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**“Election 2002: Why the Democrats Lost”**

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For several months now, political analysts from both major parties and the media have pushed the argument that President Bush and the Republicans achieved an unprecedented victory in this November’s Congressional elections. Only hours after the polls closed, for example, Bush’s press secretary Ari Fleischer announced, “It is a big victory.” Tony Coelho, Al Gore’s 2000 campaign chairman, agreed. “The White took a huge gamble; they rolled the dice, and it worked,” Coelho said with apparent admiration. Bush “got his mandate, he got his victory and now he can govern for two years.”

Republicans attributed their victories to President Bush’s “personal popularity.” Of the twenty-three Congressional districts Bush visited to support Republican candidates, 21 of them won. Out of 16 Senate candidates Bush campaigned with, twelve won.

From the vantagepoint of political history, the Republicans seemed justified to declare that they had won a “mandate to govern.” For over a century, the party whose candidate was elected president almost always lost seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate two years later. This was true even for popular presidents, like Eisenhower and Johnson. Reagan, for example, won a landslide victory for re-election in 1984, but the Democrats regained control of the Senate two years later. Democrats remained in the majority in both houses of Congress until 1994. By picking up seats in both the House and the Senate, Bush had accomplished what no other Republican since Theodore Roosevelt had done, back in 1902.

However, don’t believe the Republican hype. In reality, there is absolutely no mandate for the Republican regime.

First, let’s count the votes. About 77 million Americans cast votes last November in 435 House and 34 Senate races. A shift of only 43,000 votes, according to the *Washington Post*,

would have given the Democrats 51 Senate seats and continued control. Republicans today control about 52 percent of the House seats, and about one-half of the state governorships—hardly a “mandate.”

The hidden story of the 2002 elections was the dramatic breakthrough registered by third parties. In California, 13 percent of the total vote went to third parties. According to historian Gerald Horne, this was “the largest total” received by California third parties “since 1913.” Green Party gubernatorial candidate Peter Camejo won five percent of the statewide vote. Even more impressively, Camejo received 15.4 percent of the vote in San Francisco, a higher total than Republican candidate Bill Simon. In Alameda County, Camejo won nearly 11 percent of the vote.

In New York, the progressive Working Families Party won 85,000 votes in the gubernatorial race, two percent of the overall statewide vote. Frequently, third party candidates affected the outcomes of important elections. In South Dakota, for example, Libertarian Party candidate Kurt Evans attracted 3,000 conservative votes away from Republican Senate candidate John Thune. As a result Thune lost by a narrow 500 vote margin against incumbent Democratic Senator Tim Johnson.

Throughout the U.S. in 2002, there were 362 Green Party candidates running in 39 states last fall. Sixty-seven of the Green candidates won, bringing the total number of Green Party elected officials to 171 nationwide. Over 250,000 Americans are now registered members of the Green Party.

The reason that millions of Americans are exploring third parties, and tens of millions are staying home on Election Day, is that the United States does not hold democratic elections. In fact, we should call them “no-choice elections,” because in most Congressional districts, the voters had no real choice due to the lack of competition.

As historian David Garrow recently observed in the *New York Times*, in California, only 3 of 52 Congressional races were won with less than 60 percent of the vote. In New York State,

only 3 of 29 House races were won with less than 60 percent. Out of 435 House of Representatives races, only 39 “were won with less than 55 percent of the vote,” observes Garrow. “Even of the 49 races not involving an incumbent, 35 were won with 55 percent of the vote or more.” Although Senate races are generally much more competitive than House elections, nevertheless there were 14 races last year that were won by over sixty percent of the vote.

Our legislatures at both the national and state levels are rigidly gerrymandered by both the Republican and Democratic parties, whose interests are served by minimizing truly competitive elections. Districts are carefully constructed to create “safe” constituencies that are almost guaranteed to go either Democrat or Republican by their social and political composition. Third parties are usually excluded through absurdly complicated ballot qualifying requirements. The winner-take-all voting system we have also makes it difficult for minority groups to influence majority decisions.

The Center for Voting and Democracy observes that about 95 percent of all House incumbents “cruise to victory, usually by huge margins. Voters are bunkered down in one-party districts where their only real choice is to ratify the candidate of the dominant party.”

In 2002, less than one in four Americans of voting age actually elected a House member, due to the limitations imposed on our voting procedures. The question we should be asking is not “how do we encourage more people to register and vote,” but “how can we restore true democracy to the American political system?”

Other democratic countries are moving to fairer voting systems, such as proportional representation and instant runoff voting (IRV). The U.S. Constitution permits the creation of multimember districts, where winners would be selected through full or proportional representation voting. With these reforms in place, independent and third party candidates would have a chance to compete without being “spoilers.” And finally, we might begin to have a political system that truly reflects what the great unrepresented majority of Americans want.

The Democrats lost, and will continue to lose, so long as they reject policies that would encourage a vast increase in the size of the national electorate. If 80 percent of all Americans regularly voted, and if we had a democratic electoral system that truly reflected real choices for voters, conservatives would have a hard time winning.

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