

# Strategic Reflections on the Quadrennial Extravaganza

April 29, 2012

The quadrennial presidential election extravaganza is here and along with it comes the quadrennial intra-U.S. leftist bloodletting on the unpleasant question of how to best respond to the narrow "choices" handed down by the nation's corporate-managed one-and-a-half party system. The conservative corporate and imperial records of the Democratic Jimmy Carter (1977-1981), Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and Barack Obama (2008-21??) administrations have been richly consistent with Upton Sinclair's observation more than a century ago that "*the two political parties are two wings of the same bird of prey*. The people are allowed to choose between their candidates, and both of them are controlled, and all their nominations are dictated by, the same [money] power."

How might we on the left best respond to the latest big money, big media, narrow-spectrum, and candidate-centered election spectacle? I am aware of three basic positions:

**1. Hold your Nose and Vote Democrat to Block Republicans.** This position holds that Republicans are so terrible that serious progressives should vote "for" the Democratic incumbent (however "disappointing" he or she may have been to liberal and progressive supporters) to block the G.O.P. Block the proto-fascistic Republican troglodytes and then work for progressive change beneath and beyond the elections.

One variation on the nose-holding counsel articulated by the leading radical intellectual Noam Chomsky comes with two key caveats. The first qualification holds that you remain free to protest vote for a third (or fourth or fifth, etc.) party presidential candidate in "uncontested states"—states where one of the major party candidates already has an Electoral College victory sewn up before the election. Chomsky has advised leftists to vote Democratic in contested states on the grounds that the differences between the two leading business and imperial parties are not irrelevant to many disadvantaged people (more on this below). Those differences might seem small to privileged leftists but they matter to millions living at the bottom of concentrated power systems like the United States.

The second Chomsky caveat (also a major point made by Howard Zinn) counsels against fetishizing the ballot moment. It holds that what you do (or don't do) in a voting booth for two minutes once every 4 years is a *relatively tiny part of your political activism*. "Serious ['left'] political action" is about building grassroots social movements with the power to shake the society and its politics from the bottom up on the model of the labor movement in the 1930s and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. That's how real change occurs.

**2. "Vote Your Hopes Not Your Fears."** Since both of the dominant parties and their candidates are egregiously capitalist and imperial and we do (in most states) have the option of voting for third party left candidates, this position holds, serious progressives must always (even in contested states) vote outside the corporate duopoly. Always "vote your hopes, not your fears!"

**3. Ignore/Boycott/Mock.** The personalized electoral spectacles that the masters stage for us every 4 years are such potent exercises in bamboozling the citizenry and creating the illusion of democracy that the best thing is to ignore or perhaps boycott them. As the early 20th century U.S. left anarchist Emma Goldman once said, "if voting made any difference they'd make it illegal." Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies ran a pig ("Pigasus") for president in 1968 to make this point.

While my own voting behavior has tended to alternate between positions 2 and 3, these standpoints strike me as unimpressive for four basic reasons. First, "left" candidates never have the slightest chance of making more than a tiny dent in the American "winner- take-all" elections system (which is not going to be constitutionally overhauled between now and the first Tuesday in November 2012). That system is stacked against left "contenders" and those contenders' inevitably pathetic showing ends up reinforcing the false notion that left and progressive policy positions find little favor among the populace.

Second, Chomsky is right about small differences mattering for millions under systems of concentrated power. The fact that a Republican president will attack the welfare state to a somewhat greater degree than a Democratic president might seem like small potatoes to a radical intellectual claiming to advocate workers' control, but it is not irrelevant to a poor family that cannot afford to lose its Food Stamps, unemployment benefits, Medicaid and/or public family cash assistance.

Third, while advocates of positions 2 and 3 often note correctly (if obviously) that Democrats are far better than the Republicans at co-opting progressives, those advocates do little to disabuse citizens of the notion that the former represent a meaningful progressive alternative to the G.O.P. They may actually further that illusion, actually, because their voting/non-voting recommendations increase the likelihood of Republican victory and having Republicans in power reinforces many liberals' and progressives' false belief that the nation's problems can be reduced largely to the fact that Republicans are in charge. When the Republican trademark spoils as it did under George W. Bush in his second term, the ruling class remains free to generate the illusion of meaningful "change" by pulling the G.O.P brand from the shelf and putting the Democratic product (generally advertised as "hope" and "change") out front for a while.

Fourth, Chomsky is right about what constitutes "serious political action" and the third party candidates for whom I have marked ballots in the past (including Nader in 2008) never seem to leave anything behind in the way of social movements.

It would seem that I am arguing for a simple return to position #1. Not quite. As Glenn Greenwald has argued, the price of Chomsky's "small differences that matter" is not the only ethical calculus to consider in approaching the voting/non-voting dilemma. We must also weigh the cost of telling the Democrats that they and not the only other party that can actually defeat them (under the current elections system) can count on our votes, pretty much no matter how clearly they act in accord with Sinclair's dictum.

As it happens, there's a different, rarely noted strategic and radical case for wanting the Democratic wing of the bird of prey to "win." This case has nothing to do with "lesser evilist" thinking and everything to do with exposing the corporate and imperial Democrats for what they really are. Let's call it *Position 4: the Hope of More Bipartisan Disillusionment*. Left adherents of positions 2 and 3 are correct to worry about the role of the Democratic Party in co-opting rank and file social and political movements and popular energies. But how, Position 4 asks, are the Democrats best revealed as agents of the unelected and interrelated dictatorships of money and empire? Which is better for the development of "serious," and I would add lasting, "political action" (grassroots, and non-co-opt-able citizen and workers' activism and organization) beyond the masters' quadrennial electoral extravaganzas—(A) radically regressive Republicans holding nominal power or (B) dismal dollar Democrats sitting atop the symbolic ship of state?

The answer according to advocates of Position 4 is clearly B. It would be best, this position (mine) holds, to get Obama back for a second term for two key reasons. First (let's be honest), the intensity of the corporate and social-conservative assault on the U.S. populace *will* be somewhat less severe

under Obama's second term than under Mitt Romney's (or Rock Santorum's) first term. Second and most important (since the main task is to get serious left sociopolitical movements underway), the presence of another Republican in the White House will just encourage liberals and progressives and others to blame everything wrong in America on "those insane evil Republicans." That just leaves elite power centers free to tamp down the resulting popular anger by bringing the Democrats back in the names of "hope" and "change"—the keywords of both Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign and Obama's 2008 campaign.

I wanted Obama to win the 2008 election for what might strike some as a strange reason. I hoped Obama would triumph because I thought there was radical potential in U.S. voters and citizens, especially younger ones, experiencing the aforementioned dictatorships under a Democratic administration that seemed to offer special promise of progressive change. I wanted Americans (young ones above all) to come into more direct and visible contact with the bipartisan nature of the American imperial and business system and to confront the gap between their expectations of transformation and the harsh reality of persistent top-down corporate, financial and military rule with the "dismal Dems" (Doug Henwood's term) at the outward helm of the ship of state. I wanted them to be subjected to the reality that, to quote the Marxist commentator Doug Henwood nearly four years ago, *"everything still pretty much sucks" when Democrats hold the top political offices—that the basic underlying institutional realities of capitalist and imperial rule stay the same.* As the antiwar activist, author, and essayist Stan Goff noted two years ago, "I'm glad Obama was elected. Otherwise, people would blame the war on McCain and the Republicans and continue with the delusion that elections can be our salvation."

Radicals want workers and citizens to grasp that the real problem is not which of the two wings holds political office but the rule of capital and Empire behind the charade that passes for democracy. Having Democrats in office is strategically preferable for the Left because it helps bring that lesson home.

My dark dialectical hope for Obama has been born out by the rise of the Occupy Movement, which fed off youthful disillusionment with Obama and the Democrats—a bursting of political "hope" bubbles that followed two years after the bursting of the real estate and financial bubble to fuel disenchantment with the underlying profits system. Obama has been a great object lesson in the wisdom of something that the great American radical historian Howard Zinn once wrote: "the really critical thing isn't who's sitting in the White House, but who is sitting in—in the streets, in the cafeterias, in the halls of government, in the factories. Who is protesting, who is occupying offices and demonstrating—those are the things that determine what happens."

Bringing back a Republican to the White House will reinforce the longstanding liberal claim that installing Democrats in power is the cure to the national malaise. We can't bypass the confusion and co-optation created by the Democrats by indirectly voting in Republicans. We can't dance around the Democratic Party problem. Like the Civil Rights Movement and New Left in the 1960s and the "old" Left and industrial workers movement in the 1930s and 1940s, we have to develop and sustain our abilities to mobilize, march, occupy, strike, organize, strategize, and develop radical vision when Democrats hold office.

*Paul Street is the author of numerous books, including Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis (2007), Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics (2008), The Empire's New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power (2010) and (co-authored with Anthony DiMaggio) Crashing the Tea Party (Paradigm, 2011).*

[This article is part of a symposium on the elections organized by *New Politics*.]