

The U.S Election System is Based on Co-optation, What is “The Alternative”?

Interview with Arnold August

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The mainstream talks about many features regarding the electoral system, but neglects its most important feature: co-optation.

Trabajadores: How would you describe the electoral process in the United States?

Arnold August (AA): The U.S. ruling elite provides itself with the most advanced electoral process in the world based on co-optation. Some analysts describe the American electoral system as principally being characterized by money and a high degree of corruption. Both these features are well understood in the U.S. and abroad and the U.S. system easily accommodates itself to this. The permanent mainstream news media never misses an occasion to express itself on political funding and corruption. As well, there are over 25 American TV satires on politics, often ridiculing the most banal features of the political/electoral system.

One can talk about anything regarding the electoral system, but not its most important feature: co-optation.

Through the subterfuge of co-optation, the status quo is maintained by alternating exclusively between the two imperialist political parties, while suppressing alternative revolutionary political options. Co-optation is so effective in the US, more than in any other country, because in addition to unlimited corporate support for both parties, it has at its disposal the most sophisticated multi-faceted media to shape public opinion. The central feature of this process is for the elite to co-opt anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggles, making them its own in order to avoid revolutionary struggle by the working class and other sections of society.

TR: Can you provide an example of co-optation?

AA: Yes, let's take the case of Obama's first election and mandate in 2008. It is also useful as once again he is a leading figure in the current presidential election. During the George W. Bush years, the standing and reputation of the U.S. hit a new low, both domestically and abroad. The elite saw Barack Obama as the solution.

In my second book, *Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion*, I deal with it in this way:

“Let us initiate this theme beginning with the international aspect. Zbigniew Brzezinski was a former National Security adviser to President Bill Clinton. Brzezinski wrote in his 2008 book *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower* about the “global alienation from America and worldwide doubts about Bush’s leadership.” He also expressed a pre-occupation with the “increasing linkage in Latin America between the rise of democracy [in reference to countries such as Venezuela] and the rise in anti-American sentiments.” Brzezinski goes on to write about how George W. Bush “misunderstood the historical moment ... and undermined America’s geopolitical position.”

Brzezinski was also apprehensive about Europe being “increasingly alienated.” Latin America was “becoming populist and anti- American.” He highlighted the “intensifying hostility to the West through- out the world of Islam [and] an explosive Middle East.” During the Democratic primaries in 2007, Brzezinski came out in favour of Obama versus Hillary Clinton. Brzezinski’s reason was that Obama “recognizes that the challenge is a new face [and has] both the guts and intelligence to address that issue [world affairs] and to change the nature of America’s relationship with the world.” Another example of wide-scale fear was expressed regarding U.S. credibility in Egypt and Latin America. It consisted of what was declared at a high- profile panel held in November 2008 featuring the establishment’s think-tank, the Council on Foreign Relations, whose representative said, “The election of an African-American had effectively countered propaganda about U.S. racism.”

Domestically, the integrity and authority of the capitalist system was a source of distress. The credibility gap is most evident among African- Americans. Michelle Alexander is an African-American civil rights advocate and Stanford (California) Law School professor. She published one of the [most impressive books on U.S. society](#) and recent history, bringing the readers into the stark reality faced by African-Americans.

The two-party system provides the opportunity for the elites to present one presidential candidate as different and better than the other. The credibility gap among African-Americans was a major preoccupation for the ruling circles.”

However, on the traces of the Obama case study, once having won the election by co- optation, the same basic policies continued at home and abroad, with the addition of some policies of his own:

- Did not persecute George W. Bush war crimes.
- Used drones to kill U.S. citizens abroad.
- S. military forces were at war for all eight years of Obama’s tenure, the first two-term president with that distinction.
- Launched airstrikes or military raids in at least seven countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan.
- With the assassination of Khadafi in Libya, the most advanced country in Africa, Obama converted it into the chaos of an open-air slave market.
- Used the Patriot Act to spy on U.S. citizens. As a senator in 2005, Obama condemned the Patriot Act for violating the rights of American citizens, but in 2011, Obama signed a four-year renewal.
- On whistle blower persecution, his National Defense Authorization Act allowed for imprisonment indefinitely of journalists, activists and human-rights workers based on what could be vague allegations.
- Obama’s Department of Justice head, Eric Holder, cleared the vigilante who killed

Trayvon Martin and the cop who murdered Mike Brown.

- Called Ferguson protesters [thugs protesting](#) the murder of Mike Brown.
 - The value of military equipment transferred to domestic police departments increased by 2,400% and has been used primarily against Black and Brown communities.
 - Record deportation: Obama Has Deported More People Than Any Other President
 - Direct or indirect coups in Honduras, Paraguay, Brazil.
 - Honduras became one of main sources of immigration.
 - Wall Street 2008 bail out to the tune of approximately \$500B.
 - Cuba:
1. Guantanamo: did not close it by [blaming it on Congress](#), but had the right to do so.
 2. Blockade against Cuba: Claimed that he was in favour of lifting it but was blocked by Congress. However, an American Constitutional Lawyer said the President has [the right to do it](#).
- While opening up toward Cuba in December 2014 and March 2015, Obama also initiated sanctions against Venezuela, Cuba's most important economic, political and moral ally. The main positive points of that "thaw," included the freedom of the remaining Cuban Five and easing of travel and other restrictions.

TR: Throughout the campaign, the current president and presidential candidate Donald Trump tried to impose the suppression of votes that mainly affects the population of Afro-descendants, Latinos and the poorest people. What do you think?

AA: This is true and it is the most grotesque feature of voter suppression. However, let us take a look at other forms of voter suppression.

- An impressive anti-capitalist, imperialist third party exists that stands against all the domestic and foreign policies of both the Democrats and Republicans. Both the presidential (Howie Hawkins) and vice-presidential (Angela Walker) candidates are workers and trade union activists. This is the Green Party. There are other examples. The Democrats have used their position in some state courts to block this third party from being on the ballot, thus suppressing the rights of those citizens who want to vote Green. The Democrats were able to knock the Greens off the ballot in Montana, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania where the Green petitions had two to three times the required signatures, which was difficult to do in the Covid lockdown. But the Democrats are also legislating party suppression. For example, in New York the Democrats rammed through a law attached to the state budget bill in April while attention was focused on the pandemic that triples the number of votes the Greens need to keep their ballot line.
- The duopoly sets a 15% threshold through their Commission on Presidential Debates to get into the debates. This means that a party needs at least 15% approval as per the selected national public opinion polling organizations. So that is a no-win situation for any third party. In order to increase their popular support, they have to get into the debates, but in order to get into the debates, they need a 15% polling support, difficult to be reached.

- Even though I do not believe that Bernie Sanders is a socialist, Biden admitted that Obama led the behind-the-scenes negotiations against the Sanders bid for the presidential nomination and in favour of Biden. There are reports that many disaffected potential Bernie voters will not vote for Biden, thus de facto eliminating their right to vote.

Yet, a recent Gallup poll showed that 57% of Americans are in favour of a major third party. Only about 55% of eligible voters actually vote. In other words, there are large sections of the voting age population that are de facto disenfranchised.

The Green Party is supported by the most important Black organizations and many other organizations and media outlets on the left, that is perhaps millions of people. The Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates for the Green Party, Howie Hawkins and Angela Walker (an Afro-American), are both workers.

In this resistance to the duopoly at the grassroots, Afro-Americans have traditionally played a leading ideological and organizational role. To discuss the American electoral process without taking into account – first and foremost – the Afro-American poor, working class and revolutionaries is devoid of all meaning. The U.S. state, after all, still carries vestiges of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans, all in the service of capitalism. In its bosom grows its very antithesis. This is the Afro-American revolutionary tradition that naturally gravitates toward Marxist thinking and action against capitalism at home and imperialist expansion in every corner of the world, especially the global south.

However, in the current elections, the Biden-Harris ticket, with the help of Barack and Michelle Obama, are trying to co-opt the Black Lives Matter Movement, along with concern about COVID-19 and the economic crisis. Once again, as was the case for Hilary Clinton in her 2016 race against Trump, there is very little enthusiasm for Biden.

When co-optation does not fully work to dupe the people, the lesser-of-two-evils rationale is trotted out, taking advantage of the fact that the Green Party and others are still marginalized. The hope is that through co-optation, despite the limitations of the Biden campaign, people would vote for Biden as the lesser of two evils. This will work to a certain extent, but as Malcom X pointed out long ago:

“The white conservatives aren’t friends of the Negro, but they at least don’t try to hide it. They are like wolves; they show their teeth in a snarl that keeps the Negro always aware of where he stands with them. But the white liberals are foxes, who also show their teeth to the Negro but pretend that they are smiling. The white liberals are more dangerous than the conservatives; they lure the Negro, and as the Negro runs from the growling wolf, he flees into the open jaws of the ‘smiling’ fox. One is the wolf, the other is a fox. No matter what, they’ll both eat you.”

Is falling into the trap of the lesser of two evils just a fleeting moment at the polling booth with no consequences? I do not believe so. It collectively eats away at the revolutionary movement at the base and sucks its energy. When one gives up principle, is there an end in sight? Seeking the lesser evil is part of an ideology that is ongoing and infects the movement like a cancer. When does it stop? When is the line drawn in the sand? Much of the anti-duopoly left asks: When should all progressive forces concentrate in building a strong People’s Party to take on the duopoly by voting Green now, as a step toward a new

mass socialist, anti-imperialist party?

TR: For some analysts, the current presidential campaign has shown that the American democratic model is in crisis. Do you share this opinion? What elements of judgment would allow to affirm something like this?

AA: No, the U.S. model is not in crisis; in fact, it is doing fine. As long as it maintains the capacity to transfer power from one of the two major parties to another through co-optation, unfettered by a viable third option by relying on the lesser-of-two-evils option, there will be no crisis. As I write this piece, one may notice on social media more and more personalities on the left are advocating a Biden vote as the lesser of two evils, either in all states, or in swing states. To capitulate to the lynching of the left by the Obama/Biden apologists will leave sequels behind. Even then, those who have succumbed to the lesser-of-two-evils are not a majority on the left.

The system will indeed be in crisis, as you ask, but only once the people break out of the two-party framework, unhesitatingly see through co-optation and its instrument the lesser of two evils, and thus mount a challenge to the status quo.

TR: What could change for Latin America and the Caribbean if the Democratic candidate wins and what if the Republican wins? What differences exist between the two platforms in terms of foreign policy?

AA: Why not ask first: how will the election outcome affect working people, Afro-Americans and the revolutionary left in the US? I am not being facetious. During the rebellion that followed the murder of George Floyd, every single day, the revolutionary left in general and especially the Afro-American left, following Malcolm X, brought this out onto the streets and in their alternative media. They cannot separate the struggle against the U.S. government domestically from the role of the U.S. abroad. Furthermore, to bring home the point that what the people on the streets of the U.S. are facing is what the peoples of the global south also face, often providing Cuba and Venezuela as targets of U.S. fury.

That being said, taking Latin America and the Caribbean as a region, little will change. In my view the litmus test to evaluate where a party or candidate stands is Venezuela. Therefore, there will be no significant shift since the U.S. regime change program against President Maduro, based on a so-called “humanitarian crisis” or on his supposed “human rights violations,” is a bipartisan issue extending into every pore of the decrepit Democratic Party, including its so-called left wing represented by Sanders and AOC.

Even on Cuba, although Biden has said he would return to the Obama policy, I have my doubts. Firstly, did you notice that when Obama travelled to Florida last week to speak in support of Biden, Obama did not say a word about Cuba? Furthermore, also last week, from Miami two Playa Giron right-wing “veterans” [openly abandoned Trump to endorse Biden](#). We know that an endorsement is a two-way street; one is expected to follow through once elected.

Secondly, during the entire time Trump hacked away at the Obama policy since 2017, Obama did not say a word to defend his own legacy. In my last two books, I made it clear that it is foolhardy to entertain illusions about Obama and his apologists.

TR: In an effort to “make America great again,” the administration of Donald Trump has

declared a trade war against its main economic rivals, mainly China. Could continuity in that policy be expected for whoever is elected tomorrow on November 3?

AA: While it is true that Trump has declared a trade war against China, however during this presidential campaign the Democratic Party has declared a “war” so to speak against what it calls Trump’s cozying up to dictators such as China’s President Xi. In other words, as on virtually all international issues, the Biden camp attacks Trump from the right. Thus, it is responsible for pushing the American political landscape even further to the right. In the last presidential debate, both candidates were squabbling as to which one is more hawkish on Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. In fact, while Trump defended his policy of trying to broker a peace deal between South Korea (80% support a peaceful solution in the South) and North Korea, all Biden had to say is that the leaders of all the above-mentioned countries are “thugs.”

However, whether it is Biden or Trump who wins, it is not either one of them who can decide everything about China. China is preparing itself economically and military to defend itself against any incursion. I visited China several years ago. Their accomplishment in bringing so many millions of people out of poverty is impressive, as is its current plans to accelerate this process. The movement of China on the international scene is objective: it represents an economic, political, cultural and spiritual challenge to U.S. hegemony. Thus, the U.S., being an imperial power, is hell bent on world domination and thus the containment of China. There is an unprecedented, bipartisan, racist U.S. campaign being waged against China.

However, the U.S. (the lowest any society has sunk since WW II) is no match for China and its millennium-long civilisation, coupled with its modern political system and unique approach to socialism. Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and others in the region have a powerful friend in China, whose wisdom and power can overcome anyone in the White House.

Modified version based on an interview by Trabajadores TR (Cuba) published in Spanish.

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