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BY STEPHEN F. EISENMAN- JANUARY 13, 2023
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Capitol Charades



House Representatives Matt Gaetz, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Paul Gosar. Photograph: CSPAN screengrab.

Leadership contest, filmed before a live audience

I first realized the contest over the House speakership was of more than specialist interest during a visit to the men's room in LaGuardia airport. Standing at a urinal, I heard the roll call vote, broadcast in non-synchronous stereo from the cellphones of the two men standing on my left and right. That my own phone remained in my pocket was the consequence only of a low battery and a full bladder.

The performance at the Capitol was in fact irresistible. Viewership of CNN, MSNBC and especially CSPAN surged. My own explanation is that the House Clerk's repeated reading out of member names transported listeners back to grade school and their teachers' calling attendance. The Clerk, Chery Johnson is quite schoolmarmish, adept at both scolding her charges for "engaging in personalities" when they showboat, and earning their affection.

(When it was all over, House members gave her a standing ovation.) In addition, the simple storyline of the proceedings, recited endlessly by the media, was a reframing of the classic American movie Western: A peaceful community trying to protect itself against a gang of outlaws. In this case, it was Kevin McCarthy and moderate Republicans fending off an assault by what several legislators dubbed “the Taliban 20.”

Those of us on the political left were rooting for the Taliban. At one point, CSPAN cameras spotted Mullah Omar, aka Matt Gaetz, caucusing with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They spoke and gesticulated with animation. Gaetz once said he aspired to be the Republican AOC; maybe he’d nominate her? More likely however, was a nomination of Ronald Reagan; just as there is no bar to electing someone from outside the House chamber, there is no rule against picking a dead president. Moribund Donald Trump had already been nominated.

Finally, on the 15th ballot, McCarthy prevailed; the Republicans had fended off the MAGA mujahadin. But not quite. Nearly all Taliban demands were acceded to, and anyway their positions – on abortion, Critical Race Theory, Queer rights, the border, the deficit, military spending, climate change, fossil fuels, the Ukraine War, the social safety net and voting rights – are indistinguishable from the mainstream of the Republican party. The whole thing had been a big charade!

“Not a dime’s worth of difference”

During his 1968 run for the presidency, Alabama governor George Wallace frequently said: “There’s not a dime’s worth of difference between the Republican and Democratic parties.” Both parties, he said, pledged to continue the war against Vietnam, and supported racial integration. Wallace by contrast, promised to end the war if it couldn’t quickly be won, and was an arch segregationist. But as always with Wallace, truth was undergirded by deception. His vice-presidential running mate, Curtis Lemay, for example, pledged to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, not exactly a plan for de-escalation. (Nixon too contemplated a nuclear attack on North Vietnam.)

Nor was there much difference, as it turned out, between Wallace’s positions on race and those of the Democratic and Republican parties. Though presidential candidate (and former senator) Hubert Humphrey championed civil rights, the Democratic party waffled on integration. By 1974, they campaigned against “bussing” – the transportation of children from one school district to another to achieve racial balance – led by the junior senator from Delaware, one Joseph R. Biden Jr. The Republican candidate in 1968, Richard Nixon, was of course a notorious racist, as taped conversations made clear. The Republican Party’s “Southern Strategy” –fostering white racism to sever the historical connection between

southern states and the Democratic Party — was highly successful. Since '68, Republicans have had a lock on southern states, with the elections of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton being partial exceptions to the rule.

Wallace's "dime's worth of difference" line (inflation would now make it a 10-dollar bill) is still used, but mostly by the left. Both parties, it's claimed, are wholly owned subsidiaries of multinational corporations – military and aerospace, fossil fuel, financial, and communications – to the detriment of working people and the environment. Both support U.S. military hegemony. Both would better accept the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But in one major respect, the parties are distinct: Democrats support expanded voting rights for U.S. citizens, (including statehood for Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico) while Republicans clearly don't. They would further restrict the franchise to enhance their electoral success on the way to one-party rule. The Republicans are the party of authoritarianism, even fascism, as I have written elsewhere. And while nominally free elections haven't of late yielded much to boast about, progressive victories in future ones are certainly imaginable, especially if voting rights are expanded and basic electoral reforms are enacted.

The Republican assault on democratic voting

Many Republicans today laud what they call "the constitutional republic," an innocent-sounding term describing an increasingly undemocratic electoral system. The gerrymandering of districts by Republican officials has already succeeded so well that in many states, legislative and congressional delegations are overwhelmingly Republican despite parity or near-parity in Democratic registration and vote tallies. This is the case in Texas, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Florida, and Georgia. The unfairness is justified by Republicans on the grounds that from its founding, the U.S. was a "constitutional republic" not a "democracy", that minority rights must be protected, and that nothing in the Constitution mandates majority rule. There is historical evidence for this view only if you discount all amendments to the U.S. Constitution written after 1865.

The Electoral College system, and the apportionment of two U.S. senators per state regardless of population, clearly rigged the system at the start in favor of small, slave holding states and rural areas and against large, free states and urban centers. That disparity continued, despite the extension of voting rights to Blacks after the Civil War, because of racial segregation ("Jim Crow"), poll taxes and other tools for disenfranchisement in former Confederate states. A constitutional amendment banning poll taxes (1962), the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Voting Rights Act (1965) were supposed to finally redress these injustices and bring greater

democracy to the South, but they did so only to a limited extent. The current Republican Party – buttressed by a tractable, far-right Supreme Court — has succeeded in reviving and expanding racial inequality and circumventing (with SCOTUS approval) the Voting Rights Act. Gerrymandering, denying the franchise to people convicted of crimes, and the purging of Democrats from registration lists in the name of preventing (mythical) voter fraud, are some of the key strategies used to deny majority rule. Support for unlimited campaign contributions by corporations is another.

In 2022, Republicans in swing states sought to gain control of the actual election apparatus to ensure victories regardless of the vote count. Though they had only limited success, they have pledged to continue the effort. This isn't a matter of constitutionally protected “minority rights”; it's a case of taking away fundamental voting rights from the majority. The effort by Republican legislators in Arizona and Georgia after the 2020 election to choose “alternate” (fraudulent) electors, was a practice-run for what they hope will become standard operating procedure in future presidential elections: if they lose at the ballot box, they can win in the statehouse or in the U.S. Congress. State and federal indictment and conviction of some of those plotters might discourage future efforts.

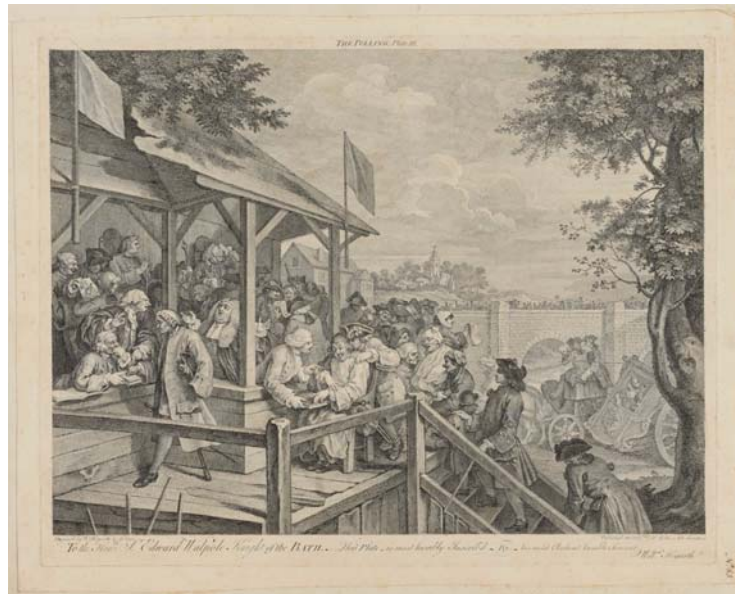
Clearly, the jerry rigging of elections goes well beyond the idea of the U.S. as a “constitutional republic.” It borrows from the book of contemporary “illiberalism,” a system of governance that's ostensibly electoral but denies voters any meaningful say over how officials are chosen and how public affairs are conducted. Elections in illiberal nations aren't exactly rigged, but the process for selecting candidates, combined with severe press and broadcast restrictions, ensures that only the far-right has any chance of winning. Key economic and political decisions are made not by an elected majority but by autocratic leaders in collaboration with corporate and other cronies.

The phenomenon of illiberalism is today most associated with Viktor Orbán, president of Hungary, but also with far-right nationalist leaders in India, Brazil (formerly), Turkey, the Philippines, and Russia. At the Conservative Political Action convention in Dallas in early August 2022, Orbán gave the keynote address, in which he inveighed against immigrants, same-sex marriage, and the free press. He also defended comments he made the week before that Hungarians “do not want to become peoples of mixed race” and that immigration is akin to “population replacement or inundation.” Orbán's greatest American acolyte, the Fox news commentator Tucker Carlson, shares his conspiratorial and racist vision. In July 2022, Carlson condemned the Democratic president and Congress for “changing America

completely and forever” and “trying to replace the electorate,” that is, replace native-born or “legacy” Americans with non-white immigrants.

“Replacement” is the liaison between restricting voting rights and fascism. It was invoked by the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville in 2017 and has become common currency among Republicans. Carlson has cited it more than 400 times, according to a tally by the *NYTimes*, and in recent polling, 2/3 of registered Republicans subscribe to the conspiracy theory. It posits that Democrats foster immigration for the purpose of replacing white Americans with non-whites who will quickly be granted citizenship. They in turn will become Democratic voters, ensuring permanent, one-party rule. The theory has roots in American nativism, the KKK, and racist pseudo-science dating back to the first two decades of the 20th Century. (See for example, Madison Grant’s book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 1916.) Replacement theory motivated deadly mass shootings by the neo-Nazi Dylan Storm Roof in Charleston and Peyton Gedron in Buffalo, among others.

A pantomime of democracy



William Hogarth, *The Polling (The Humours of an Election, plate 3)*, 1758. London: Royal Academy of Art.

In 1758, the English painter, engraver and caricaturist William Hogarth designed a series of engravings, (based on a prior set of four paintings), called *The Humours of an Election*. The title was a play on the word “humours” which according to ancient medical theory, consisted of Blood, Yellow Bile, Black Bile and Phlegm, the proper balance of which was the basis of a healthy constitution. An over-abundance of one could be the cause of physical or mental illness. For example, a surplus of black bile leads to a melancholic or depressed temperament,

and of yellow bile to a choleric or angry mood. At the same time, the word humor had, by the mid-18th century, taken on its modern sense of funny, amusing, or witty.

Plate three of Hogarth's series is thus intended as comedy of a serious sort. It shows a polling booth on election day and a parade of electors coming to cast their ballots. The right to vote in Georgian England was limited only to men of a certain wealth, and even at that was anything but free and fair. It was expected that candidates would purchase or make deals for the votes of electors. The two candidates in the engraving, seated on slightly raised chairs at the back of the booth, view the scene with apprehension; one with concern about its cost (the balding man who scratches his head), and the other with anxiety about the size of the turnout (the man in profile holding a stick). In the foreground, a scrum of voters, election officials and miscellaneous thieves and knaves shove, tussle, and connive to make what profit they can from the business.

When the election for House speaker was finally over last week, Rep. Jim Jordan, Trump's bulldog and incoming chair of the powerful Judiciary Committee said: "So, sometimes, democracy is messy, but I would argue that's exactly how the Founders intended it...real debate, real input from all people and then you get a decision." He might have added: "Who do you believe, me or your lying eyes?" Debate was limited to encomia on behalf of the candidates; input came from a tiny, rich and privileged electorate. To get their votes, Kevin McCarthy bribed them with jobs, money (campaign support), influence and access, or threatened them with the withholding of all these. He did this both in full view of the television cameras and in backrooms. On at least one occasion, fisticuffs were barely avoided.

The speakership election was at best a Hogarthian pantomime of Democracy intended to persuade Americans that the same party which voted a year ago to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election (and still plots to undermine the next one) is democracy's champion. The rank and file of House Republicans, the Taliban 20 and the other 200, will now undertake to destroy the very programs – Social Security, Medicare and environmental protections — that the vast majority of Americans support. They will hold government checks for retired people, veterans, the disabled, TSA workers and many others hostage to their effort to cut the federal deficit, the better to return money to the wealthiest Americans.

There remains considerable truth to Wallace's line about there being "not a dime's worth of difference between the Republican and Democratic parties." But in the absence of a strong movement for democratic socialism, democratic capitalism is the best we have to address gross inequality, expand medical care, improve schools, reduce pollution and stop global

warming before it's too late. The election of a Republican majority in the House, now led by Kevin McCarthy, puts even that at risk.

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