

Noam Chomsky: Moral Depravity Defines US Politics



The US midterm elections of November 6, 2018, produced a divided Congress and essentially reaffirmed the existence of two nations in one country. But they also revealed, once again, the deep state of moral and political depravity that prevails in the country's political culture — at least insofar as political campaigns go. In the exclusive interview below, world-renowned scholar and public intellectual Noam Chomsky discusses how the major issues confronting the United States and the world at large were barely addressed by the majority of candidates of both parties.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, with people still arguing about winners and losers from the 2018 midterm elections (and there is clearly a lot to say about what those elections mean), what do you consider to be the most striking features of the latest manifestation of American democracy in action?

Noam Chomsky: The most striking features are brutally clear.

Humanity faces two imminent existential threats: environmental catastrophe and nuclear war. These were virtually ignored in the campaign rhetoric and general coverage. There was plenty of criticism of the Trump administration, but scarcely a word about by far the most ominous positions the administration has taken: increasing the already dire threat of nuclear war, and racing to destroy the physical environment that organized human society needs in order to survive.

These are the most critical and urgent questions that have arisen in all of human history. The fact that they scarcely arose in the campaign is truly stunning — and carries some important, if unpleasant, lessons about our moral and intellectual culture.

To be sure, not everyone was ignoring these matters. They were front and center for those who are constantly vigilant in their bitter class war to preserve their immense power and privilege. Several states had important ballot initiatives

addressing the impending environmental catastrophe. The fossil fuel industry spent huge, sometimes record-breaking, sums to defeat the initiatives — including a carbon tax in the mostly Democratic state of Washington — and mostly succeeded.

We should recognize that these are extraordinary crimes against humanity. They proceed with little notice.

The Democrats helped defeat these critically important initiatives by ignoring them. They scarcely mentioned them “in digital or TV ads, in their campaign literature or on social media,” a [New York Times survey](#) found. Nor, of course, were they mentioned by the Republicans, whose leadership is dedicated to driving humanity off the cliff as soon as possible — in full knowledge of what they are doing, as easily demonstrated.

The Times article goes on to explain that “Environmental activists and political scientists say it is a reflection of the issue’s perpetual low ranking among voters, even Democratic voters, and of the intense polarization along party lines that has developed around global warming.” The article failed to add that this assessment is an incredible indictment of the country and its political, social, economic and media institutions, all of which, so the assessment claims, have sunk to such a level of depravity that the question of whether organized human society can survive in any minimally tolerable form, in the near future, is of little consequence.

Whether that unspoken indictment is correct, we cannot be sure. It is perhaps of some significance that one Democratic candidate, Sean Casten, flipped a Republican district while [making impending climate disaster the centerpiece of his campaign](#).

There is plenty of competition for moral depravity in the current remarkable moment of human history. Perhaps the prize goes to a bureaucracy, maybe in honor of Kafka: Trump’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Right in the midst of the campaign, it produced a detailed study calling for an end to regulations on emissions, with a rational argument: extrapolating current trends, it turns out that by the end of the century the game will be over. Automotive emissions don’t contribute very much to the catastrophe, so there isn’t any point trying to limit them.

In brief, let's rob while the planet burns, putting poor Nero in the shadows.

This surely qualifies as a contender for the most evil document in history. Again, not an issue in the campaign.

There have been many monsters in the past ... but it would be hard to find one who was dedicated to undermining the prospects for survival of organized human society, not in the distant future — in order to put a few more dollars in overstuffed pockets.

It's hard to find words to describe what is happening before our eyes.

The same is true of the second truly existential threat: nuclear war. A few weeks before the election, Trump announced that the US is withdrawing from the INF treaty, which eliminated short-range missiles deployed in Western Europe and Russia — extremely hazardous weapons, which have only a few minutes flight-time to Moscow, posing a decapitation threat, a sudden attack that would destroy any possibility of response. That, of course, sharply increases the danger of a nuclear response to warnings given by automated systems that have often failed in the past, thus ending all of us.

Anyone familiar with the record knows that it's a virtual miracle that we have so far avoided terminal nuclear war. The threat, which was already grave, was heightened by the Trump nuclear posture review that authorized new destabilizing weapons and lowered the threshold for nuclear attack. This latest move increases the threat further. Scarcely a mention on the campaign trail or in coverage.

The US is withdrawing from the treaty on the grounds that China is not a partner and that the Russians have violated it — they in turn claim that the US has violated it. It's plain how to address these problems: through inspections and diplomacy, neither of which has been attempted. Rather, let's just blithely increase the threat of total destruction. And let's ignore all of this in the vast outpourings during the political campaign.

Again, we have to ask some serious questions about the prevailing moral and intellectual culture — and about the urgency of providing remedies, very soon.

Let's put aside what are merely the most significant questions in human history,

and turn to what is within the realm of discussion.

A striking fact about the election is that it once again demonstrated the failure of the Democratic Party as a whole to deal with issues that matter to working people. While working-class people of color largely supported the Democratic Party, even more than before, the party lost the non-college educated white population. What's more, it seems to be of little concern, at least to Democratic Party leaders, the "Wall Street Democrats" as they are sometimes called. They were exultant about their successes in the affluent suburbs, where normally Republican voters were disgusted by Trump's vulgarity. Whether they come naturally or are feigned, Trump's antics help keep his white working-class constituency in line while his party stabs them in the back at every turn, meanwhile serving its real constituency, great wealth and corporate power, with impressive dedication.

The betrayal of working-class America could hardly be clearer, though fortunately, some are breaking free of the treachery. One positive feature of the midterms was the success of a diverse group of young progressive candidates, mostly women — a tribute to the popular activism of recent years, and a hopeful sign for the future, if it can expand and flourish.

On the surface, it seems that Trump's success with much of the voting constituency can be attributed to racist and xenophobic appeals, particularly concerning the imminent threat of "invasion" by hordes of terrorists and criminals approaching our borders that he focused his tantrums on up to the election - then dropping the topic when it was no longer needed to rally the faithful.

Few seem to have recalled that Trump was pulling a leaf from Reagan's playbook. In 1985, our intrepid leader strapped on his cowboy boots and declared a national emergency because Nicaraguan troops were a two days' drive from Harlingen, Texas — and people didn't collapse in laughter. Trump made a similar move in warning that if people fleeing from misery and oppression (misery and oppression for which we are largely responsible) reach our borders they'll try to kill us all. Heavily armed militias travelled to the border to back up the thousands of troops deployed to defend us, and it seems to have worked. Surveys report that people did vote for Trump because only he could save us from destruction by these criminal hordes. That also carries some lessons.

But when we ask why Trump's strategy works, we find something deeper, which extends pretty much worldwide, with particularities from place to place. In conditions of economic distress, a sense of hopelessness, justified contempt for institutions, and understandable anger and resentment about what is being done to them, people can become easy prey to demagogues who direct their anger toward scapegoats, typically those even more vulnerable, and who foster the symptoms that tend to rise to the surface under such circumstances. That's been happening, worldwide. We see it in election after election in many countries, and in other ways.

In the US, working-class people have suffered 40 years of stagnation while wealth concentrates in very few hands, leading to staggering inequality. The Democrats have ignored all this, and worse, have carried forward the neoliberal policies that took off with Reagan and Thatcher and have imposed these consequences, by design. And for the designers, the neoliberal programs have been brilliantly successful, in ways that we need not review here.

Despite low unemployment, wage growth, after a rise in 2014-15, is now barely keeping up with inflation while corporate profits are skyrocketing, particularly for the predatory financial institutions, which emerged from the crisis for which they were responsible even richer and more powerful than before. A side effect is that the country's wealth is being shifted from R&D, innovation and product development, to financial transactions in the interests of the very rich. Fine for them, but disastrous for the health and future of the society.

The concentration of wealth and enhancement of corporate power translate automatically to decline of democracy. Research in academic political science has revealed that a large majority of voters are literally disenfranchised, in that their own representatives pay no attention to their wishes but listen to the voices of the donor class. It is furthermore well established that elections are pretty much bought: electability, hence policy, is predictable with remarkable precision from the single variable of campaign spending, both for the executive and Congress. [Thomas Ferguson's work](#) is particularly revealing, going far back and including the 2016 election. And that is a bare beginning. Legislation is commonly shaped, even written, by corporate lobbyists, while representatives who sign it have their eyes on funding for the next election.

The midterms highlighted other ominous developments. The Republicans

increased their Senate majority — with barely 40 percent of the votes cast. Right now, 60 senators are elected by states with 25 percent of the population, which means some 15 percent of the vote (mostly rural, white, religious, skeptical of science, heavily armed). And the tendency is increasing. It's hard to see how some form of civil conflict can be avoided unless the Democrats reverse course sharply and become a political party that doesn't simply abandon the working class to its bitter class enemy, as they have done for 40 years.

How do we explain the fact that while US politics seems nastier, more polarized and more divided than any other time in recent history, both parties stay away from addressing the most critical issues facing the country and the world at large?

In 1895, the highly successful campaign manager Mark Hanna famously said: "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is *money*, and I can't remember what the second one is."

Those who control the wealth of the country have their own priorities, primarily self-enrichment and enhancement of decision-making power. And these are the priorities that prevail in a neoliberal democracy with the annoying public dismissed to the back rooms where they belong.

The CEOs of major banks surely understand the extraordinary threat of environmental catastrophe but are increasing investment in fossil fuels because that's where the money is. Like the energy corporations, they are hardly eager to support candidates warning of the serious crimes they are committing. Lockheed-Martin and its cohorts are quite happy to see vast increases in the military budget and are surely delighted with such declarations as the Trump administration's [new National Defense Strategy](#), just [released by the US Institute of Peace](#) (lacking a sense of irony, the bureaucracy is quite happy to caricature Orwell).

This somber document warns that our dangerously depleted military, which almost overwhelms the rest of the world combined, might not be able to prevail in a two-front war against Russia and China. Of course, neither military industry nor the distinguished authors of the report believe that such a war could even be fought without terminal destruction, but it's a great way to siphon taxpayer dollars away from absurdities like health and education and into the deserving pockets of the captains of industry and finance.

Not many political figures will dare to dismiss such awesome threats to our security.

As for the nastiness, it's largely a result of the drift to the right of both parties during the neoliberal years, the Democrats becoming what used to be called "moderate Republicans" (or often worse) and the Republicans drifting off the spectrum, with devotion to wealth and corporate power so extreme that they cannot possibly win elections on their actual policies. They have therefore been compelled to mobilize voting constituencies on "cultural issues," diverting attention away from actual policies. To keep them in line, it's natural for the leadership to demonize the political opposition as not merely wrong but intent on demolishing their most deeply held values — and for the latter to resort to contempt for the "deplorables." Soon antagonisms degenerate to warfare.

There are many illustrations of how the Republican leadership has sought to organize a voting constituency, some of which we've discussed before. One revealing case is [abortion rights](#). In the '60s, the Republican Party was strongly pro-choice, including the leadership (Reagan, Ford, George H.W. Bush and others). Same with voters. In 1972, two-thirds of Republicans believed abortion to be a private matter, with no government involvement.

Nixon and his cohorts realized that they could attract the Catholic vote, traditionally Democratic, by adopting an anti-abortion plank. Later in the '70s, evangelicals began to organize for political action. Among their demands was maintaining segregated schools. Republican operative Paul Weyrich recognized an opportunity. An open call for segregated schools wouldn't work, but if the Republican Party pretended to oppose abortion, it could pick up the huge evangelical vote, now a core part of Trump's voting base. The leadership accordingly shifted to passionate "pro-life" advocates, including those who it is sometimes believed had some character and honesty, like Bush I, who shifted along with the rest.

Meanwhile the actual constituency of the Republican Party remains great wealth and corporate power, even more dramatically so under Trump. It is quite an achievement to serve this actual constituency with dedication while maintaining a hold on the voting base.

As their voting base shrinks, Republican leaders understand that the GOP is

becoming a minority party, which is why they are so dedicated to finding modes of voter suppression and packing the courts with reactionaries who will support their efforts.

It should also be noted that popular opinion differs from the party leadership on many central issues. But as already mentioned, since the majority of the population is disenfranchised, it doesn't matter much. To take just one example, for 40 years of polling the population has strongly favored higher taxes on the rich — as taxes on the rich decline.

Bernie Sanders was re-elected to the Senate while his protégé Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won a smashing victory over her Republican opponent for New York's 14th District and became, in fact, the youngest woman elected to Congress. In fact, there are now probably as many Democratic Socialists in the House as there are conservative Democrats, so the question is whether progressives should go on to form a third party or try to change the Democratic Party from within. What's your take on this matter?

In the 18th century, with all of its extreme flaws, the US constitutional system was a major step forward in democratic participation as compared with Europe. Even the concept "we the people," though grossly misleading, was a conceptual breakthrough. Over the years, however, by comparative standards the system increasingly ranks as quite regressive. It is doubtful, for example, that Europe would admit a country with the US system as a new member. In particular, the system is radically rigged against any challenge to the governing duopoly. To develop a basis for a third party would require a serious and sustained effort in popular mobilization — not impossible, but not now on the horizon. There do seem to be possibilities to shift the character of the Democratic Party, at least back to its modern New Deal origins, and beyond (it already is considerably beyond in some respects as a result of the civilizing effect of the activism of the '60s and its aftermath).

There are possibilities for development of independent parties, beginning at the local level, adopting fusion policies for more general elections, perhaps gaining enough traction to take part more actively in the political system.

But we should never forget that electoral politics, while not to be dismissed, should not be the prime focus of serious radical political action, which aims to

change the basic institutions that undergird the political system, to dismantle hegemonic ideologies, and to help develop the kind of mass consciousness that must be the basis for badly — even desperately — needed social and political change.

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