

Chomsky: Voting Is Not The End. It's Only The Beginning



Noam Chomsky

Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 election. Yet while Trump has lost, the Democrats failed to materialize the blue wave some expected — and Trump fared extremely well despite the pandemic. In this exclusive interview, Noam Chomsky shares some of his insights about Trump's continuing popularity and what the left needs to do in the years ahead, emphasizing that voting is never an end — only a beginning.

C.J. Polychroniou: Although Biden has won the election, the Democrats failed to materialize a blue-wave landslide, and it is clear we will continue to deal with large-scale Trumpism. Given that you were extremely skeptical of the polls from day one, what do you think contributed to the massive turnout for Trump, even as Biden saw an even more massive turnout? Or, to phrase the questions differently, why is nearly half the country continuing to support a dangerous charlatan leader with such a feverish passion?

Noam Chomsky: The very fact that someone could be considered a serious candidate after just having killed tens if not hundreds of thousands of Americans through a disastrous response to COVID-19 is an extraordinary victory for Trump — and a defeat for the country, for the world and for hopes for a decent future. Some of Trump's victories are very revealing. A report on *NPR* discussed his victory in a solid Democratic county on the Texas-Mexico border with many poor Latinos that hadn't voted Republican for a century, since Harding. The *NPR* analyst attributes Biden's loss to his famous "gaffe" in the last debate, in which he

said that we have to act to save human society from destruction in the not very distant future. Not his words, of course, but that's the meaning of his statement: that we have to make moves to transition away from fossil fuels, which are central to the regional economy. Whether that's the reason for the radical shift, or whether it's attributable to another of the colossal Democratic organizing failures, the fact that the outcome is attributed to the gaffe is itself indicative of the rot in the dominant culture. In the U.S., it is [considered] a serious "gaffe" to dare to hint that we have to act to avoid a cataclysm.

Poor working people in the border area are not voting for the predictable consequences of Trump's race toward cataclysm. They may simply be skeptical about what science predicts. Sixty percent of conservative Republicans ([35 percent](#) of moderate Republicans) believe that humans are contributing "not too much/not at all" to global warming. A poll reported in *Science* found that only 20 percent of Republicans trust scientists "a lot...to do what is right for the country." Why then believe the dire predictions? These, after all, are the messages pounded into their heads daily by the White House and its media echo chamber.

South Texan working people may not be ready to sacrifice their lives and communities today on the basis of claims in elite circles that they are instructed not to trust. These tendencies cannot be blamed solely on Trump's malevolence. They trace back to the failure of the Democratic Party to bring to the public a serious program to fend off environmental catastrophe while also improving lives and work — not because such programs don't exist; they do. But because they don't appeal to the donor-oriented Clintonite neoliberals who run the Democratic Party.

There's more. Trump has shown political genius in tapping the poisonous currents that run right below the surface of American society. He has skillfully nourished and amplified the currents of white supremacy, racism and xenophobia that have deep roots in American history and culture, now exacerbated by fear that "they" will take over "our" country with its shrinking white majority. And the concerns are deep. A careful [study](#) by political scientist Larry Bartels reveals that Republicans feel that "the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it," and more than 40 percent agree that "a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands."

Trump has also skillfully tapped reservoirs of anger and economic resentment among the working and middle classes who have been subjected to the bipartisan neoliberal assault of the last 40 years. If they feel that they have been robbed, they have good reason. The Rand Corporation recently estimated transfer of wealth from the lower 90 percent to the very rich during the four neoliberal decades: \$47 trillion, not small change. Looking more closely, the transfer was primarily to a small fraction of the very rich. Since Reagan, the top 0.1 percent has doubled their share of the country's wealth to an astonishing 20 percent.

These outcomes are not the result of principles of economics or laws of history but of deliberate policy decisions. If decisions are shifted from government ("government is the problem," as Reagan claimed) they do not disappear. They are placed in the hands of the corporate sector, which must be guided solely by greed (per neoliberal economic guru Milton Friedman). With such guidelines in place, results are not hard to anticipate.

On top of the near-\$50 trillion train robbery, the international economy ("globalization") has been structured to set American working people in competition with those in low-wage countries with no workers' rights while the very rich are granted protection from market forces, by exorbitant patent rights, to take one example. Again, the effects of this bipartisan enterprise are not a surprise.

Less educated workers may not know the details or understand the mechanisms that have been designed to undermine their lives, but they see the outcomes. The Democrats offer them nothing. They long ago abandoned the working class and have been full collaborators in the racket. Trump in fact harms workers even more than the opposition, but he excoriates "elites" — while slavishly serving the super-rich and corporate sector, as his legislative program and executive orders amply demonstrate.

Apart from almost daily steps to chip away at the environment that sustains life and to pack the judiciary top-to-bottom with far right young lawyers, the main achievement of the Trump-McConnell administration has been the tax scam of 2017: "a delayed tax increase dressed up as a tax cut," economist Joseph Stiglitz [explains](#). "The Trump administration has a dirty little secret: It's not just planning to increase taxes on most Americans. The increase has already been signed, sealed and delivered, buried in the pages of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act."

The law was carefully designed to lower taxes initially so as to “hoodwink” Americans to think their taxes were being reduced, but with mechanisms to ensure that tax increases “would affect nearly everyone but people at the top of the economic hierarchy. All taxpayer income groups with incomes of \$75,000 and under — that’s about 65 percent of taxpayers — will face a higher tax rate in 2021 than in 2019.” It’s the same device that the George W. Bush Republicans used to sell their 2001 “tax cut” — for the rich.

What happens if Trump refuses to accept a Biden victory and seeks to settle the matter in the Supreme Court? And when corporate lawyers and the militias end up doing their thing, is it even remotely possible that the country could end up under martial law?

My uneducated guess is that it won’t come to that, but it’s a speculation with little basis or credibility. Trump has strong reasons — maybe even his personal future — to hold on to office by any possible means. We are not in the days of Richard Nixon, who had good reasons to question the legitimacy of the vote he lost in 1960, but had the decency to put the welfare of the country about his personal ambitions. Not Donald Trump. And the organization that grovels at his feet is not the political party of 60 years ago.

Trump still has two months to wield the wrecking ball that has already diminished the United States, harmed the world and severely threatened the future. His penchant for wrecking everything he did not create, whatever the cost, is hard to miss. He might decide to go for broke.

What are the next steps for the left?

For the left, elections are a brief interlude in a life of real politics, a moment to ask whether it’s worth taking off time to vote — typically against. In 2020, the choice was transparent, for reasons not worth reviewing. Then back to work. Once Trump is fully removed, the work will be to move forward to construct the better world that is within reach.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity. It has also been updated to reflect Joe Biden’s victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 election.

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