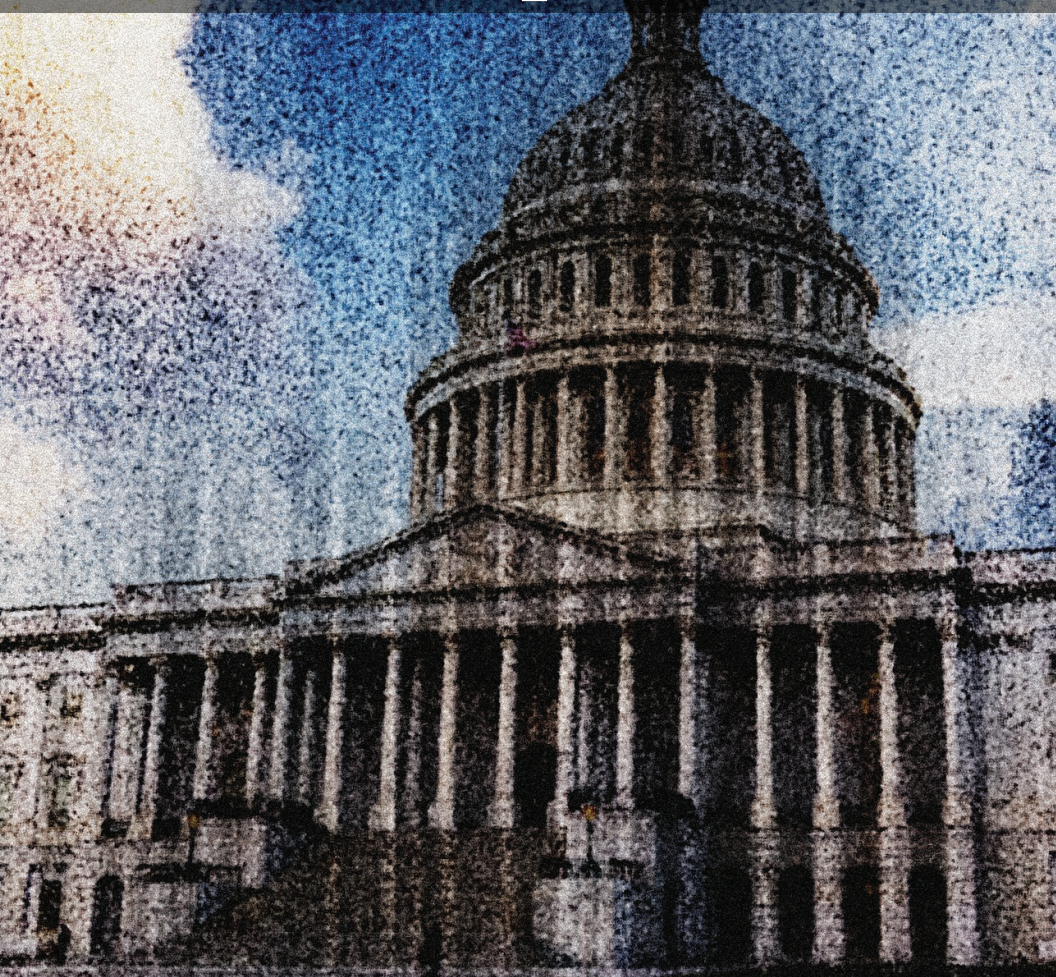


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U.S. “Democracy”: A Dictatorship of the Rich



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“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

–Audre Lorde, poet and activist

Introduction

At the end of 2020, we went through an election process to select new politicians to supposedly represent the population democratically and reflect its interests. On top of the normal election season, there was also the rapid confirmation of new right-wing Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

The news coverage of the election cycle presented two parallel universes, depending on what channel you watched – one station denouncing Trump and the Republicans, while others made it seem like he was one of the best presidents in history.

Growing up, we are taught that American democracy is the best system of government in the world. But when we look at the process of choosing candidates, how our votes are weighed both in Congress and in the Electoral College, the amount of money spent on elections, and



media coverage of politics, we should ask ourselves: who is this democracy actually for?

Our democracy and electoral system cannot be separated from the larger society and economic system. They mirror and help to maintain the capitalist system, which in turn depends on the exploitation of workers by a small number of bosses, banks, and billionaires, generating massive inequality. Understanding how this financial elite maintains its power under the guise of “democracy” is key to creating a real democracy that represents the majority. We need to understand how our votes are currently channeled and organized, with the goal of controlling us.

An Undemocratic System

The United States constitution set up a political system that is far from the ideal of “one person, one vote.” The two houses of Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court are all structured to limit decision-making and control by the 99 percent.

The Senate has two senators for each state. This means that states like Wyoming with a population of 578,759 have the same power in the Senate as California with a population of 39.5 million. A voter in Wyoming has 68 times the power of a voter in California in the Senate! In spite of the Democratic Party receiving 41,549,808 more votes than the Republican Party in this year’s senate races – one seventh of the U.S. population – the best that the Democrats can hope for is a 50-50 split in the Senate.

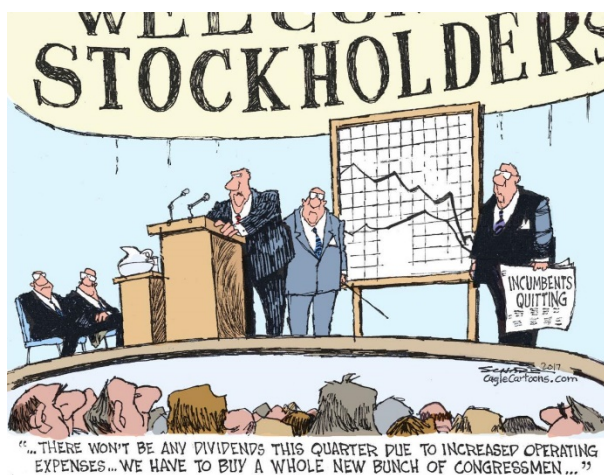
The House of Representatives gives representation to states in proportion to their populations, but this is done through a complicated formula. The House can only have 435 representatives, but every state must have at least one representative. *These rules give proportionally more representation to the population of small states, and restrict representation of large states.* For example, in 2016 the Republican Party won only 1.2 percent more votes than the Democratic Party, but received 21 more seats in the House than Democrats – five percent of the seats.

In presidential elections, the president is not chosen by popular vote, but by the Electoral College. Each state has a certain number of “electors” equal to the number of senators plus representatives each state has in Congress. Together, they make up the Electoral College. This process

again gives rural voters more power than urban voters, just as in the Senate. The vote of someone in Wyoming is worth three times the vote of a Californian. A Black person's vote is worth three-quarters of a white person's vote and a Latin person's vote is worth half as much as a white person's vote – simply because Black and Latin voters are more likely to live in big cities and in more populous states.

Most states are usually ignored in presidential elections because the outcome of their elections is virtually guaranteed – for example, typically California is guaranteed to go to the Democrats and Alaska will go to the Republicans. The two parties only really campaign in “battle-ground states” where the election is close. After the November election, the electors (in the Electoral College) from each state present their votes to Congress, and a president is chosen based on the party's candidate with the most Electoral College votes. Because of the slanted power given to the Electoral College, a president can win the presidential election with a minority of votes from the population. In three of the last eight elections, the Republican presidential candidate, with fewer popular votes than their opponent, won the presidency. For example, Hillary Clinton got two million more votes than Donald Trump in 2016, but Trump was elected president based on the results of the Electoral College.

The Supreme Court, along with the judges in lower courts, interprets and applies laws made by Congress. These officials are appointed by the

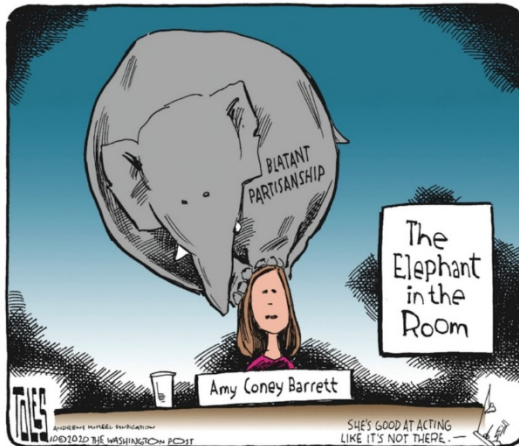


president and approved by the Senate. They are not elected. Lower court judges have long term limits – for example, 12 years for an appeals court judge in California. Supreme court judges, or justices, are appointed for life.

The consequences of this set-up are playing out right now. The Senate, dominated by the Republican Party, spent the last two years of Obama’s presidential term blocking any court appointments, most famously Obama’s appointment of judge Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court. Once Trump was elected in 2016, the Senate opened the gates to Trump, allowing him to appoint hundreds of Federal judges. The retirement of justice Anthony Kennedy in 2017 and the deaths of justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsberg opened two more Supreme Court seats for Trump and the Republicans. Trump was allowed to appoint Brett Kavanaugh, Neil Gorsuch, and Amy Coney Barrett – three far-right, conservative Supreme Court judges. As a result, the Supreme Court is now dominated by right-wing judges who oppose abortion, civil rights of many sorts, and workers’ rights. These justices were appointed by the president and confirmed by the Republican-controlled Senate, both elected by a minority of voters.

A Slave-Owner’s Republic

Why is the U.S. political system designed this way? The framers of the U.S. constitution knew what they were doing. The constitution was written by slave-owners. It only gave the right to vote to white, property-



owning men. But this wasn't enough. The slave-owners in Southern states like Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia were a minority even among wealthy, white men. So they designed a system that guaranteed their right to rule by giving extra power to small-population states. They went so far as to count three-fifths of the slave population in their census, giving the slave-owners even more representation, while the enslaved population had no political rights.

This situation did not last. The Northern states developed economically and by the 1850s, they were led by wealthy industrialist capitalists and their representatives like Abraham Lincoln, a railroad company lawyer. They won support by removing property restrictions in voting, giving anyone rich or poor the right to vote – as long as they were white men. They formed the Republican Party to try to win control of the government away from the slave-owners. The political conflict between North and South led to the Civil War, which gave enslaved people the opportunity to free themselves and put an end to chattel slavery once and for all.

The slave-owners were overthrown, but why didn't the Republican Party change the political system? They must have found it useful! With the growth of the railroads and factories in the North came millions of workers, immigrants from all around the world. The workers, trying to better their conditions, would naturally turn to the ballot box and try to influence politicians to represent workers' interests. A system that decreases the power of urban voters makes it easier for the wealthy elite to escape the pressure of workers' votes. The wealthy elite can then play on the prejudices and fears of isolated rural communities to exert control through the system of unequal representation.

The Cost of the 2020 Elections: An Epic Waste of Money

Many point to the amount of money in U.S. politics and how it's a pay-to-play game. This is definitely another undemocratic aspect of this system that is layered on top of the already undemocratic processes that lead to power in the House, Senate, and Electoral College. The campaigns for the national elections in 2020 (for president and Congress) have cost a record-setting fourteen billion dollars, with even more to be spent in run-off elections for the Senate in early 2021! What kind of society is this in which such an enormous amount of money is

wasted to convince us to vote for these politicians? Imagine what we could do with that money! Here's a brief calculation based on research done by the Center for Responsive Politics, a group that follows and analyzes the money trail in U.S. politics.

- Fourteen billion dollars would increase the amount of money the U.S. government spends on renewable and efficient energy by over six times. In other words, this society spends only one-sixth as much on addressing long-term renewable energy – a critical factor in climate change – as on this election.
- With fourteen billion dollars, Medicaid could be provided to an additional 3.5 million people. This would provide health care to a population roughly equal to the number of people in Connecticut or Utah.
- Fourteen billion dollars would more than double the budget of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The budget for the EPA, which protects endangered species, monitors toxic waste, and ensures food and water quality, is only \$8.2 billion. This election wastes about one and two-thirds times that amount.
- Fourteen billion dollars would double federal aid to K-12 schools. Title I grants, which help fund schools in low-income communities across the nation, amount to \$14 billion as well. An additional \$14 billion could provide resources for students and jobs for educators and school staff in these underfunded schools.
- The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) could fund 93 times as many artists. The NEA, which gives a little less than \$150 million a year to artists, musicians, writers, and poets, could expand its support for creativity 93 times!
- The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program could be expanded three times. Today, this federal program covers the cost of cooling and heating for seven million families when they can't afford it. With climate change making weather patterns increasingly harsh, this is a growing need. Fourteen billion dollars could almost quadruple the budget of this agency.
- The U.S. could help significant numbers of refugees. With an estimated 26 million refugees in the world fleeing wars and climate destruction, the U.S. only gives a small number of refugees a safe

place to live. In 2019, the U.S. spent only \$2.8 billion to resettle 18,000 refugees. With fourteen billion dollars, this number could be increased by five times. This is far less than what is needed, but it is that much more than the pathetic amount currently spent by the U.S. government.

- With fourteen billion dollars, the U.S. could increase its funding for substance abuse and mental health treatment by four times. The U.S. spent just \$3.5 billion on mental health and substance abuse in 2019. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and substance abuse, this would be an enormous help.

Who Owns Congress?

If we do get to vote, despite the barriers that many of us face, how are the candidates we get to choose from determined? To answer this question, let's look at who chooses the candidates. It takes a lot of money to get in the race, which is especially true this year. As of the end of October, Trump had raised \$863,552,249, and Biden \$1,378,937,038. Combined this is more than two billion dollars!

Getting elected to office is overwhelmingly determined by money. Nine out of ten congressional races are won by the highest campaign spender. Members of Congress begin fundraising the day they are elected, because on average it takes \$1.4 million to run a successful House campaign, with Senate races costing six times that amount. The majority of that money is obtained by large donors and Super PACs (Political Action Committees), which are set up to funnel money from rich people, big corporations, and interest groups into campaigns. These large donors ensure that their money is well-spent when it comes time for Congress to make decisions, pulling their financial support if their interests aren't represented.

Furthermore, the amount needed to win a race keeps increasing, especially in hotly contested elections. For example, in a recent senate race, Democrat Jaime Harrison raised \$107,568,737, while his competitor, Republican Lindsey Graham, raised \$72,690,495. That's a total of \$180,259,232, for just one congressional race! While that was the most expensive race, the top ten most expensive races still all raised over \$59 million apiece. With that amount of money coming in, we must ask: whose interests do these politicians represent?

There are many ways big donors can channel money into Congress – some are more aboveground, and others are more veiled. One look at the list of top contributing interest groups shows that every major industry has its hand in the pot: from real estate, the insurance industry, business services, big pharma, the finance sector, oil and gas, and commercial banks. In less obvious ways, big industries do things like funnel funds through fiscal sponsors, using non-profits to create a buffer between the donors and the recipients. But we don't need to track every specific donation, as the sheer volume of money going into these elections shows that regular people aren't the ones these politicians are going to remain beholden to.

Plus, Congress members themselves are often a part of the wealthy elite. In fact, the majority of Congress people in office today are millionaires. Democrat Mark Warner is the wealthiest with an estimated \$214,092,575 to his name. The top ten wealthiest members of Congress as of 2018 were all worth more than \$78 million. And while some might enter office with a lower income, they often come out wealthier and better connected to the richest echelons of society.

Clearly, our government isn't an impartial democracy. It's a democracy of the rich. It's really "one dollar, one vote." And with three people holding as much wealth as the bottom half of the U.S. population



A 1904 cartoon depicting Rockefeller's Standard Oil corporation as an octopus gripping the White House and the Capitol. Today, Standard Oil is Chevron, ExxonMobil and others, and their power has only increased.

(Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett), we can see who has enough wealth to really pull the strings. You may remember that Mike Bloomberg had a slip of the tongue in the primary debates when he said he had “bought” many members of Congress in the past. Well it wasn’t just a slip of the tongue after all, but rather an admission of the truth. Once, when Bill Gates was asked if he would run for office, his reply was essentially that he didn’t need to – his financial contributions allow him to accomplish what he wants in the government without having to run. It’s the billionaires, Bezos, Gates, Kochs, and others like them that really call the shots. It makes perfect sense that the same people who own everything else – every major industry, the media, and finance – also own the government. In every aspect, this government is shaped by and functions to serve the interests of the rich.

Who Owns the Supreme Court?

At the nomination hearing of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, made news by likening the hearing to a puppet theater. In a twenty-minute presentation, the senator laid out the connections between what he called “dark money” and those who have been controlling the Supreme Court. His claim was that monied interests have been driving Supreme Court nominations and decisions, with a conservatizing effect. But is there more to the story than just money corrupting politics?

In his presentation, he discussed the \$250 million that was spent in a “behind-the-scenes campaign to remake the nation’s courts,” calling out conservatives for their manipulations and the dismantling of any pretense of democracy. He recounted the goals of these dark money groups that use front groups claiming to have a relationship to the question being considered. They in turn file amicus briefs that they say offer information, expertise, or a perspective that has a bearing on the issues in the case. Examples include: reversing *Roe v. Wade*, which would limit access to abortions; rolling back the Affordable Care Act; banning gay marriage; weakening regulatory agencies; and more. Along with revoking rights won through decades of struggle by the oppressed and exploited, many lesser known decisions give free choice to large

corporations to operate without any restrictions on their pollution of the environment or endangering of workers' lives in the workplace.

One such dark money group is the Wellspring Committee (which ceased operations in 2019), which spent \$14.8 million to get Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court secured. Another is Judicial Crisis Network, which funnels millions of dollars from wealthy conservatives' pockets into Supreme Court confirmations. In September of 2020, they committed to spending over \$2 million, to get a swift confirmation of conservative judge Amy Coney Barrett. The goal was to secure a Trump-nominated judge to a lifetime appointment before the elections that could put Trump out of office and/or end the Republican majority in the Senate. All in all, the Judicial Crisis Network committed \$17 million to pushing Trump's three Supreme Court nominees.

Conservatives are not the only ones involved in these dark money conspiracies. Sixteen Thirty Fund, operating as a non-profit, has funneled millions in donations to the liberal organizations it sponsors, including efforts to sway Supreme Court nominations. It does this through a variety of projects, such as Demand Justice, which leave no paper trail because they operate as unincorporated entities under the sponsorship of the Sixteen Thirty Fund. In other words, we often don't know who is funding which organizations, or where their money is coming from.

Whitehouse's accusations were shocking to many, as they revealed some of the truth about the Supreme Court. But the reality runs deeper. It's not just the country's highest judicial body that functions undemocratically, it's the whole political and economic system. And it's about much more than money in politics, it's about a system that serves to expand and protect profits, at the expense of everything else – democracy, peoples' lives, and all life that has evolved on the planet as well.

Who Controls the Media?

It may seem that we have a huge variety of news sources and media outlets to choose from. There are so many TV and radio stations, newspapers, streaming services, social media, and websites. Behind this illusion of variety, however, is a highly centralized system controlled by

a powerful few. What is in common, for example, to Vogue, The New Yorker, GQ, Glamour, Pitchfork, Wired, Bon Appetit, and Reddit? They are all owned by a corporation most people haven't even heard of, called Advance Publications.

In 2012, six giant media corporations controlled 90% of the media in the United States. Today, it is five giants that dominate this industry: Comcast, Walt Disney, Time Warner, Fox/News Corp, and National Amusements. Comcast, for example, the most hated company in the U.S. according to consumer surveys, is not only the largest cable-TV and internet provider, it also owns multiple news channels such as NBC, CBS, MSNBC, and Telemundo, as well as Universal Studios. National Amusements is not a household name, but it is a "holding company" that owns the more familiar ViacomCBS, which includes many TV networks and film studios (CBS, Showtime, Paramount) and even the book publisher Simon & Schuster. The handful of billionaires (about 15 of them) who own these corporations oversee the dissemination of information and culture to hundreds of millions of people.

Economists call this market domination by a few companies "concentration." This process was supported by both capitalist parties in the U.S., Democratic and Republican. In the early 1980s, 90% of the media was owned by 50 companies. The Carter and Reagan Administrations then initiated deregulation that ushered the growth of huge media conglomerates – for example by relaxing limits on how many



commercials can be shown. (The media infrastructure in the U.S., such as cable, satellite, internet, and airwaves, is regulated by the federal government.) In 1996, Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act, which removed the cap on the number of radio stations a single company can own. As a result, the iHeartMedia corporation (known as Clear Channel at the time), was able to acquire 1,200 stations. It is now the largest radio station owner in the U.S. with 245 million listeners every month.

Although the government facilitated this concentration, its root cause is not politicians, but the capitalist system they work for. With its ruthless market competition, capitalism drives the growth of corporations, which then swallow up or destroy smaller businesses, until a monopoly or cartel dominates an entire industry. This is already the case for auto, energy and petrochemical, food, finance, and the list goes on.

The traditional value of independent journalism is based on the idea that journalists must be able to freely criticize the government, corporations, or any powerful entity, so that they can alert the public to abuses of power. Today, independent journalism barely survives in small media outlets that are funded by donations and have very limited exposure, while most people get their news from Big Media. Many of the mergers and acquisitions that create these media giants are orchestrated by banks, and the need for profit increasingly overrides any commitment to the values of quality journalism. As one historian of journalism described the executives and bankers behind these maneuvers, “news was not their business; business was their business.” The result is that the huge variety of news stations is a sham, as their content is produced by big companies that dictate to the local stations. Dozens of news stations will often deliver the exact same content, and the job of making news has been replaced by that of parroting the corporate line.

As media became increasingly dominated by mammoth corporations, their ties to other industries strengthened. This is because the major shareholders of big companies are billionaires who also own large shares of other companies, creating a network of capitalists that protect each other. Thus, news stations and papers will avoid criticizing or exposing scandals associated with their owners’ other companies. Journalists of integrity are then excluded from mainstream media and

marginalized, as conflicts of interest are built into the system that employs them.

The New York Times Company, for example, is apparently independent as it is not owned by a larger holding company. However, its major shareholder is the billionaire Carlos Slim Helú, one of the richest capitalists in the world who owns many companies (in communications, real estate, construction, airlines, media, technology, retailing, restaurants, industrial production, and finance). This kind of bond between large corporations by way of common ownership is a widespread phenomenon. It creates interdependence not only between different media companies but across other sectors of the economy and the government. It is one of the ways that different capitalists operate together to protect their common interests as a ruling class.

Another example of a paper that takes pride in upholding values of independent journalism is The Guardian. It claims to be principled about its sources of revenue by refusing money from companies that extract fossil fuels. It happily accepts money from other sections of the same ruling class, however, such as the Ford, Rockefeller (“old” oil money), and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations. This ostensibly ethical stance allows The Guardian to be more critical of the “excesses” of capitalism, such as environmental destruction, racism, and war, but not too critical of their root cause – the capitalist system itself. If it ventured too far in that direction, its funding from rich benefactors would disappear. (Indeed, the paper explicitly defended the Ford Foundation as being one of the few “good” capitalist foundations, while criticizing the “bad” ones.)

Another structural constraint on independent journalism is that most news outlets rely heavily on advertising. This means that they must be careful not to upset the advertisers, who may pull their ads from the paper if their companies are put in a bad light. Today, many people get their news from social media, where advertising is a huge source of revenue. Companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, while seemingly providing a service to their users, are actually providing a service to other companies – the service of selling our attention to advertisers. In fact, these tech companies carefully tailor their algorithms to maximize addiction to their products so as to increase advertisement exposure. This is a digital version of the addiction-promoting techniques

that the sugar industry uses to insert this highly addictive substance into so many food items, and that tobacco companies use to promote addiction to cigarettes and vapes.

The internet was hailed in its early years as a great democratizing force for information and culture – a brilliant solution to the corroding effects of corporations on traditional media. Today, as the recent fights around “net neutrality” are being lost to the same old media giants that are eclipsing independent websites and apps, it is clear that even the internet is not immune to the logic of concentration – the logic of capitalism.

The capitalist ruling class is driven by the pursuit of profit. To keep their profits up, their corporations must grow, and this requires increasing the exploitation of workers and the destruction of nature. It is for this reason that two themes are conspicuously absent or distorted in the corporate media – the struggles of workers against their bosses, and the environmental catastrophes that threaten humanity. Most working-class fights for better conditions (such as strikes) are not even deemed newsworthy and are totally absent from the mainstream media. On the rare occasion that they are represented, the opinion of the employers are highlighted and the voices of workers marginalized. For the same reason, the most urgent issues of our time – climate change, the destruction of agricultural land and water – are hardly discussed. The book (and film) *Merchants of Doubt* documents how the petrochemical industry uses its enormous influence to sow doubt about climate change through the media. A recent study based on news from the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today over the span of three decades concluded that “the messages opposing action to address climate change are about twice as likely to receive newspaper coverage as messages advocating for climate action.”

The other result of the capitalist control of the media is that it seeks to divide us. Depending on whether you watch channels like CNN or Fox News, you get wildly different information and explanations for the problems of our country. But what is always consistent is that the media promotes a culture and worldview expressing that the source of our problems is not the rich or their system, but other workers, ordinary people, and just plain “stupid people.” So many of those who pride themselves on reading the news regularly want to blame “the stupid” and

“the ignorant” for our problems. Sometimes consciously, others unconsciously, these media outlets turn us on each other, so that we are suspicious of our neighbors and feel powerless to fight back against the system. It is the old “divide and conquer” strategy.

Who controls the media? The same tiny class of capitalists who own the largest corporations that dominate all other industries. All attempts to carve out a “neutral” or benign pocket within this system – an industry, institution, or technological novelty not dominated by profit – are necessarily short-lived or pushed into the fringe.

U.S. Elections: Two Parties, the Same System

Since the Civil War, many battles have been fought to win greater democratic rights. Black men formally won the right to vote along with their freedom after the Civil War. But soon these rights were denied to Black people through violence in the segregated South until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Women of all races were denied the vote until 1920. In both cases, mass movements forced the system to change and allow more people the right to vote.

In spite of major struggles and victories by social movements, the fundamental structure of the system remains. For the most part, only the wealthy or those with their support can afford to mount campaigns and get elected. In addition, from the Presidency to Congress and the Supreme Court, the system is designed to limit democratic pressure from the majority of the population.

Today, the inequality in voting power enables the Republican Party, with its rural base, to exert greater control than it has popular support by playing on the fears and prejudices of some rural white voters. It is no accident that one of the central themes of Trump’s campaign in 2020 was to condemn “Democrat-run cities,” and to align himself with racism and prejudice. The fear-mongering and scapegoating of Trump’s message is only a slightly more vulgar version of the politics the Republicans have relied on for decades.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, relies on the popular vote to a greater extent than the Republican Party, and therefore has to consider some of people’s needs, especially the needs of people of color whose votes the Democrats have come to rely on. However, this has not changed the nature of the Democratic Party as a party representing the

wealthy elite. Democrats have launched or supported wars, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, stripped away benefits to the poor, cut spending on education, passed laws that result in putting more people in prison, and handed over billions of tax dollars to corporations. Civil rights for Black people and LGBTQ people, and workers' rights to unions and legal protections on the job were not granted by politicians without a fight. They were all won by struggles that forced politicians to act. Democrats in office have made no positive, substantive changes without the force of popular movements pushing them. The Republican dominance of the Senate is often the Democrats' excuse for why they failed to make these changes. In this way, the two parties work together to facilitate the rule of the rich, while keeping the rest of us distracted.

Conclusion

Because this form of "democracy" is actually an instrument belonging to the ruling class, with its slanted misrepresentation in the House, the Senate, and the executive branch through the Electoral College – all buttressed by extraordinary amounts of capitalist funding, and the Senate and president controlling nominations to the judicial branch as well – we can't rely on this undemocratic tool to serve our interests; it simply won't allow this. Instead, we need to rely on our own forces and organize ourselves to bring real democracy to our lives – a workers' democracy.

Some claim that the solution to ending the control of the rich over the system is to get money out of politics and demand more transparency. But how would this work, when the entire system serves the interests of the rich? We need a system that operates in the interest of the majority, not the interest of a small exploiting capitalist class. While the wealthy may own everything, working people are the ones who make it all run. That is where our power lies, in the workplaces and in the streets, not in the ballot box.

The money spent on the media and the political system is tragic. Instead of helping people live, this money is wasted on feeding a political system that does not represent the majority of people in the United States, just the opposite. Can't we imagine a better use for this wealth? Can't we imagine a better way to organize our society?

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