

US Presidential Election Season Begins

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Global Research, March 13, 2015

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More than a year and a half before the 2016 US presidential elections, the political establishment and media are already beginning to shift their focus to the vast exercise in influence-peddling and insider dealing that is the American electoral process.

The WSWS has often noted the stark contradiction between the size and diversity of the United States, a country of 320 million people and 50 states stretching across an entire continent, and a political system that offers only two parties with virtually indistinguishable right-wing programs. Lending the upcoming election an added element of farce is the fact that the contest could well be between a Bush and a Clinton, offering the American people a “choice” of candidates from two families that have occupied the presidency or vice-presidency for 28 of the past 34 years.

On the Democratic Party side, the presumptive nominee is Hillary Clinton, a right-wing and militarist scion of the political establishment. Indeed, the eruption of the media scandal over Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email account during her four years as US secretary of state marks the semi-official beginning of the 2016 presidential campaign. Clinton is expected to formally announce her candidacy sometime next month.

Clinton’s press conference Tuesday has left many unanswered questions, both about her conduct at the State Department, and about the performance of her presidential campaign team, which has been assembled over the past several months. Clinton has recruited virtually all available Democratic Party operatives and has monopolized major sources of fundraising.

Growing concerns in the Democratic Party wing of the political establishment found expression in articles Thursday in three leading US daily newspapers, all noting the stumbling character of Clinton’s response to the attacks over her use of private email and the absence of any alternative presidential candidate for the Democrats if her campaign should self-destruct.

The *Washington Post*, in a news analysis headlined, “Absence of 2016 competition for Clinton raises stakes for Democrats,” observed, “Clinton has been such a dominant front-runner that she has smothered most potential competition. Who rightly thinks they can seriously compete with her for money or institutional support?”

The *Wall Street Journal*, in a report headlined, “Some Democrats See the Risk of Having Single Candidate,” said the email controversy

“is providing fresh ammunition not just to Republican adversaries but people in her own party who are concerned she could win the 2016 Democratic

presidential nomination without being challenged in a primary contest.”

The *New York Times*, under the headline, “Democrats See No Choice but Hillary Clinton in 2016,” made the most scathing assessment of the condition of a Democratic Party without Clinton heading the ticket. Calling Clinton “too big to fail,” the newspaper noted,

“Her star power ... has helped obscure a vexing reality for the post-Obama Democratic Party: As much as it advertises itself as the party of a rising generation, the Democrats’ farm team is severely understaffed, and many of its leading lights are eligible for Social Security.”

The Democrats may call forward some other candidates—the “independent” Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren or the like—with the aim of in some way dressing up the tired and reactionary party with a progressive gloss while giving the various pseudo-left organizations that orbit around it something to sell. Their campaigns are not considered “serious,” least of all by the potential candidates themselves.

While unmentioned in the press critiques of the Democrats, the Republican Party is in no better shape in terms of presidential candidates. Its current frontrunner is former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, brother of the man who left the White House in 2009 as the most hated American president since Herbert Hoover. Vying with Bush are assorted reactionaries, Christian fundamentalist demagogues and semi-fascists.

The potentially dynastic character of the 2016 election only testifies to the extreme narrowness of the existing political system and the emergence of the aristocratic principle as the dominant feature in American society. The enormous growth of economic inequality is the most pervasive social reality of the past three decades. It inevitably finds expression in political life as well.

Candidates become viable, not because of character or political ideas, but because they can raise sufficient amounts of money to be “competitive.” In order to do this, they must ingratiate themselves with the Wall Street financial oligarchy. Just as importantly, they must pass muster with the Pentagon, CIA, NSA and FBI, the vast military-intelligence apparatus that defends the interests of corporate America both at home and abroad—and has what amounts to a veto over who is selected as “Commander-in-Chief.”

In such an environment, the ruling elite seeks to limit political debate to its own circles, and to argue over what tactics will best serve its interests, excluding any political views that would threaten the existing social structure and division of wealth and income. There are sharp tactical divisions within the ruling class, including over foreign policy, but these are generally fought out through backroom methods of scandal-mongering and media leaks.

The extraordinarily insular character of the parties is a reflection of the narrow social foundations upon which they rest. In addition to support from the financial aristocracy and the military intelligence apparatus, the Democrats mobilize sections of the privileged upper middle class, including layers of academia, professionals, Hollywood and the trade union apparatus. Identity politics is a major component of their appeal, although the experience of the Obama administration has dealt a devastating blow to the popular illusions raised by the election of the first African-American president. Nonetheless, the Democrats seek a reprise with a campaign focusing on Clinton becoming the first female president.

The Republicans mobilize openly reactionary sections of the population, on the basis of attacks on the poor and racial minorities and appeals to religious bigotry. They also make an increasingly open appeal to the military apparatus itself, as demonstrated in the suggestion by one potential Republican candidate, Lindsey Graham, that if elected, he would urge the military to force Congress to increase the Pentagon budget.

This protracted political process, extending over many decades, is something of a double-edged sword for the ruling elite. The great majority of the American people have zero influence over the selection of candidates by the two corporate-controlled parties between whom they will be given a “choice” on November 8, 2016.

Bourgeois politics in America has reached a certain point of exhaustion, particularly following the experience of Obama, the “transformative” candidate of “change.” The widespread disillusionment emerged in the last elections, the midterm contest in 2014, which saw a sharp fall in voter turnout. Outside of the top 10 percent or so of the population, the vast majority of the population is hostile and angry.

While this sentiment has not yet found direct political expression, it will—and as it does, it will take on an ever more insurrectionary and revolutionary form.

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