

Noam Chomsky: Democratic Party Centrism Risks Handing Election To Trump



As the 2020 election race heats up, U.S. politics, the nation's political culture as a whole, and even the future of organized human life are at a crossroads. Another four years of Donald Trump would deliver nightmarish blows to democracy and social rights, handing an unthinkable mandate to

a president who has become notorious for undermining virtually everything of decent value to humanity.

Yet, the question remains as to whether this dangerous man will actually be defeated in 2020. At the Democratic debate on Wednesday night, we witnessed a cacophony that did little to convey the ideological elements and political values that define the Democratic Party in the age of authoritarian neoliberalism and plutocracy. Intellectual shallowness and opportunism were prevalent throughout the debate. Pete Buttigieg's meager attempts to parry questions on his lack of support among Black voters attracted the most buzz. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Warren's reasonable and anything but radical "wealth tax" proposal received little attention because it remains an anathema to the political establishment of the Democratic Party, as do Bernie Sanders's universal health care and climate change policies.

Indeed, as evidenced by the lack of a coherent vision on the part of most candidates in Wednesday's Democratic debate in addressing the real threats and challenges facing the country and the whole planet, the Democratic Party is still unable to get its act together, and, in its apparent determination to kill the left wing, it may very well end up ensuring a Trump electoral victory for a second time.

To discuss what is really at stake in the 2020 presidential election, *Truthout's* C.J. Polychroniou interviewed Noam Chomsky, the world's leading public intellectual

and a founder of modern linguistics. Chomsky is Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at MIT and Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona. He has published more than 120 books, which have appeared in most of the world's languages, and is the co-author of the forthcoming book with Robert Pollin and C.J. Polychroniou titled, *The Political Economy of Climate Change and the Green New Deal* (Verso, 2020).

C.J. Polychroniou: The 2020 U.S. presidential election is less than a year from now, and, while most polls seem to indicate that Trump will lose the national vote, the electoral vote is up for grabs. What manner of a democracy is this, and why isn't there a public outcry in this country about the antiquated institution of the electoral college?

Noam Chomsky: Preliminary comment: I find it psychologically impossible to discuss the 2020 election without emphasizing, as strongly as possible, what is at stake: survival, nothing less.

Four more years of Trump may spell the end of much of life on Earth, including organized human society in any recognizable form. Strong words, but not strong enough.

I would like to repeat the words of Raymond Pierrehumbert, a lead author of the startling [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] report of October 2018, since replaced by still more dire warnings: "[With regard to the climate crisis](#), yes, it's time to panic. We are in deep trouble." These should be the defining terms of the 2020 election.

Environmental catastrophe is an imminent threat. Much of the world is taking steps to deal with it — inadequate, but at least something. Trump and the political organization he now virtually owns are taking steps too — to exacerbate the crisis. Some may recall [George] W. Bush's infamous call, "bring it on," directed to Iraqis preparing to "attack us" (in what happened to be their country, but put that aside). Bush later apologized, with regret, but Trump is proud to outdo him, calling on the rising seas and burning Earth to put an end to the human experiment.

In fairness, we should add that Trump is also pursuing ways to avert the environmental threat — *destroy us first by nuclear war*. That is the simple logic of his demolition of the Reagan-Gorbachev [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] Treaty followed at once by testing of missiles that violate it; the threat to

dismantle the (Eisenhower-initiated) Open Skies Treaty, and finally, [New START](#). These final blows to the arms control regime constitute, very simply, a call to other nations to join us in creating new and even more horrendous weapons to destroy us all, to the unrestrained applause of weapons manufacturers.

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Turning finally to your question, the electoral college is not the most serious anachronism — even worse is the [radically undemocratic Senate](#). These problems are severe, and remediable only by constitutional amendment that is sure to be blocked by the small states. All of this is part of more fundamental problems. A variety of demographic, structural and policy factors are converging to a situation where a small minority — white, rural, Christian, traditional, older, fearful of losing “their America” — will be able to dominate the political system.

These considerations raise further questions about worship of a document from centuries ago that was in some ways progressive by the standards of its day, but would very likely lead to rejection of an appeal for membership in the European Union by a country bound by it.

Speaking of political culture, Donald Trump's rise to power has not only unleashed some very dangerous forces, but seems to have altered in significant ways the political culture of this country. Can you talk a bit about this?

The dark forces were gathering long before Trump appeared to mobilize them. It's worth recalling that in previous Republican primaries, candidates that emerged from the base — Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Rick Santorum — were intolerable to the conservative establishment and were crushed. In 2016, those efforts failed. None of this is too surprising. In recent years, the Republican Party has dedicated itself [with] such fervor to its constituency of wealth and private power that a voting base had to be mobilized on grounds unrelated to its primary policy objectives — with many dark forces. And it's also worth recalling that there are parallels elsewhere, notably in Europe, with the collapse of centrist parties. Much of what has been happening can be traced to the neoliberal assault on the general population launched a generation ago, leaving in its wake quite understandable anger, frustration and search for scapegoats — terrain that can

readily be plowed by demagogues and con artists of the Trump variety. Matters we've [discussed elsewhere](#).

What can the state elections of the last two weeks ago tell us about 2020?

It seems that relatively affluent suburban sectors that are part of the usual Republican voting base were having second thoughts about Trump, while his grotesque behavior energized voters who normally don't participate. Much, seems to me, uncertain about 2020.

The power brokers in the Democratic Party are out to kill the left wing, and this time includes not only Bernie Sanders but also Elizabeth Warren. If that happens, how will it impact Trump's chances of getting re-elected?

The donor class is clearly perturbed by Warren's critique of wealth and corporate power, and even more so by Sanders, who committed a major crime: inspiring a popular movement that doesn't just show up every four years to push a button and then leave matters to their betters, but continues its activism and the engagement in public affairs that is none of their business, according to long-standing democratic theory. The intense hatred of [Labour Party leader Jeremy] Corbyn in England, I think, has a similar basis. These have been concerns of the self-described "men of best quality" since the first modern democratic revolution in 17th-century England, and they haven't abated.

The consequences are hard to predict. If the donor class succeeds in nominating a centrist candidate, progressive activist forces might be disillusioned and reluctant to do the work on the ground that will be needed to prevent the tragedy — repeat, *tragedy* — of four more years of Trumpism. If a progressive candidate does gain the nomination, centrist power and wealth may back away, again opening the path to tragedy. It will be a fateful year. It will be even more important than usual to remain level-headed and to think through with care the consequences of action, and inaction.

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And the culture of the more privileged sectors of the world generally.

It's not something new. It's common now to invoke Watergate — when President Nixon's terrible crimes, domestic and international, were ignored while elite

opinion agonized over the attack on the foundations of the republic — thankfully overcome in a “stunning vindication of our constitutional system” (according to famed liberal historian Henry Steele Commager). What was the attack? A break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters by some thugs organized by Nixon. That’s half of the U.S. system of political power, which doesn’t take such offenses lightly. Turning to today, the prime charge so far is the abuse of presidential power to implicate a leading figure of the Democratic Party [Joe Biden] in some concocted scandal [“Ukraine-gate”]. Does that suggest some conclusions about what matters to elite opinion?

One final question: Much has been written about the resurgence of democratic socialism in the United States. Do you see such a resurgence, or are people confusing traditional social democratic ideas with democratic socialism?

I’m not sure how helpful the categories are. There are a variety of serious concerns that are engaging substantial sectors of the population, mostly young. Some have to do with existential crises. The September climate strike brought many millions to the streets, just one phase of ongoing activism. Others cover a wide range of critical issues, including the scandalous health care system; a society in which 0.1 percent hold over 20 percent of wealth while half the population has negative net worth and homeless people try to survive amidst fabulous luxury; and numerous other social ills. There are also promising efforts to develop cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises that challenge fundamental hierarchic structure more directly. That’s a bare sample of considerable ferment that could open the way to a much more free and just social order — if imminent looming catastrophe can be overcome.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout*’s Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.