

# Democracy: Or How to Choose a Candidate in United States Elections

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## Current Introduction by the Author



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(Picture pma)

(11/2020) As an American citizen I have voted in US elections since 1968. I once believed that the United States was a genuine democracy, the best in the world. It took me decades to realize that the voter never gets the chance to vote on the issues but is forced to choose between one of two

candidates, each one of whom presents a platform, a conundrum of issues and programmes that do not have any internal coherence but result from the demands of lobbies and donors.

Still, the so-called "representative democracy" would work, if the elected candidate would keep his campaign promises, which they seldom do. In other words, candidates practice what I would call "deceptionalism". Moreover, there is very little opportunity to effect real change in society or in the power equations, because the programmes of the two political parties converge in fundamentals: both favour neo-liberalism, Wall Street over Main Street, ever increasing military budgets, contempt for international law and international institutions, increased foreign military adventures, rejection of multilateralism, the use of threats and military force to obtain "regime change" in other countries, targeted assassinations, etc.

A closer look at the US electoral system reveals that it often does not correspond to the wishes of the electorate because the "representatives" do not represent the people but the lobbies and the donors. Thus, the much praised "representative democracy" does not deliver democracy but simply implements the wishes of the powerful elites, the banks, the major transnational corporations.

My problem has always been that the choice between only two candidates would force me to choose between two political programs that do not reflect my own convictions. Essentially, I am disenfranchised and have been disenfranchised for decades. Similarly, the entire Afro-American community is disenfranchised, as is the Native Ameri-

can community, as are the members of the "middle class" and the millions of residents of the slums.

The vast majority of the American public has no real hope that the government will do anything for them. The American citizen is given a choice between bad and worse, between two parties that will continue and cement the status quo. Elections are a recurrent masquerade – but one that costs billions of dollars.

Thus, in 2016 I registered my protest vote by using the opportunity of NOT voting for the Republican or Democratic candidate, but for a "write in" candidate, who in 2016 was Bernie Sanders. In 2020 I shall write in Tulsi Gabbard. Although this is a meaningless exercise in futility, millions of Americans go to the polls at every election and some of them persuade themselves that we, United States citizens, are blessed with the best democratic elections on the planet. – The mainstream media advances this myth, and many Americans actually believe it.

## "Democracy" and "democratic values"

I am both a Swiss and US citizen and vote in both jurisdictions. In Switzerland I participate in its semi-direct democratic system, characterized by voting on issues, initiating legislation, approving or rejecting laws and regulations by referendum. We can even decide whether a bridge or a tunnel is built over Lake Geneva – or decide not to build it at all. Governance by the people and for the people works rather well, guided by the old principle *salus populi suprema lex* (the well-being of the people is the highest law, Cicero *De legibus* 3,3,8).

Everybody hails "democracy" and "democratic values", but what do we mean by it? We mean hands-on participation to ensure the correlation between the needs and wishes of the people and the laws and structures that affect them. Democracy functions best with an informed citizenry, but this is sabotaged by world-wide media dis-information, selective reporting, suppression of facts. The curse of "fake news" has accompanied humanity through millennia, but today not only governments, but also private media conglomerates, the "quality press" and civil society are all purveyors of "fake news" and participate in the free-for-

all of false information and skewed analysis. Since the goal of politicians is to be elected, they operate according to the old principle of “the end justifies the means”. Lie now, govern later. At the same time, there is a concerted effort to make it all appear plausible and coherent, and thus politicians and media cooperate in an effort to “manufacture consent” (Noam Chomsky).

Because there are no mechanisms of direct democracy in the United States (nor in many European countries), we do not have the opportunity to decide whether a bridge is built, taxes are lowered, securities regulation is strengthened. We can, however, influence government by means of what is termed “representative democracy”, which is not co-terminous with “participatory democracy”. The system works by organizing clusters of ideals and goals into a “platform” and dividing the players into political parties or “teams”, which are expected to enter into coalition with other parties in order to achieve viable majorities in Parliaments, so that they can adopt legislation.

Ideally we would like to identify a person we can trust to advance our ideals, adopt legislation necessary for the well-being of society – also in all those abstruse areas of political activity about which we know nothing and understand even less.

### **Fundamental downside of the two-party system**

The problem with “representative democracy” is that often enough the Senators and congressmen/women do not really represent us, the electorate, but are more committed to the agendas of certain lobbies, big business, big pharma, Wall Street, the automobile industry, the weapons manufacturers, the American Rifle Association. Indeed, there is a great disconnect between power and the people and certainly if many of the laws adopted by Congress were put to the direct vote of the electorate, they would be voted down.

In the United States the democratic deficit of “representative democracy” becomes more acute, because although there are some “marginal” political groupings, essentially there are only two players or teams – like in a football match. We are expected to root for Team A or Team B, and the newspapers tend to act as cheer-leaders for the one or the other. There is no possibility of entering into coalitions that represent a broader proportion of the population – it is either A or B, take it or leave it.

The fundamental downside of the two-party system operates on the basis of competing “platforms” of things-to-do. This cocktail, however, inevitably incorporates disparate ingredients – some of which we may be allergic to. In my personal experience as a conscious citizen in Chicago, Boston and New York, I often found myself in a quandary because whereas I enthusiastically approved 50% of the Republican or Democratic platform, I abhorred most of the remaining 50 %, some of which elements I considered toxic. I never wanted to be compelled to endorse the 50% that sometimes contradicted my deepest moral and religious convictions. It thus became impossible for me to vote according to my conscience – a situation which led me to abstain or to throw my vote away by voting for a “write-in” candidate, who of course had zero chance of being elected. In the United States the voter is expected to compromise his/her ideas and beliefs and is forced to vote “strategically”. In order to try to get certain policies adopted, we are forced to vote against our convictions in a number of important social, economic and cultural domains.

Unlike in Switzerland, there is no possibility in the US to vote for issues and policies one by one. The differences between the two parties are mostly marginal, because on the key issues of governance they converge. Both US Democrats and Republicans are for huge military budgets, cater to the military-industrial complex, support Wall Street, reject multilateralism in international affairs, enter into alliances with rogue States like Saudi Arabia and other strange bedfellows. Thus, in deciding for one party or the other, we often have to choose between bad or very bad. Does this situation have any resemblance to democracy? Is democracy just the pro-forma casting of a ballot for either one of two candidates we do not trust? Have we arrived at such a level of dysfunction that constitutional reform has become an urgent necessity?

### **Profile of my ideal candidate**

My ideal candidate for President, Senator, Congressman/woman should have integrity and demonstrate intellectual and emotional honesty. He/she must have a moral compass and a sense for proportions. He/she must have competence and independence of mind, must be able to think both inside and outside the box, must be committed to transparency and accountability. He/she must understand his/her role as a servant,

not as a master. He/she must be able to listen and demonstrate flexibility and empathy, must be committed to pragmatically advancing human dignity through the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. He/she must be committed to ensuring a level playing field for all, without privileges, monopolies or scams, so that the "American dream" can become reality, so that the concept of "meritocracy" is more than just a PR farce. He/she should have a knowledge of world history and the courage to accept that the United States has not always acted in conformity with "American values", and that we owe a huge debt to the First Nations of the Americas, the indigenous Iroquois, Algonquins, Crees, Cherokees, Sioux and other indigenous peoples, whom our ancestors massacred in great numbers and whose right to property was ignored, whose land and resources we took without compensation. He/she must place people over profits. He must be committed to domestic and international peace, understanding that patriotism is not chauvinism or jingoism, nor waging aggressive wars against real or imagined enemies. Patriotism means devising ways to strengthen local, regional and international peace. The guiding principle should be: *si vis pacem, cole iustitiam* – if you want peace, you must cultivate social justice – both domestically and internationally.

### **Platform of my ideal party**

*On domestic issues:* Ensure that the basic necessities of all persons under the jurisdiction of the State are covered. This entails advancing the well-being of all, e.g. through preparedness to meet daily needs and unexpected emergencies such as earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and pandemics; universal medical coverage, enhanced research and development in the fields of health security, prevention of disease, new medicines and medical equipment to prevent and/or cure disease; free public education from grammar school to university; job-creation and re-training programs; a Civilian Conservation Corps to ensure maintenance of National Parks, dams, bridges and infrastructures; affordable housing; environmentally sensitive energy policies with an emphasis on promoting the use of renewable energy; sensible public transportation, construction of more cycling lanes; access to information, maximum disclosure by government offices, a truly free media instead of a cor-

porate press that manipulates public opinion through fake news, suppression of crucial facts, and the partisan interpretation of events and history; freedom of opinion and expression that guarantees the right to dissent and not just the right to echo whatever nonsense we heard last night over CNN or Fox; academic freedom that is not restricted by pressures of "political correctness"; abolition of structural violence, racial and gender discrimination; affordable housing and a solution to the homelessness problem in many big cities throughout the United States.

*Budget priorities:* Taxpayers' money should not be squandered in exorbitant military expenditures, procurement of more aeroplanes and bombers, missiles and drones, research and development into nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, lethal autonomous weapon systems, artificial intelligence, military bases all over the world. The mantra should be: *disarmament for development*. The priorities of the national budget should ensure a better future for all Americans through job-creation and comprehensive social programs. Congress should allocate no funds to subsidize the oil and gas industries, or provide cheap fuel to the airliners. Government must immediately stop unconstitutional activities such as those conducted by the CIA and the National Security Agency with its Orwellian "mass surveillance" of American citizens. Moneys should be allocated to facilitate the conversion of a military economy into a human services economy.

*Economy:* Create jobs. Support Main Street over Wall Street. Encourage private initiative and small business enterprises. Downsize large corporations and use anti-trust legislation where necessary. Break down monopolies. Regulate banks and Wall Street so as to prevent the boom-and-bust cycles and the necessity to bail-out rogue banks.

*Criminal law:* The State is ontologically obliged to protect the population from crimes and abuses. Here, like elsewhere, prevention is better than cure. This requires a police department that is truly democratic, not racist, and inspired by a philosophy of public service. The State must not privatize the police, security services or the prisons. The primary goal of prisons should not be to "punish", bearing in mind that punishment is always *ex-post facto*. The goal must be to prevent crime and to rehabilitate the criminal so that he can be reintegrated into society after he has paid his debt to society. Prosecution of common

criminality is part of the State's obligation to ensure the "security of person" (article 9, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), but this obligation extends also to the prosecution of "white collar crime" or economic crimes, including speculation, market scams, insider trading, fraudulent bankruptcies, "sweetheart" deals, "golden parachutes", etc.

*Urgently needed legislation:* significant strengthening of Securities Regulation, abolishing tax havens and criminalizing all forms of tax evasion and most forms of "tax optimization", regulating the activities transnational corporations to ensure that they pay taxes where the profits are generated and that their employees receive decent salaries without racial or gender discrimination. Abolish "mass surveillance" of the population and impose high penalties on government officials who breach the privacy of persons without judicial warrant. Following the revelations of Edward Snowden, the NSA should be disbanded, and officials who acted illegally and unconstitutionally should be prosecuted.

#### **International law and international relations**

Apply international law uniformly and not à la carte; government lawyers should facilitate the

implementation of international treaties (*pacta sunt servanda*) and not try to find loopholes so as to weasel out from international obligation; abandon unilateralism and "exceptionalism"; participate in multilateral negotiations and constructive action; stop military adventures that generate terrorism, create enemies and alienate friends; respect freedom of navigation and freedom of trade; lift economic sanctions and financial blockades of geopolitical rivals; be a leader in the regional and international human rights court systems; commit to the purposes and principles of the United Nations; acknowledge the UN Charter as a kind of "world constitution; properly fund all UN agencies, including the WHO, ILO, UNESCO UNDP, UNEP and UNWRA; commit to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals; abolish Investor-State Dispute Settlement mechanisms contained in many free-trade agreements and bilateral investment treaties, because they undermine the rule of law and circumvent the system of public courts, recognizing that ISDS cannot be reformed because it is an ontological aberration and *contra bonos mores*; ensure that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund advance and do not frustrate the principles and purposes of the United Nations.