

The Great Fear in the Face of a Historic Opportunity

written by Ted Zuur | October 23, 2024



Destruction in Gaza from Wikicommons

Every day we receive new confirmation that the two-party political regime of US imperialism is crumbling. Donald Trump, his minions, their Project 2025 and their Supreme Court herald the end of times.

Yet, many have hope that there is a savior for the wonderful two-party system: Kamala Harris. She has done what Biden and Bernie Sanders could not do: rallied the Democrats and raised the nearly dead party from the grave it was marching into. Harris is going to win the popular vote, and may even lead the Democrats to taking control of both houses of congress.

Nevertheless, Harris cannot heal the ruptured political system. It is on its last legs and will be replaced. The MAGA GOP sees an authoritarian one-party GOP system as its only way out of its long-term crisis while the Democrats may end up imposing its own one-party system when it fails to save the dead bipartisan system. Another possibility also exists: a crisis ridden multiparty system like the one that Colombia now has after it ditched its two-party system.

What happens will determine the future. So far, most of the left in the United States is acting out of fear rather than recognizing the historic opportunity presented in this crisis.

Why not dump lesser-evilism?

In moral terms, lesser-evilism means supporting evil. To get around this uncomfortable truth, DSA and other leftists who support the Democratic Party talk about the catastrophic consequences of a Trump presidency, just as their grandparents talked about the catastrophic consequences of a Goldwater or Nixon victory.

In 1964, the Students for a Democratic Society supported Lyndon Baines Johnson for President. Johnson's slogan was "All of the way with LBJ". The SDS came up with "Half of the way with LBJ." They meant they supported Johnson's domestic agenda and opposed his immoral, barbaric, colonial war against Vietnam. Following LBJ's election, the antiwar movement became massive, the ghetto rebellions exploded, SDS splintered, and a leftist third party movement grew.

"Half of the way with LBJ" was morally bankrupt. Today, support for Kamala Harris is just as morally bankrupt.

Just as the left should have been 100% against LBJ and his criminal war in Vietnam, today, we must be unequivocally on the side of Ukraine, and unequivocally on the side of Palestine. These are the Vietnam Wars of our time.

Practically speaking, support for the Democrats demobilizes mass struggles. In contrast, a working-class party independent of the Democrats could use election campaigns to boost the struggle in the streets rather than demobilize it.

The Political Regime of the United States

The USA's political regime was the result of four great events in human history: the Glorious Revolution of England in 1688, the American Revolution in 1776, and the American Civil War in the 1860's, and the USA's permanent genocidal war against Native America.

Even today, when the armies have drones that use AI, this bourgeois political regime exists to mobilize the common citizenry for warfare based on masses of rifle bearing foot soldiers.

With malice aforethought, the "Founding Fathers" excluded five groups from democratic full rights and participation in the state: indigenous people, enslaved people, all women, all children, and white men without property. These exclusions, essential to the new state, were "natural" to the founding fathers whose power was based on the principle of divide and rule.

The famous Constitutional "balance of powers" was predicated on divide and conquer, political exclusions, and the peculiar social regime of Great Britain's North American colonies.

Their corollary was the unwritten 17th century social contract that promised "free" white men a share of the land expropriated from Native Americans in return for service in the colonial militias fighting the permanent offensive against Native America.

The original Jacksonian system that collapsed in the US Civil War was restored as today's two-party system in the compromise of 1877. It ended reconstruction, instituted the rule of Jim Crow, and put Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican's candidate in the White House. Southern white vigilantes had used widespread terror to suppress the votes of black freedmen, drive black Republicans out of local government offices and Congress, and tilt the 1876 presidential elections towards the Democratic Party candidate. With the Electoral College unable to come a decision, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives.

This later became the model for Trump's attempted coup in 2020, a model that is likely to be used again this year.

The compromise of 1877 restored the system of apartheid minus legal chattel slavery, and put Hayes in the White House where he predictably and reliably, called out the army to break the Great Railroad strike of 1877.

In other words, the current two-party system was established through Jim Crow in the South and the suppression of unions in the north and the West. It precluded the very notion of any sort of mass working-class party.

The struggle for the right to vote

Nevertheless, the exclusionary bases of the political regime have been steadily undermined by struggles for democratic and social rights.

Women finally gained the right to vote nationwide after the First World War. Black voting rights, guaranteed in word by Reconstruction era Amendments to the Constitution, were finally realized by the civil rights struggles and ghetto rebellions of the 1960's.

Still, around 45 million people are excluded partially or completely from voting in the United States: 6 million Americans with felony and misdemeanor convictions; 3.5 million US citizens in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and other US colonies, 23 million documented and undocumented immigrants, and all politically active people under the age of 18 years.

Hard won voting rights gains have deep social consequences: they contribute to the breakdown of racial and gender barriers within the working class and undermine divide and rule, and political exclusion of the oppressed.

The extra-constitutional edifice

The two-party system functions through state and federal law, the rules of the two parties themselves, and de facto agreements within the ruling class to deny real ballot access to any other political party. Five basic mechanisms prevent the rise of third parties: an expensive and Byzantine bureaucracy that would-be parties must successfully thread to gain and maintain ballot status; a winner take all system of geographic districts and states; a mass media monopoly by the bourgeoisie; simple repression; and cooptation.

Both parties are cross-class alliances. Sectors of the working class and petty bourgeoisie, the masses of voters, are tied to coalitions of fractions of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois coalitions set the policies and the rules of the game, and the working class and petty bourgeois voters are then allowed a choice of poisons.

The capitalist coalitions at the top provide the lion's share of the money that pays the salaries of the parties' professional cadre, choose the candidates, and have an outsized voice on platform and policy. Connecting those coalitions to their mass voter bases are thousands of party cadre including elected office holders, paid party officials, and the personnel of various think tanks and PACs.

From the earliest days, the heart of the Democratic Party has been merchants and bankers. They were the link for Southern slave agricultural exports to Europe and continued to be the link between the United States and Europe after the US Civil War temporarily disrupted that relation.

The Democrat's added two mass voter bases: racist white southern small landowners and mostly Catholic Irish immigrants in New York and other antebellum cities. Their northern mass voter base later expanded to include most other Catholic immigrants and most Jewish and Eastern Orthodox immigrants.

As the USA grew through warfare and conquest, a new capitalist coalition became the heart of the new Republican Party: construction and operation of railroads in the newly conquered west, the new steel industry, and the part of finance capital based on western land speculation. Its mass voter base consisted of land hungry small settler farmers who wanted to expand into the great plains west of the Mississippi River and on to the Pacific. The great majority were Protestants immigrants or descendants of Protestant immigrants from Northern Europe.

The Republican Party, correctly so, called itself the party of business.

In 1860, the election of Abraham Lincoln on a platform of outlawing slavery in any new states admitted to the union blew the system up. The two-party system failed, and the Civil War began.

Since restoration in 1877, the two cross-class coalitions survived remarkably well.

One major change set the system onto the path towards the crisis it is now in. In the 1960s, the Democratic Party under John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson betrayed southern white racists by making an alliance with the Civil Rights movement. By 1972, the almost the entirety of the Southern Democratic Party machine had moved into the GOP.

Die-hard white racist Democrats suddenly became the most vociferous Republican voters.

The Great Switch meant that the Republicans alone had both mass bases of reaction, and that the Democrats had almost the whole of the working-class voter base: black, white, Asian, and Latino.

The Gender Gap, Farmers, and Science

Both coalitions have also undergone major cumulative impacts that contribute to the political regime's current crisis.

In 1920, the first presidential election in which women could vote, most women voted Republican. From 1932 to 1992, women slowly moved into the Democratic Party. Since that year, more women have voted for the Democratic candidate than the Republican candidate in every election. From 1980 to 2020, the majority of male voters have voted for the Republican candidate in every election except for two: those in 1992 and 2008.

As of this writing, Harris has a 21% advantage over Trump among likely women voters in the latest poll, while Trump has a 12-point advantage over Harris among likely male voters.

This change mirrors the decline of the patriarchal family system: more and more women work outside of the family household, more and more women exercise their right to divorce, and - with safe birth control and the right to choose an abortion - women gained control over their own bodies that had never before been experienced.

It also reflects a change in Republican political strategy. The extreme right wing of the Republican Party's successful mobilization against the Equal Rights Amendment led to the 1979 foundation of the "Moral Majority" against women's rights. Its appeal to Christian fundamentalism mobilized rightwing Protestant votes while splitting the Democrat's Catholic voting block.

Its success put Ronald Reagan into the White House.

Currently, the gender gap is wider than at any time in recent history: 48% of women voters intend to vote for Harris while only 35% intend to vote for Trump, but 47% of male voters intend to vote for Trump while only 39% intend to vote for Harris.

Republican decline is also due to a decrease in the number of small farms to less than two million, and to the drift of the technical, professional, and scientific sectors of the working class and petty away from the Republicans, a result of the GOP's turn to Christian fundamentalism and against science

The post WWII offensive against unions and the consequent decline of the post-WWII labor aristocracy undermined the Democrat's mass voter base. It was intertwined with the movement of industrial capital out of heavily unionized US regions which, together with the container revolution and the computer revolution, has lately been dubbed *globalization*.

The results include a decline in unions' bargaining power and union membership, and a decline in the standards of living of many sectors of the working class, especially the mostly white and male labor aristocracy.

Disaffection in the Democratic Party's mass voter base led to the failed U.S. Labor Party project in the 1990s and then to Donald Trump's experiment to mobilize these voters behind the GOP, a project that has had small but significant success.

Social Classes in the United States

If we define social class by relationships to social production and reproduction, it is evident that there are three main classes in the United States: the working class, the petty bourgeoisie, and the big bourgeoisie. Each is divided into various fractions and strata.

The big bourgeoisie consists of about four million households (owners of the top 10% of small businesses plus owners of the 20,000 largest businesses plus a factor for wealth). The main part of the petty bourgeoisie consists of the 29,500,000 small businesses owners and their families.

The heart of the working class is the 78.7 million workers who are paid hourly wages. The 70,274,000 people classified as professionals occupy the gray zone where the working class overlaps with the petty bourgeoisie. They include many union members in education and healthcare but also managers, business owners, and lawyers.

Another intermediate layer consists of workers who are homeowners, landlords, and/or small business owners.

Today, at the end of 2024, the working class of the United States *appears* to have almost no class consciousness. Our class identifies struggles as women's struggles, immigrant struggles, black struggles, trade union struggles, student struggles, solidarity struggles, but it is not conscious of itself as one social class fighting on all of these fronts. Therefore, it sees no reason to form a socialist or working-class party.

Nevertheless, *appearances* can be deceiving. Slowly, the struggles of black people, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ people for equal rights have changed the whole working class. Today a black man, a white woman, and their child can go shopping without fear in Arlington, Texas. Today, two men can walk down the street holding hands without fear in many, but not all, parts of the United States.

The new working class of the United States is young, multiracial, multicultural and includes almost equal numbers of men and women. Today, unions reflect this, and new struggles to organize the unorganized reflect this even more.

The deeper problems of capitalist society

During the 20th century, capitalism produced two World Wars, a plethora of smaller but very deadly wars, one Great Depression and many social revolutions, the two most noteworthy of which occurred in the Russian Empire and China. Today, the very idea of independent "national" economies has become surreal, and arguments about "socialism in one country" have faded into the past: not only is socialism impossible in one country, capitalism has become impossible in one country.

Globalization has turned everything upside down everywhere, but on top of those changes,

capitalism has created an even greater threat to human society: global warming. Not surprisingly, the capitalist classes of the world have failed to seriously address our planet's life-threatening condition.

Today's two-party system

The Democratic Party has been loath to actively work for any kinds of serious reforms in the system that would alter capitalist relations of production and social reproduction to the benefit of its working class voter base. They have been able to maintain their appearance as the lesser evil mostly by appearing to defend the status quo of reforms won by the mass movements of the 1930's to the 1970's.

On the other hand, the Republican Party faces a serious and intractable long-term problem: “the party of business” can never be a majority party in a modern capitalist economy. They have two possible solutions to this permanent problem: disenfranchisement of working-class voters or enticement of sufficient numbers of working class voters to choose the GOP as the lesser evil instead of the Democrats.

The Republicans have tried both.

The GOP tries to attract the most backward and reactionary working-class voters to replace and enhance the stagnant, dying GOP voter base of farmers and small business owners. Their efforts have produced a reactionary and rotten salad of racists, religious fundamentalists, misogynists, anti-vaxxers, gun lovers, neo-fascists and conspiracy theorists.

By the 21st century, it was ripe for the eating by a reactionary demagogue. Several contenders appeared, but Trump was hired. He then pulled the GOP’s voter base out from under the feet of the traditional Republican Party business establishment. Later the voters fired him.

Now, older and even more reactionary, his comeback try is backed by an important minority of the wealthiest capitalists and large numbers of smaller capitalists.

Trump’s shrill appeals to the rotten salad are well known. Nevertheless, even the addition of rotten pieces of society has not stopped the decline of the GOP’s mass voter base.

A large majority of eligible voters are workers, and their great majority are young, women, and people of color. Past struggles broke down barriers of race, gender and ethnicity to the point that they are weaker now than they have ever been before, especially among younger workers.

Consequently, MAGA’s efforts to resurrect those barriers have failed, so it is desperately trying to restrict voting rights and steal this year’s election.

The crisis of lesser evilism

The Democratic Party’s quandary mirrors that of the Republican Party.

To maintain its mass voter base, the Democratic Party promises it will protect reforms won in the past, and that it will occasionally do something new to improve people’s lives. However, to keep its capitalist core happy, the Democrats have to chip away at the gains of the past, and rarely come through on promised new reforms.

The Democrats are able to get away with their ruse by blaming every attack on past gains and every failure of new reforms on Republican opposition.

In other words, the Democrats’ existence as the lesser evil party has always depended on having a nearly equal *greater evil party*: the Republicans. Without the GOP, the Democrats will simply become *the evil party*.

Now, the GOP’s abandonment of bipartisanship has set the USA on the path toward an even less democratic political regime. If successful, it will reduce the Democratic Party to a permanent national minority party through voter suppression and other undemocratic measures, and impose even greater barriers on the path to the formation of new political parties.

This is an existential crisis for the Democratic Party whose replacement of Biden with Harris shows that they have finally noticed. Still, they have no strategy to resolve the crisis. If Harris wins, it will

continue.

The Party of No and the Excluded

In the United States, more eligible voters do not vote than vote for either of the two capitalist parties. Most of these nonvoters are young, working class, and not well educated. More often than not, they see the system as a powerful enemy whose representatives are the well-armed and dangerous cops.

Potentially this sector of the working class could be mobilized in the class struggle, including its electoral front.

The Democratic Party fears mobilization of these masses of people as much as it fears MAGA. Nevertheless, this year, the Democrats have fearfully played with fire by trying to mobilize some of these voters. Needless to say, the Democrats are even more afraid of mobilizing the 45 million excluded to fight for themselves.

When non-voters and the excluded come into struggle in the streets, as in the mass immigrant rights movement and Black Lives Matter, the Democratic Party works overtime to repress them and/or coopt their leaders, channel movement remnants into elections, and then leave them with no significant reforms or changes.

A working-class party, independent of the Democrats, could offer something the Democrats cannot: *using elections to boost the struggle in the streets rather than demobilize it.*

The Great Fear

Large doses of fear to motivate voters have been used since elections began: fear of the Indians, fear of the slaves, fear of the British, fear of immigrants, fear of the coming Martian invasion. Trump's entire campaign is just a reprise of old American fear mongering.

Fear is the bourgeoisie's first choice because use of the carrot may require making good on promises.

The flip side of GOP fear mongering is the fear peddled by the Democratic Party. Overtime the Democrats have been afraid of slave revolts, slaves in general, Indians, Lindbergh's America Firsters, Japanese Americans, McCarthyism, the John Birch Society, Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, the Bushes, the Tea Party, and now MAGA.

Long before Joe Biden's disastrous debate performance, the left had been gripped by fear of what another term of Trump in the White House might portend, so in this year's election, fear mongering by Democrats is supposed to keep progressives and the left working in the Democrats' barnyard.

Sometimes, fears are neither delusional nor misplaced. Fear of Trump is not unfounded, but it has been exaggerated. The idea that Trump can be fought in the streets and courts with or without the Democratic Party has been swept under the rug by Democratic vote herders.

The Democratic Party itself seems to be remarkably unafraid of Trump. Kamala Harris acts like she will win, and she has excellent reasons for her optimism. Her lead in the polls is growing, and even Republican states like Texas and Florida may be in play this year. All the results of early voting point to a Harris victory with massive turnouts of key working-class voter bases and especially of young women and people of color.

Scenarios

If they return to power, Trump and the MAGA GOP will try to reverse many reforms won in the past and establish a racist, misogynist, one-party system. Will they succeed? There are major reasons to believe that they will not.

1. The working class and the oppressed of the United States have gained strength and confidence from their low point of consciousness and organization around the turn of the century. The struggle against Trump will return to the streets.
2. Trump's agenda does not have the support of most of the bourgeoisie which is clearly fighting itself within its two parties and outside of them.
3. Government employees, among Trump's main intended victims, will resist.
4. Democratic Party controlled state and local governments will resist.
5. Institutions like the State Department, the military and remnants of the old GOP will resist.

The outcome will be uncertain, as all such struggles have been throughout history.

The left's fear of a second Trump term in the White House is understandable, but *campaigning for the Democrats is wrong because it defends the current genocidal regime of US imperialism.*

The Left in the United States

Most of the organized left in the United States resides in and around the Democratic Party and are objects of the fear peddled by that party.

The Democratic Party is the largest single imperialist political party on the planet, yet the left in the United States mostly sees itself as anti-imperialist. The center of this left is the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). It claims to have over 92,000 members and chapters in all 50 states, and it boasts members of Congress and many lesser elected officials among its members.

Outside of the Democratic Party are various left groups ranging from the more or less ecosocialist Green Party, the largest ballot qualified party outside of the Democrats and Republicans, to the neo-Stalinist Party of Socialism and Liberation (PSL).

How many left activists there are in the United States? 50,000 is a conservative estimate, but if you count up the activists of the movement in Solidarity with Palestine, the womens', LGBTQ+, immigrant rights, and Black Lives Matter movements, and then add in a significant minority of union activists, the number is probably much larger.

Most of the left hopes the Democratic Party ship will not sink, but what if it does not? Will President Harris continue to arm Israel's genocidal war against Palestine? Will she crack down on the border? Will she make good on her promises?

The left should finally break with the most important party of imperialism in the world. If it does, history and current circumstances tell us that it can rapidly become a mass party of the working class and oppressed.