

# Obama's Failure Leads to Crushing Conservative Victory; Some Signs of Hope on the Left

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The failure of President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party to lead a fight for many of the major social issues on which he had campaigned—jobs and wages, African Americans' civil rights, immigration, labor union power, and the environment—led to a sweeping victory for the Republican Party and a crushing defeat for the Democrats in the midterm election. The historically low voter turnout of 36.6 percent compared to 40.9 percent in the 2010 midterm, the lowest turnout since 1942, provides a measure of the American people's sense of alienation from the political process, politicians, and major parties. The Democrats lost turnout from many of those groups who had carried Obama to the presidency six years ago. Young people, Latino, African Americans, women, union members, and independents voted in far lower numbers than Democrats had hoped and needed. The Republicans now take control of the Senate—55 Republicans to 45 Democrats—and increase their dominant position in the House where there will now be 243 Republican representatives compared to the Democrats' 178. The Republicans will control 31 governor's mansions, while the Democrats have only 17. The Democrats have not been such a political minority since the Civil War.

While some leftists had argued that working for Obama and the Democrats would place socialists on the side of the people and that a revived liberalism that would allow us take advantage of a friendly and supportive administration in the shadow of which we could advance social and labor movements, the result after six years has been just the opposite. Obama proved to be the president of high finance and big business, while in foreign policy he has been an inept imperialist whose attempt to control developments in the Middle East have led to disaster for the peoples of the region. Obama saved the banks in 2008, but his temporary and weak stimulus plan failed to adequately revive the economy and to provide jobs to the millions of unemployed, discouraged workers, and those working one or more part-time jobs at low wages. His single major achievement, Obamacare, a plan written by insurance corporations, health companies, and the pharmaceutical industry, while it brought coverage to many, left millions without insurance and failed to have an impact on rising rates and medical costs. Failing at so many things, Obama's administration did succeed in advancing the privatization of public education through charter schools, also weakening the teachers' unions.

The Obama administration, far from encouraging social struggle in any form, worked with local Democrats to crush the Occupy Wall Street movement and contributed to the demobilization of African Americans and the defeat of Latinos' efforts to reform immigration—while more immigrants were deported than under any other president. The idea that the Democrats serve in any way to advance the left should be abandoned by all, but we know that some will cling to this idea even after this experience. The Democrats' turn to the right over the last several years and their failure to speak to the issues of the working class majority of our population left them with no program of interest to American voters, and they have reaped the result. If the African American population has remained strongly supportive of Obama, it is not only because he is the first black president, but also because the Republican political alternative seems so hostile and dangerous to the black population, threatening its economic wellbeing and its voting rights. Yet, as some African Americans acknowledge, the president has done little to improve the lives of the country's black communities.

The Republican win, a victory for a more conservative Republican Party than existed even a few years ago, may have been, as many commentators suggest, more the result of frustration with the entire political system than an endorsement of the party's ideology and programs. There was no groundswell for the Republicans and rightwing policies, but rather tremendous disappointment and discontent with Obama. The election results, nevertheless, will increase for the time being the power of economic and social conservatives, continues to move the entire spectrum to the right, and enhance and legitimate rightwing politicians and their attitudes—racist, sexist, pro-business and anti-labor—in the media, in politics, and in society at large. With this election we can only expect more white racism, police brutality and impunity, criminalization of youth, voter suppression laws, moves to shutdown abortion clinics, and so on—all the reactionary feelings and behaviors encouraged by the right and so often aimed at society's underdogs.

## **Republicans Sweeping Victory**

The Republican victory is sweeping if not surprising. In the South, which has been largely Republican territory since the 1970s, the Republicans overwhelmed the Democrats in the Senate races. The arch-conservative Republican Mitch McConnell of Kentucky won 56% of the vote to Democrat Alisson Lundergan Grimes 41%, making it possible for him to become Senate majority leader. Republicans took North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia as well. But more surprisingly Republicans also won Iowa, where Obama had his first victory back in 2008 and Arkansas, the home state of Bill and Hilary Clinton, and in Colorado where Democrat Mark Udall had campaigned on his support for women's reproductive rights.

Most depressing of all the election results may be the victory of Republican Governor Scott Walker over Democratic challenger Mary Burke by a vote of 53.3% to 46.6%. First elected in 2010, Walker supported legislation in 2011 that effectively dismantled Wisconsin's public employee unions. Faced with a largely union-organized recall in June of 2012, Walker defeated his Democratic Party opponent then (for a second time) and has now won his third gubernatorial election in four years. Walker's victory demonstrates that the AFL-CIO's reliance on a traditional electoral strategy in Wisconsin, adopted after union leaders shut down the strikes and massive protests in the state capital of Madison in 2011, was a tremendous mistake. An electoral strategy unconnected to the building of mass movements will have little effect in stopping the right and advancing the left in this period. Also successful in the Midwest governor's races were Republicans John Kasick of Ohio, Rick Snyder of Michigan who introduced "right-to-work" anti-union legislation and undemocratic emergency managers there, and venture capitalist Bruce Rauner of Illinois. The Republicans clean sweep of the governor's mansions in the industrial Midwest, where once cities like Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland formed the backbone of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, is a devastating judgment on the labor unions' strategy and the Democrats' political commitments.

Where the Democrats won, there was little for progressives to rejoice in. In the East, conservative Democrat Governor Andrew Cuomo easily won reelection in New York, while in New Jersey, the slick, pro-Israel, "happy to reach across the aisle" Democrat Cory Booker was victorious. In New Hampshire the liberal former governor and incumbent Senator Jeanne Shaheen was reelected. Surprisingly in a close election the Democrats lost the Massachusetts governorship, with Republican Charlie Baker, a health insurance executive, defeating Democrat state attorney general Martha Coakley.

The Republican victory—and some Democratic Party victories as well—were largely paid for by corporate and conservative PACs and "dark money", used to purchase often misleading advertising attack ads. Since the *Citizens United* case of 2010, the role of money in politics has increased, become more obscure, and more nefarious. Altogether some \$3.7 billion was spent on the 2014 mid-term campaigns. The brothers Charles D. and David H. Koch were among the biggest spenders at

\$77 million on advertising and twice that amount on grassroots organizing. American Crossroads, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and many other smaller business and conservative groups spent tens of millions on advertising and organizing aimed not only at beating the Democrats, but also at defeating pro-labor, pro-women, and pro-environmental agendas. The wealthy conservatives and the corporations who contributed to representatives can expect their well spent money to lead to delivery of the XL Keystone pipeline and other legislation they have paid for.

Obama has made little or no headway on the progressive elements of his legislative agenda in six years and now any hope that he had of advancing these initiatives is virtually dead. If Obama were a courageous advocate of even his own by no means progressive agenda, he would use his veto power combined with his executive power to advance his own agenda—as he has said he will. But his first six years suggest that he will seek “shared government,” compromise, more-give-than-take, surrender, and ultimately only encourage ever more conservative developments. Both parties now looking at 2016 are likely to move toward the center—which is a center now located further to the right—in an attempt to win and animate the electorate.

The results pose serious problems for U.S. imperial global management. Various national leaders—from Putin to Erdogan and from Netanyahu to Kim Jong Un—felt free over the last year to flout the nominal “leader of the Free World” so that Obama has lost all authority on the international stage. The Republican Congress will only complicate his attempt to win the cooperation of Russia to conclude a nuclear agreement with Iran, which if it fails could lead to a much more dangerous world situation. Israel’s stranglehold on the U.S. Congress will continue to cripple Obama’s Middle East policy, while the Republicans, neocons, and Hillary Clinton will push for a hard line against Palestine and more aggressive military intervention in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine, a disastrous course. Conservatives who wish to destroy whatever remains of Obama’s authority might even be tempted to put that priority above their conception of the national interest.

### **Some Hope on the Left**

Within the larger context of the Republican surge and the Democratic defeat the far right seemed to retreat while the left made some small gains. The Tea Party, which seemed to dominate all political discussion back in 2010, diminished considerably in significance, as a more disciplined Republicans moved to defeat wildcard challengers. At the same time, of course, Tea Party candidates have become ensconced in the Republican Party and the party as a whole has moved in the direction of the Tea Party’s more conservative policies, though downplaying some social issues, such as abortion, in order to win.

Over the last couple of years, labor and left candidates have reappeared on the national radar, most spectacularly with the Seattle City Council victory of Kshama Sawant in 2013. The leading left challenger nationally in this election, Howie Hawkins, the Green Party candidate for governor of New York—who had been polling as high as 9 percent—in the end received 166,822 votes or 4.78% of the total votes cast. This is a remarkable gain over the 60,000 votes he received in 2010, votes won in part, no doubt, because Working Families Party members, angry at their leadership for backing Cuomo, cast votes for Hawkins in protest. Hawkins received endorsements from a few local Democratic Party clubs and from several local teachers unions, demonstrating that he and his party have the ability to attract from the Democrats’ left wing. In Ohio, according to unofficial tallies, Green Party gubernatorial candidate Anita Rios of Toledo won 99,402 votes, or 3.3 percent of the vote, meaning the party will keep its ballot line status.

In Richmond, California, the anti-Chevron petroleum company candidates swept to victory with longtime politician Tom Butt defeating Nate Bates in the mayoral race, while all three Richmond Progressive Alliance council candidates won their seats. In Richmond Mike Parker, a longtime labor

union activist and self-identified socialist, had dropped out of the mayor's race, stepping aside for Democrat Butt in order to preserve the unity of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, which has for years worked to defend Richmond from Chevron whose refinery dominates the local economy.

In a remarkable showing in the Milwaukee Sheriff's election, former bus driver, union officer, and independent socialist Angela Walker, a first time candidate, came in second with 67,346 votes behind the victor David A. Clarke with 261,489 — that is, Walker won 20 percent of the vote her first time out. Walker's was not the typical sheriff candidate with the usual call for more police; quite the contrary. She argued, "I firmly believe that poverty is violence, and that the gun violence and crime we see on our streets is the outcome of poverty. If we want to honestly address crime in Milwaukee, we need to look at the limitations placed on people in the most affected areas here. We absolutely need living-wage jobs, and safe transit to get people to and from their jobs. We need progressive mental health treatment and drug and alcohol treatment that is dignified and available to anyone who needs it. We need to stop incarcerating people for drug possession, and look at addiction not as a criminal offense, but a matter of public health. People need safe and decent housing."

### **The Presidential Election of 2016**

While the Republicans have done well in the mid-term elections this by no means assures them of success in the presidential and congressional elections of 2016. Hillary Clinton will in all likelihood be the Democratic Party presidential candidate, while the Republicans may find it difficult to unite around a candidate. The liabilities of the leading contenders are many: New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's "bridgegate" scandal and bullying behavior make him unattractive to many. Texas Senator Ted Cruz's anti-abortion, pro-gun, and other far right positions may make him too conservative for most American voters. Libertarian Rand Paul could not win the confidence of the Republican elite. The nomination could go to former two-term Florida governor Jeb Bush, though he would have to live down the legacy of his brother George W. Bush's disastrous presidency.

Though they are well positioned now, it is altogether possible that by 2016 the tide which turned so powerfully against the Democrats may turn again, this time against the Republicans. Hillary Clinton will not have Obama's 2008 advantage of being a fresh face and an unknown; her ties to the New York economic elites, to the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and her hawkish attitudes are well known. Therefore, if Clinton is to win the 2016 elections, she will have to revive the electorate, particularly women, African Americans, Latinos, and working people with the same sorts of false promises that carried Obama to the presidency. Clinton and the Democrats will have an increasingly hard time convincing most Americans that they are on their side and represent their best interests.

Democratic progressives and liberals like Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York will be absolutely necessary to help the fundamentally conservative Hillary Clinton win the presidential election. Their job will be to defend the party's left flank from raids by the Green Party and socialist candidates in an election where every vote may count. The Democrats may also need to find another figure like Rev. Jesse Jackson who in the 1988 election rounded up discontented African Americans, Latinos, and working class white voters who were straying from the flock and brought them back to the party—with the usual results.

### **The Elections, the Unions, and the Movements**

The AFL-CIO and the major African American, Latino, women's, and LGBT organizations remain committed, as always, to supporting the Democratic Party, believing that they can have more influence with Democrats than Republicans. Most American working people don't share that confidence as revealed by the high level of non-voting and votes cast for Republican candidates. The

left's task remains to build independent workers' and social movements that can also exert an independent political influence. The continuing economic malaise and the likelihood of recurring economic crises combined with the continuing attack on social programs provides the basis for building such movements with the goal of supporting campaigns such as those of Sawant and Hawkins as the way to a larger and more powerful political alternative independent of the two pro-corporate mainstream parties.