost."[64] 51 percent support increased military spending and 23 percent support the current level of high military spending, while only 14 percent want to reduce it.[65] With conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising tensions over China and Taiwan, and worries about the vulnerability of U.S. physical and digital infrastructures to terrorism and cyberattack, it is not surprising that many Americans, including those with generally progressive views, support high military spending.[66] 65 percent of Americans expect the U.S. to be involved in a war in the next five years. However, it is also clear from that same survey that strong majorities of Americans do not support the use of military force for other than defensive purposes.[67] Only 4 percent of Americans believe military force should be used to defend human rights and only 1 percent to promote democracy abroad. Most Americans prioritize other policies to promote democracy, including setting a good example (52 percent), working through international organizations like the United Nations (28 percent), and foreign aid (8 percent).[68]

What this polling on policy positions indicates is that a progressive majority supports social democratic public policies, although not a socialist transformation of the capitalist system. Increasing numbers of Americans have a favorable view of "socialism." By 2021, that included 41 percent of adults, 45 percent of women, 51 percent of young adults, and 60 percent of Black Americans.[69] But what most Americans who are favorable to socialism mean by it is social democratic public programs within capitalism,[70] not changing the system to a full economic democracy structured around social ownership and democratic planning and administration of the major means of production. There has been no polling about socialism as social ownership and democratic planning. In the absence of a strong socialist movement and party with mass education and influence, discussion about an alternative system of democratic socialism has been confined to far-left margins away from mainstream political discourse.

The 2024 presidential election was a paradox. A right-wing president was elected despite a progressive-leaning majority in the electorate, especially on the economic issues that were voters' top concerns. It is clear from polling data we have reviewed here that there is a majoritarian base for progressive politics. The right-wing base of the Republican Party has not grown so much as the Democratic Party has not provided a progressive alternative.

Some would argue that the Democrats could win back control of the federal government by running on a progressive populist economic program. I would argue that the wealthy funders and professional cadre who control the Democratic Party are congenitally committed to a neoliberal

corporate agenda. The Harris campaign reflected their politics. I would argue that the political vacuum for progressive politics can best be filled by an independent party of the left. But that is a discussion for another time. For now, let's finish on the optimistic yet challenging note that there is a huge political vacuum on the progressive left to be filled, one way or another.

notes

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