

Trump And The Flawed Nature Of US Democracy: An Interview With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky

Trump's presidential victory exposed to the whole world the flawed nature of the US model of democracy. Beginning January 20, both the country and the world will have to face a political leader with copious conflicts of interest who considers his unpredictable and destructive style to be a leadership asset. In this exclusive interview for [Truthout](#), world-renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky sheds light on the type of democratic model the US has designed and elaborates on the political import of Trump's victory for the two major parties, as this new political era begins.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, I want to start by asking you to reflect on the following: Trump won the presidential election even though he lost the popular vote. In this context, if "one person, one vote" is a fundamental principle behind every legitimate model of democracy, what type of democracy prevails in the US, and what will it take to undo the anachronism of the Electoral College?

Noam Chomsky: The Electoral College was originally supposed to be a deliberative body drawn from educated and privileged elites. It would not necessarily respond to public opinion, which was not highly regarded by the founders, to put it mildly. "The mass of people ... seldom judge or determine right," as Alexander Hamilton put it during the framing of the Constitution, expressing a common elite view. Furthermore, the infamous 3/5th clause ensured the slave states an extra boost, a very significant issue considering their prominent role in the political and economic institutions. As the party system took

shape in the 19th century, the Electoral College became a mirror of the state votes, which can give a result quite different from the popular vote because of the first-past-the-post rule — as it did once again in this election. Eliminating the Electoral College would be a good idea, but it's virtually impossible as the political system is now constituted. It is only one of many factors that contribute to the regressive character of the [US] political system, which, as [Seth Ackerman observes](#) in an interesting article in Jacobin magazine, would not pass muster by European standards.

Ackerman focuses on one severe flaw in the US system: the dominance of organizations that are not genuine political parties with public participation but rather elite-run candidate-selection institutions often described, not unrealistically, as the two factions of the single business party that dominates the political system. They have protected themselves from competition by many devices that bar genuine political parties that grow out of free association of participants, as would be the case in a properly functioning democracy. Beyond that there is the overwhelming role of concentrated private and corporate wealth, not just in the presidential campaigns, as has been well documented, particularly by Thomas Ferguson, but also in Congress.

A [recent study by Ferguson](#), Paul Jorgensen and Jie Chen on “How Money Drives US Congressional Elections,” reveals a remarkably close correlation between campaign expenditures and electoral outcomes in Congress over decades. And extensive work in academic political science — particularly by [Martin Gilens](#), [Benjamin Page](#) and [Larry Bartlett](#) — reveals that most of the population is effectively unrepresented, in that their attitudes and opinions have little or no effect on decisions of the people they vote for, which are pretty much determined by the very top of the income-wealth scale. In the light of such factors as these, the defects of the Electoral College, while real, are of lesser significance.

To what extent is this presidential election a defining moment for Republicans and Democrats alike?

For the eight years of the Obama presidency, the Republican organization has hardly qualified as a political party. A more [accurate description was given](#) by the respected political analysts Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein of the conservative American Enterprise Institute: the party became an “insurgent outlier — ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and

economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”

Its guiding principle was: Whatever Obama tries to do, we have to block it, but without providing some sensible alternative. The goal was to make the country ungovernable, so that the insurgency could take power. Its infantile antics on the Affordable Care Act are a good illustration: endless votes to repeal it in favor of — nothing. Meanwhile the party has become split between the wealthy and privileged “establishment,” devoted to the interests of their class, and the popular base that was mobilized when the establishment commitments to wealth and privilege became so extreme that it would be impossible to garner votes by presenting them accurately. It was therefore necessary to mobilize sectors that had always existed, but not as an organized political force: a strange amalgam of Christian evangelicals — a huge sector of the American population — nativists, white supremacists, white working and lower middle class victims of the neoliberal policies of the past generation, and others who are fearful and angry, cast aside in the neoliberal economy while they perceive their traditional culture as being under attack. In past primaries, the candidates who rose from the base — Bachmann, Cain, Santorum and the rest — were so extreme that they were anathema to the establishment, who were able to use their ample resources to rid themselves of the plague and choose their favored candidate. The difference in 2016 is that they were unable to do it.

Now the Republican Party faces the task of formulating policies other than “No.” It must find a way to craft policies that will somehow pacify or marginalize the popular base while serving the real constituency of the establishment. It is from this sector that Trump is picking his close associates and cabinet members: not exactly coal miners, iron and steel workers, small business owners, or representatives of the concerns and demands of much of his voting base.

Democrats have to face the fact that for 40 years they have pretty much abandoned whatever commitment they had to working people. It’s quite shocking that Democrats have drifted so far from their modern New Deal origins that some workers are now voting for their class enemy, not for the party of FDR. A return to some form of social democracy should not be impossible, as indicated by the remarkable success of the Sanders campaign, which departed radically from the norm of elections effectively bought by wealth and corporate power. It is

important to bear in mind that his “political revolution,” while quite appropriate for the times, would not have much surprised Dwight Eisenhower, another indication of the shift to the right during the neoliberal years.

If the Democratic Party is going to be a constructive force, it will have to develop and commit itself credibly to programs that address the valid concerns of the kind of people who voted for Obama, attracted by his message of “hope and change,” and when disillusioned by the disappearance of hope and the lack of change switched to the con man who declared that he will bring back what they have lost. It will be necessary to face honestly the malaise of much of the country, including people like those in the Louisiana Bayou whom Arlie Hochschild studied with such sensitivity and insight, and surely including the former working class constituency of the Democrats. The malaise is revealed in many ways, not least by the astonishing fact that mortality has increased in the country, something unknown in modern industrial democracies apart from catastrophic events. That’s particularly true among middle-aged whites, mainly traceable to what are sometimes called “diseases of despair” (opioids, alcohol, suicide, etc.). [A statistical analysis reported by the Economist](#) found that these health metrics correlate with a remarkable 43 percent of the Republican Party’s gains over the Democrats in the 2016 election, and remain significant and predictive even when controlling for race, education, age, gender, income, marital status, immigration and employment. These are all signs of severe collapse of much of the society, particularly in rural and working class areas. Furthermore, such initiatives have to be undertaken alongside of firm dedication to the rights and needs of those sectors of the population that have historically been denied rights and repressed, often in harsh and brutal ways.

No small task, but not beyond reach, if not by the Democrats, then by some political party replacing them, drawing from popular movements — and through the constant activism of these movements, quite apart from electoral politics.

Much of the rest of the world — with the notable exception of some of Europe’s extreme nationalist and anti-immigrant political leaders — also seems to be rather anxious about Trump’s aims and intents. Isn’t that so?

Trump’s victory was met in Europe with shock and disbelief. The general reaction was captured quite accurately, for instance, on the front cover of Der Spiegel [a major German weekly]. It depicted a caricature of Trump presented as a meteor hurtling toward Earth, mouth open, ready to swallow it up. And the lead headline

read "*Das Ende Der Welt!*" ("The End of the World"). And in small letters below, "as we have known it." To be sure, there might be some truth to that concern, even if not exactly in the manner in which the artist and the authors who echoed that conception had in mind.

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