

Chomsky: Midterms Could Determine Whether US Joins Ominous Global Fascist Wave



Noam Chomsky

This week voters will be reshaping Congress in ways that will have profound effects for the future of the country and the world at large. Indeed, this year's midterm elections are particularly momentous, as Noam Chomsky highlights with his typical brilliance in an exclusive interview below for *Truthout*.

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C.J. Polychroniou: Midterm elections, in which, typically, about one-third of the seats in the Senate are up for grabs while all 435 seats in the House of Representatives are contested, are yet another peculiar feature of the U.S. political system. However, midterm elections are significant in various ways.

First, they are regarded as something of a verdict on the performance of the current president but have lower voter turnout than presidential elections. Secondly, the midterms almost always spell trouble for the party in power. Be that as it may, the upcoming midterm elections, to be held on November 8, are the most critically important elections in recent times both for the country and the rest of the world. Do you agree with this assessment, and, if so, why?

Noam Chomsky: It's become common in recent years to say that the coming election is the most important ever. There are good reasons. One was [laid out](#) starkly by the astute political analyst John Nichols: "The November 8 midterm elections could be the last in which the United States operates as a functional democracy."

Nichols is not exaggerating. There is no need to review again GOP plans to establish permanent rule as a minority party dedicated to the welfare of the super-rich and corporate sector. While legitimate questions can be raised about the extent to which the U.S. is even now a functional democracy, the descent to the Viktor Orbán-style "illiberal democracy" that is openly the ideal of the Trump-owned GOP would institute a qualitative change. It would not only condemn the U.S. to an ugly fate but would be a major impetus to the ominous fascist wave that is threatening global society.

We should note that GOP dedication to the welfare of the ultra-rich — along with pretense to be the party of the little guy — pays off handsomely. Right now, in fact. As the *New York Times* [reports](#): "Fueled by an expanding class of billionaires, political spending on the 2022 midterm elections will shatter records at the state and federal levels, with much of it from largely unregulated super PACs financed with enormous checks written mainly by Republican megadonors."

Critical as are the concerns about the fate of democracy, the issues at stake in the election are still more serious.

As the midterm elections approached, the news delivered a one-two punch, revealing how serious they are.

On October 26 the [World Meteorological Organization](#) informed us of new studies showing that "Between 1990 and 2021, the warming effect on our climate (known as radiative forcing) by long-lived greenhouse gases rose by nearly 50%," reaching new heights, "with carbon dioxide accounting for about 80% of this

increase.” The International Energy Agency [reported](#) that the means to avert catastrophe are available, and are to some extent being implemented, but “the shift toward cleaner sources of energy still isn’t happening fast enough to avoid dangerous levels of global warming, the agency said, not [unless governments take much stronger action](#) to reduce their planet-warming carbon dioxide emissions over the next few years.”

The following day, October 27, the Pentagon released its [2022 Strategic Reviews](#). Included is a new nuclear policy, which the Arms Control Association [described](#) as “a significant expansion of the original mission of these weapons, namely deterring existential threats against the United States.”

The original mission was indeed, at least formally, to deter existential threats. That is the doctrine shared by all nuclear-armed states, arousing great consternation in the U.S. when it has been reiterated by Putin, even before his recent annexation of parts of Ukraine. And it would be highly significant to expand the mission formally to endorsing use of nuclear weapons [“in retaliation to a non-nuclear strategic threat to the homeland, US forces abroad or allies.”](#)

The “significant expansion” is [spelled out](#) by Admiral Charles Richard, head of the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM). Under the new policy, nuclear weapons provide the “maneuver space” necessary for the United States “to project conventional military power strategically.” Nuclear weapons thus “deter all countries, all the time” from interfering with U.S. actions, Admiral Richard continued. Nuclear deterrence is therefore a cover for conventional military operations around the globe.

That is a significant expansion of the stated original mission, the shared doctrine. Taking a closer look, we find that there is more to the story: the actual U.S. stance on use of nuclear weapons has gone well beyond the shared doctrine.

The press described the new doctrine as not much of a change. They are right, but for reasons of which they are evidently unaware. As STRATCOM commander Richard could doubtless inform them, the “significant expansion” has been U.S. policy since 1995, when it was spelled out in a STRATCOM document on “Post-Cold War Deterrence.” Under Clinton, nuclear weapons must be constantly available because they “cast a shadow” over conventional use of force, deterring others from interfering. As Daniel Ellsberg put it, nuclear weapons are constantly

used, just as a gun is used in a robbery even if it is not fired.

The 1995 STRATCOM document goes on to call for the U.S. to project a “national persona” of “irrationality and vindictiveness,” with some elements “out of control.” That will frighten those who might have thoughts of interfering. All of this is within the framework of the overarching Clinton doctrine that the U.S. must be ready to resort to force multilaterally if we can, unilaterally if we must, to ensure “uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources.”

It is, then, true that the new doctrine is not very new, though Americans are unaware of the facts — not because of censorship. The documents have been public for decades and quoted in critical literature that is kept to the margins.

I have not mentioned the rising threat of nuclear war in Europe, which is very serious, and discussed, though not with sufficient urgency.

How are the most serious questions we face addressed in the current election fever? By silence. That tells us something more about the state of functional democracy.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to overturn Roe v. Wade could impact the midterm elections, according to some analysts, although both parties could see a boost in voter turnout. Why has culture become such a menacing force in contemporary U.S. political climate, and how will the economy affect the midterm elections?

Perceptions of the economy will surely affect the elections. According to polls, the economy, and in particular inflation, are a dominant factor in the elections and the basis for likely Republican success.

But we have to distinguish between the economy and perceptions of the economy.

High inflation is blamed on Biden, but there are a few problems with that. One, as frequently observed, is that inflation is worldwide, hence cannot be attributed to Biden. Many of the causes have been discussed: disruption of supply chains by the pandemic, and others. One major cause rarely receives media attention: [“rising profit margins have accounted for roughly 40% of the rise in prices.”](#)

These conclusions are supported in the business press. In the *Financial Times*,

UBS Global Wealth Management chief economist Paul Donovan wrote that “today’s price inflation is more a product of profits than wages,” according to [The Hill](#). As usual, “Companies have passed higher costs onto customers. But they have also taken advantage of circumstances to expand profit margins. The broadening of inflation beyond commodity prices is more profit margin expansion than wage cost pressures.”

The practice goes back to the opening of the floodgates in the Reagan years. A study in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* found that “the average profit rate since 1980 has increased from 1 percent to 8 percent and that price markups over that period increased from 21 percent to 61 percent.”

Such facts suggest some measures that could be taken to tame the inflationary beast. The Federal Reserve has a different proposal: increase unemployment — the technical term is “raise interest rates.”

The choice has ample media support, as general reporting indicates. Another illustration is Fed chair Jerome Powell’s November 2 press conference on the latest rate hike. As *Common Dreams* [reports](#), “Powell fielded questions for around 40 minutes on Wednesday following the central bank’s decision to impose another large interest rate hike, but not a single reporter asked about the extent to which [record-high](#) corporate profits are fueling inflation even as companies [openly boast](#) about their pricing power.”

Best to let working people bear the burden.

There are [prominent figures](#) calling on the Fed to rethink its routine approach to inflation. But they are voices in the wilderness.

Returning to perceptions and reality, Dean Baker has been [reporting](#) regularly on the way the liberal media have been constructing a version of the economy that reinforces the “blame Biden” message. “Downplayed or ignored [is the] unprecedented pace of job growth, the unemployment rate reaching a 50-year low, the rise in real wages for workers at the bottom, the sharp drop in the number of uninsured, and savings of thousands of dollars a year in interest costs by tens of millions of homeowners refinancing their mortgages,” he writes.

The gloomy press report on the last quarter overlooked the fact that the economy

created 1.1 million jobs, reducing unemployment to 3.5 percent, the lowest level since the late 1960s. Also overlooked was “healthy growth in real wages. The average hourly wage rose 1.1 percent over the last three months. That exceeded the 0.4 percent inflation reported by the consumer price index by 0.7 percentage points. That translates into a 2.8 percent annual rate of real wage growth. That’s really good by any standard.”

The October jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics is even more positive. Justin Wolfers, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, [comments](#): “This is a very strong economy. And whatever you read elsewhere, employment growth is motoring along.... Indeed, job growth over the past three months (or indeed, this month) has continued at a rate that exceeds almost any point in the pre-pandemic 2000s.”

“In normal times,” he adds, “this would be regarded as extremely rapid growth, and a strong labor market. For some reason people are shouting ‘recession’ in a crowded theatre, instead.”

These are, however, not normal times. Refracted through the “information system,” facts do not change perceptions. Nor does the longer record, which reveals that Democrats overall have a far better record on the economy than the GOP.

True to form, the *New York Times* [lead story on the jobs report](#) portrayed it as more trouble. The report opened by lamenting that “Job growth remained stubbornly robust in October despite higher interest rates, defying policymakers’ efforts to dampen the labor market and curb the fastest inflation in generations.” The problems are still deeper: “American workers are still seeing rapid wage gains, a sign that a strong labor market is giving them the ability to push for better pay — potentially worrying news for the Federal Reserve.”

The distortions are systematic, Baker has shown. It’s understandable that people should be more aware of the prices flashed before their eyes than by statistics on real wage growth. It’s not the proper task of the media to reinforce these misperceptions.

Like inflation, the menacing role of “culture” in the contemporary political climate is not limited to the U.S. It is a global phenomenon, found in one or another way in diverse societies: India, Israel, Brazil, Hungary, and many others. It tends to be

associated with expansion of the popular base for repressive authoritarian movements and the rise of demagogic leaders.

Particularities cannot be ignored, but there are some common threads. One is breakdown of the social order, which has advanced steadily under the neoliberal assault. As intended. Margaret Thatcher helped launch the assault with her dictum that there is [no such thing as society](#). To make sure not to misrepresent her, here are her immortal words:

“I am homeless, the Government must house me!’ and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.”

As Thatcher knew full well, these strictures do not apply to the wealthy and privileged. They have a rich array of social organizations and associations to sustain and protect them, and even the government that they largely dominate thanks to their ownership of the society is ready to bail them out when they are in trouble. But others are tossed into the market to endure its ravages as best they can, living lives of insecurity and precarity as they face the turbulent world alone.

Thatcher wasn’t mistaken about people looking to themselves first. As Adam Smith instructed us 250 years ago, in all ages the “masters of mankind” who own the economy will pursue their “vile maxim: all for ourselves and nothing for other people” — as long as society will let them get away with it, as it largely has under the neoliberal assault.

When social bonds collapse, or are broken by force, individuals will be easy prey to whatever seems to offer them something. Perhaps a church, perhaps a demagogue who stabs them in the back while professing his eternal love for his victims, or perhaps “cultural issues” to divert their attention to what is being done to them.

The practices are ancient. They became prominent in recent U.S. political culture with Nixon’s “southern strategy,” designed to attract southern Democrats and other white supremacists by not-too-subtle racist appeals. They have flourished since, as the social order has been fragmented by the neoliberal hammers.

The breakdown of the social order has reached quite shocking levels. One grim

manifestation is the increase in mortality among the white working class, a sharp departure from the rest of the world, and from history. Other aspects are revealed in [studies of public opinion](#), which find extreme polarization and alienation in a collapsing society.

Almost three-fourths of Republicans and half of the “very liberal” feel that the government is “corrupt and rigged against everyday people like me.” Almost half of “strong Republicans” (and 1/3 of the rest) agree that “it may be necessary at some point soon for citizens to take up arms against the government.” Half of Americans — almost 70 percent of “strong Republicans” and 65 percent of the “very conservative” — agree that they “more and more feel like a stranger in my own country.” And much more like it.

These are among the many signs that the country is falling apart. One critical factor is the neoliberal assault, which has had similar if less extreme impact elsewhere. The rising wave of global neofascism is one consequence.

That consequence has been well documented. Dani Rodrik [found](#):

“broad and compelling evidence, from Europe as well the United States, that globalization-fueled shocks in labor markets have played an important role in driving up support for right-wing populist movements. This literature shows that these economic shocks often work through culture and identity. That is, voters who experience economic insecurity are prone to feel greater aversion to outsider groups, deepening cultural and identity divisions in society and enabling right-wing candidates to inflame (and appeal to) nativist sentiment.”

These tendencies were particularly strong among “switchers,” workers who voted for Obama and switched to Trump after Obama’s betrayal. Rodrik found that

“Switchers viewed their economic and social status very differently from, and as much more precarious than, run-of-the-mill Republican voters for Trump. In addition to expressing concern about economic insecurity, switchers were also hostile to all aspects of globalization — trade, immigration, finance.”

It should be stressed that none of this is inherent in “globalization.” Alternatives to Clinton’s investor-rights version of globalization were developed by the labor movement and Congress’s own research bureau (the Office of Technology Assessment, dismantled soon after). These could have directed globalization along

very different paths, benefiting working people rather than private capital. But they were quickly dismissed, a chapter of the '90s that has been too little discussed.

There are hundreds of candidates across a variety of races who denied the outcome of the 2020 election results. How important is Trump's role in the midterms, and is it safe to say that GOP leaders have lost complete control of the base?

GOP leaders began to lose control of the base, and even the party management, in 2016, when, to their shock and dismay, they were swept aside by the Trump crusade. By now they have either succumbed, often slavishly, or have been expelled, apart from a few relics who are hanging on in silence. By now it's Trump's party. He has managed, skillfully, to maintain a voting base that he is undermining at every turn along with dedicated service to the traditional Republican constituency of extreme wealth and corporate power.

Denialism is one sign of the breakdown of the social order, and is an element of the undermining of democratic forms. It is rampant among the GOP voting base, and among those running for election, amounting to "A majority of Republican nominees on the ballot this November for the House, Senate and key statewide offices," according to [*The Washington Post*](#).

"The implications will be lasting," the *Post* analysis continues. The deniers will "hold enormous sway over the choice of the nation's next speaker, who in turn could preside over the House in a future contested presidential election" and the winners of state elections "will hold some measure of power overseeing American elections." Every careful analysis has shown that the charges of election fraud are utterly groundless, but alienation and desperation are so extreme that facts don't matter: "the movement arising from Trump's thwarted plot to overturn the 2020 election is, in many respects, even stronger two years later. Far from repudiating candidates who embrace Trump's false fraud claims, GOP primary voters have empowered them."

"It is a disease that is spreading through our political process, and its implications are very profound," political scientist Larry Jacobs observed: "This is no longer about Donald Trump. This is about the entire electoral system and what constitutes legitimate elections. All of that is now up in the air." No exaggeration.

Again, the phenomenon is not limited to the U.S. Brazil is an extreme example, despite its having perhaps the world's most efficient and secure voting system. Bolsonaro's pre-election campaign to discredit the results if he did not win even reached the point of his calling in foreign ambassadors to berate them on the matter. Scholarship has shown that more generally, GOP denialism "bears alarming similarities to authoritarian movements in other countries, which often begin with efforts to delegitimize elections. Many of those promoting the stolen-election narrative, they said, know that it is false and are using it to gain power."

There is a huge divide among Democrats over many issues, but there seems to be a consensus among them, at least as reflected on the campaign message, that if the Republicans take power the U.S. could backslide into outright authoritarianism, if not turned into a semi-fascist polity. How likely is this message to resonate with the average American voter, and why do Democrats keep losing the rural vote?

It's primarily in the rural areas that people "more and more feel like a stranger in my own country." Understandably. Apart from ongoing demographic and cultural changes, neoliberal globalization has hit these areas hard. Their small industries have collapsed. Farmers have been edged out by subsidized agribusiness. Stores are closing. Young people are leaving. Though in the federal system they are supported by the more educated and prosperous urban society they resent, perception is different. As the Democrats have steadily become a party of affluent professionals and Wall Street donors, they have abandoned rural America along with the working class. In these sectors warnings of democratic decline and rights of minorities have little resonance, if any.

The consensus on the drift toward a semi-fascist polity may turn out to be accurate, dooming the world to a bitter fate. It has not been inevitable. Many hands have contributed.

It is not inevitable now, but time is short.

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