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Big American Money, Not Russia, Put Trump in the White House: Reflections on a Recent Report

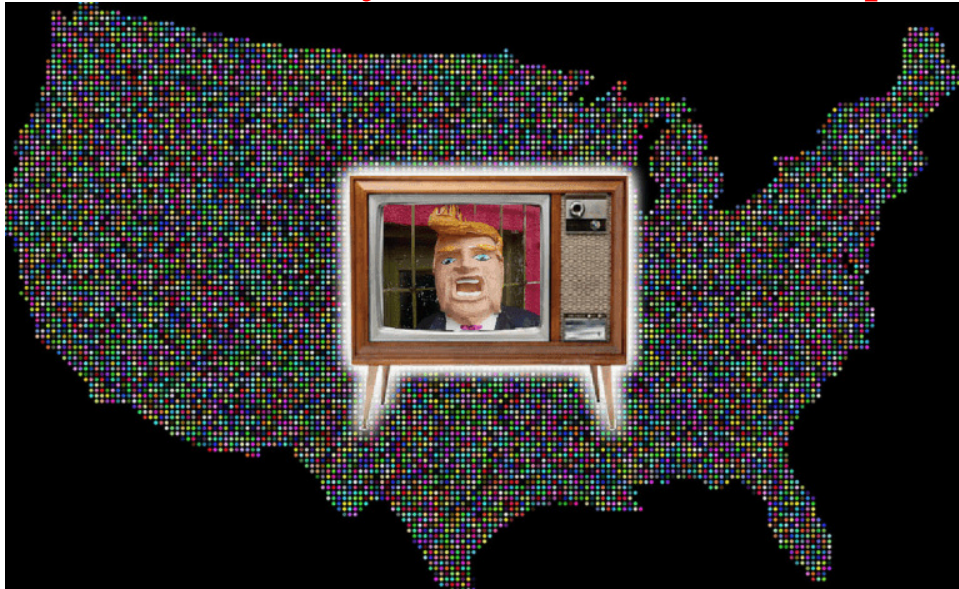


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“She Doesn’t Have Any Policy Positions”

On the Friday after the Chicago Cubs won the World Series and prior to the Tuesday on which the vicious racist and sexist Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, Bernie Sanders spoke to a surprisingly small crowd in Iowa City on behalf of Hillary Clinton. As I learned months later, Sanders told one of his Iowa City friends that day that Mrs. Clinton was in trouble. The reason, Sanders reported, was that Hillary wasn’t discussing issues or advancing real solutions. “She doesn’t have any policy positions,” Sanders said.

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The first time I heard this, I found it hard to believe. How, I wondered, could anyone run seriously for the presidency without putting issues and policy front and center? Wouldn't any serious campaign want a strong set of issue and policy positions to attract voters and fall back on in case and times of adversity?

Sanders wasn't lying. As the esteemed political scientist and money-politics expert Thomas Ferguson and his colleagues Paul Jorgensen and Jie Chen note in an important study released by the Institute for New Economic Thinking two months ago, the Clinton campaign "emphasized candidate and personal issues and avoided policy discussions to a degree without precedent in any previous election for which measurements exist....it stressed candidate qualifications...[and] deliberately deemphasized issues in favor of concentrating on what the campaign regarded as [Donald] Trump's obvious personal weaknesses as a candidate."

Strange as it might have seemed, the reality television star and presidential pre-apprentice Donald Trump had a lot more to say about policy than the former First Lady, U.S. Senator, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a wonkish Yale Law graduate.

"Courting the Undecideds in Business, not in the Electorate"

What was that about? My first suspicion was that Hillary's policy silence was about the money. It must have reflected her success in building a Wall Street-filled campaign funding war-chest so daunting that she saw little reason to raise capitalist election investor concerns by giving voice to the standard fake-progressive "hope" and "change" campaign and policy rhetoric Democratic presidential contenders typically deploy against their One Percent Republican opponents. Running against what she (wrongly) perceived (along with most election prognosticators) as a doomed and feckless opponent and as the clear preferred candidate of Wall Street and the intimately related U.S foreign policy elite, including many leading Neoconservatives put off by Trump's isolationist and anti-interventionist rhetoric, the "lying neoliberal warmonger" Hillary Clinton arrogantly figured that she could garner enough votes to win without having to ruffle any ruling-class feathers. She would cruise into the White House with no hurt plutocrat feelings simply by playing up the ill-prepared awfulness of her Republican opponent.

If Ferguson, Jorgensen, and Chen (hereafter "JFC") are right, I was on to something but not the whole money and politics story. Smart Wall Street and K Street Democratic Party bankrollers have long understood that Democratic candidates have to cloak their dollar-drenched corporatism in the deceptive campaign discourse of progressive- and even populist-sounding policy promise to win elections. Sophisticated funders get it that the

Democratic candidates' need to manipulate the electorate with phony pledges of democratic transformation. The big money backers know it's "just politics" on the part of candidates who can be trusted to serve elite interests (like Bill Clinton 1993-2001 and Barack Obama 2009-2017) after they gain office.

What stopped Hillary from playing the usual game – the “manipulation of populism by elitism” that Christopher Hitchens once called “the essence of American politics” – in 2016, a year when the electorate was in a particularly angry and populist mood? FJC’s study is titled “Industrial Structure and Party Competition in an Age of Hunger Games: Donald Trump and the 2016 Presidential Election.” It performs heroic empirical work with difficult campaign finance data to show that Hillary’s campaign funding success went beyond her party’s usual corporate and financial backers to include normally Republican-affiliated capitalist sectors less disposed than their more liberal counterparts to abide the standard progressive-sounding policy rhetoric of Democratic Party candidates. FJC hypothesize that (along with the determination that Trump was too weak to be taken all that seriously) Hillary’s desire get and keep on board normally Republican election investors led her to keep quiet on issues and policy concerns that mattered to everyday people. As FJC note:

“Trump trailed well behind Clinton in contributions from defense and aerospace – a lack of support...extraordinary for a Republican presidential hopeful...late in the race. For Clinton’s campaign the temptation was irresistible: Over time it slipped into a variant of the strategy [Democrat] Lyndon Johnson pursued in 1964 in the face of another [Republican] candidate [Barry Goldwater] who seemed too far out of the mainstream to win: Go for a grand coalition with most of big business.... *one fateful consequence of trying to appeal to so many conservative business interests was strategic silence about most important matters of public policy. Given the candidate’s steady lead in the polls, there seemed to be no point to rocking the boat with any more policy pronouncements than necessary. ...Misgivings of major contributors who worried that the Clinton campaign message lacked real attractions for ordinary Americans were rebuffed. The campaign sought to capitalize on the angst within business by vigorously courting the doubtful and undecideds there, not in the electorate*” (emphasis added).

Hillary Happened

FJC may well be right that a wish not to antagonize off right-wing campaign funders is what led Hillary to muzzle herself on important policy matters, but who really knows? An alternative theory I would not rule out is that Mrs. Clinton’s own deep inner conservatism

was sufficient to spark her to gladly dispense with the usual progressive-sounding campaign boilerplate. Since FJC bring up the Johnson-Goldwater election, it is perhaps worth mentioning that 18-year old Hillary was a “Goldwater Girl” who worked for the arch-reactionary Republican presidential candidate in 1964. Asked about that episode on National Public Radio (NPR) in 1996, then First Lady Hillary said “That’s right. And I feel like my political beliefs are rooted in the conservatism that I was raised with. I don’t recognize this new brand of Republicanism that is afoot now, which I consider to be very reactionary, not conservative in many respects. I am very proud that I was a Goldwater girl.”

It was a revealing reflection. The right-wing Democrat Hillary acknowledged that her ideological world view was still rooted in the conservatism of her family of origin. Her problem with the reactionary Republicanism afoot in the U.S. during the middle 1990s was that it was “not conservative in many respects.” Her problem with the far-right Republican Congressional leaders Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay was that they were betraying true conservatism – “the conservatism [Hillary] was raised with.” This was worse even than the language of the Democratic Leadership Conference (DLC) – the right-wing Eisenhower Republican (at leftmost) tendency that worked to push the Democratic Party further to the Big Business-friendly right and away from its working-class and progressive base.

Of course, Bill and Hillary helped trail-blaze that plutocratic “New Democrat” turn in Arkansas during the late 1970s and 1980s. The rest, as they say, was history – an ugly corporate-neoliberal, imperial, and racist history that I and others have written about at great length. (I cannot reprise here the voluminous details of Mrs. Clinton’s longstanding alignment with the corporate, financial, and imperial agendas of the rich and powerful. Two short and highly readable volumes are Doug Henwood, *My Turn: Hillary Clinton Targets the Presidency* [OR Books, 2015]; Diana Johnstone, *Queen of Chaos: The Misadventures of Hillary Clinton* [CounterPunch Books, 2015]. On the stealth, virulent racism of the Clintons in power, see Elaine Brown’s classic volume *The Condemnation of Little B: New Age Racism in America* [2003].)

What happened? Horrid corporate Hillary happened. And she’s still happening. The “lying neoliberal warmonger” recently went to India to double down on her “progressive neoliberal” contempt for the “basket of deplorables” (more on that phrase below) that considers poor stupid and backwards middle America to be by saying this: “If you look at the map of the United States, there’s all that red in the middle where Trump won. I win the

coasts. But what the map doesn't show you is that I won the places that represent two-thirds of America's gross domestic product (GDP). So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward" (emphasis added).

That was Hillary Goldman Sachs-Council on Foreign Relations-Clinton saying "go to Hell" to working- and middle-class people in Iowa, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, Indiana, and West Virginia. It was a raised middle and oligarchic finger from a super-wealthy arch-global-corporatist to all the supposedly pessimistic, slow-witted, and retrograde losers stuck between those glorious enclaves (led by Wall Street, Yale, and Harvard on the East coast and Silicon Valley and Hollywood on the West coast) of human progress and variety (and GDP!) on the imperial shorelines. Senate Minority Leader Dick Durbin had to go on television to say that Hillary was "wrong" to write off most of the nation as a festering cesspool of pathetic, ass-backwards, lottery-playing, and opioid-addicted white-trash has-beens. It's hard for the Inauthentic Opposition Party (as the late Sheldon Wolin reasonably called the Democrats) to pose as an authentic opposition party when its' last big-money presidential candidate goes off-fake-progressive script with an openly elitist rant like that.

Historic Mistakes

Whatever the source of her strange policy silence in the 2016 campaign, that hush was "a miscalculation of historic proportion" (FJC). It was a critical mistake given what Ferguson and his colleagues call the "Hunger Games" misery and insecurity imposed on tens of millions of ordinary working- and middle-class middle-Americans by decades of neoliberal capitalist austerity, deeply exacerbated by the Wall Street-instigated Great Recession and the weak Obama recovery. The electorate was in a populist, anti-establishment mood – hardly a state of mind favorable to a wooden, richly globalist, Goldman-gilded candidate, a long-time Washington-Wall Street establishment ("swamp") creature like Hillary Clinton.

In the end, FJC note, the billionaire Trump's ironic, fake-populist "outreach to blue collar workers" would help him win "more than half of all voters with a high school education or less (including 61% of white women with no college), almost two thirds of those who believed life for the next generation of Americans would be worse than now, and seventy-seven percent of voters who reported their personal financial situation had worsened since four years ago."

Trump's popularity with "heartland" rural and working-class whites even provoked Hillary into a major campaign mistake: getting caught on video telling elite Manhattan

election investors that half of Trump's supporters were a "basket of deplorables." There was a hauntingly strong parallel between Wall Street Hillary's "deplorables" blooper and the super-rich Republican candidate Mitt Romney's infamous 2012 gaffe: telling his own affluent backers saying that 47% of the population were a bunch of lazy welfare cheats. This time, though, it was the Democrat – with a campaign finance profile closer to Romney's than Obama's in 2012 – and not the Republican making the ugly plutocratic and establishment *faux pas*.

“A Frontal Assault on the American Establishment”

Still, Trump's success was no less tied to big money than was Hillary's failure. Candidate Trump ran strangely outside the longstanding neoliberal Washington Consensus, as an economic nationalist and isolationist. His raucous rallies were laced with dripping denunciations of Wall Street, Goldman Sachs, and globalization, mockery of George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, rejection of the New Cold War with Russia, and pledges of allegiance to the “forgotten” American “working-class.” He was no normal Republican One Percent candidate. As FJC explain:

“In 2016 the Republicans nominated yet another super-rich candidate – indeed, someone on the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans. Like legions of conservative Republicans before him, he trash-talked Hispanics, immigrants, and women virtually non-stop, though with a verve uniquely his own. He laced his campaign with barely coded racial appeals and in the final days, ran an ad widely denounced as subtly anti-Semitic. But...in striking contrast to every other Republican presidential nominee since 1936, he attacked globalization, free trade, international financiers, Wall Street, and even Goldman Sachs. *‘Globalization has made the financial elite who donate to politicians very wealthy. But it has left millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache.* When subsidized foreign steel is dumped into our markets, threatening our factories, the politicians do nothing. For years, they watched on the sidelines as our jobs vanished and our communities were plunged into depression-level unemployment.’”

“In a frontal assault on the American establishment, the Republican standard bearer proclaimed ‘America First.’ Mocking the Bush administration's appeal to ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as a pretext for invading Iraq, he broke dramatically with two generations of GOP orthodoxy and *spoke out in favor of more cooperation with Russia.* He even criticized the ‘carried interest’ tax break beloved by high finance” (emphasis added).

Big Dark Money and Trump: His Own and Others’

This cost Trump much of the corporate and Wall Street financial support that Republican presidential candidates usually get. The thing was, however, that much of Trump's "populist" rhetoric was popular with a big part of the Republican electorate, thanks to the "Hunger Games" insecurity of the transparently bipartisan New Gilded Age. And Trump's personal fortune permitted him to tap that popular anger while leaping insultingly over the heads of his less wealthy if corporate and Wall Street-backed competitors ("low energy" Jeb Bush and "little Marco" Rubio most notably) in the crowded Republican primary race. A Republican candidate dependent on the usual elite bankrollers would never have been able to get away with Trump's crowd-pleasing (and CNN and FOX News rating-boosting) antics. Thanks to his own wealth, the faux-populist anti-establishment Trump was ironically inoculated against pre-emption in the Republican primaries by the American campaign finance "wealth primary," which renders electorally unviable candidates who lack vast financial resources or access to them.

Things were different after Trump won the Republican nomination, however. He could no longer go it alone after the primaries. During the Republican National Convention and "then again in the late summer of 2016," FJC show, Trump's "solo campaign had to be rescued by major industries plainly hoping for tariff relief, waves of other billionaires from the far, far right of the already far right Republican Party, and the most disruption-exalting corners of Wall Street." By FJC's account:

"What happened in the final weeks of the campaign was extraordinary. Firstly, a giant wave of dark money poured into Trump's own campaign – one that towered over anything in 2016 or even Mitt Romney's munificently financed 2012 effort – to say nothing of any Russian Facebook experiments...[Then] another gigantic wave of money flowed in from alarmed business interests, including the Kochs and their allies... Officially the money was for Senate races, but...late-stage campaigning for down-ballot offices often spills over on to candidates for the party at large."

"The run up to the Convention brought in substantial new money, including, for the first time, significant contributions from big business. Mining, especially coal mining; Big Pharma (which was certainly worried by tough talk from the Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, about regulating drug prices); tobacco, chemical companies, and oil (including substantial sums from executives at Chevron, Exxon, and many medium sized firms); and telecommunications (notably AT&T, which had a major merge merger pending) all weighed in. Money from executives at the big banks also began streaming in, including

Bank of America, J. P. Morgan Chase, Morgan Stanley, and Wells Fargo. Parts of Silicon Valley also started coming in from the cold.”

“In a harbinger of things to come, additional money came from firms and industries that appear to have been attracted by Trump’s talk of tariffs, including steel and companies making machinery of various types... [a] vast wave of new money... flowed into the campaign from some of America’s biggest businesses and most famous investors. Sheldon Adelson and many others in the casino industry delivered in grand style for its old colleague. Adelson now delivered more than \$11 million in his own name, while his wife and other employees of his Las Vegas Sands casino gave another \$20 million. Peter Theil contributed more than a million dollars, while large sums also rolled in from other parts of Silicon Valley, including almost two million dollars from executives at Microsoft and just over two million from executives at Cisco Systems. A wave of new money swept in from large private equity firms, the part of Wall Street which had long championed hostile takeovers as a way of disciplining what they mocked as bloated and inefficient ‘big business.’ Virtual pariahs to main-line firms in the Business Roundtable and the rest of Wall Street, some of these figures had actually gotten their start working with Drexel Burnham Lambert and that firm’s dominant partner, Michael Milkin. Among those were Nelson Peltz and Carl Icahn (who had both contributed to Trump before, but now made much bigger new contributions). In the end, along with oil, chemicals, mining and a handful of other industries, large private equity firms would become one of the few segments of American business – and the only part of Wall Street – where support for Trump was truly heavy...the sudden influx of money from private equity and hedge funds clearly began with the Convention but turned into a torrent...”

The critical late wave came after Trump moved to rescue his flagging campaign by handing its direction over to the clever, class-attuned, far-right white- and economic-nationalist “populist” and Breitbart executive Steve Bannon, who advocated what proved to be a winning, Koch brothers-approved “populist” strategy: appeal to economically and culturally frustrated working- and middle-class whites in key battleground states, where the bloodless neoliberal and professional class centrism and snooty metropolitan multiculturalism of the Obama presidency and Clinton campaign was certain to depress the Democratic “base” vote. Along with the racist voter suppression carried out by Republican state governments (JFC rightly chide Russia-obsessed political reporters and commentators for absurdly ignoring this important factor) and (JFC intriguingly suggest)

major anti-union offensives conducted by employers in some battleground states, this major late-season influx of big right-wing political money tilted the election Trump's way.

The Myth of Potent Russian Cyber-Subversion

As FJC show, there is little empirical evidence to support the Clinton and corporate Democrats' self-interested and diversionary efforts to explain Mrs. Clinton's epic fail and Trump's jaw-dropping upset victory as the result of (i) Russian interference, (ii), then FBI Director James Comey's October Surprise revelation that his agency was not done investigating Hillary's emails, and/or (iii) some imagined big wave of white working-class racism, nativism, and sexism brought to the surface by the noxious Orange Hulk. The impacts of both (i) and (ii) were infinitesimal in comparison to the role that big campaign money played both in silencing Hillary and funding Trump. The blame-the-deplorable-racist-white-working-class narrative is belied by basic underlying continuities in white working class voting patterns. As FJC note: "*Neither turnout nor the partisan division of the vote at any level looks all that different from other recent elections...2016's alterations in voting behavior are so minute that the pattern is only barely differentiated from 2012.*" It was about the money – the big establishment money that the Clinton campaign took (as FJC at least plausibly argue) to recommend policy silence and the different, right-wing big money that approved Trump's comparative right-populist policy boisterousness.

An interesting part of FJC's study (no quick or easy read) takes a close look at the pro-Trump and anti-Hillary Internet activism that the Democrats and their many corporate media allies are so insistently eager to blame on Russia and for Hillary's defeat. FJC find that Russian Internet interventions were of tiny significance compared to those of homegrown U.S. corporate and right-wing cyber forces:

"The real masters of these black arts are American or Anglo-American firms. These compete directly with Silicon Valley and leading advertising firms for programmers and personnel. They rely almost entirely on data purchased from Google, Facebook, or other suppliers, *not Russia*. American regulators do next to nothing to protect the privacy of voters and citizens, and, as we have shown in several studies, leading telecom firms are major political actors and giant political contributors. As a result, data on the habits and preferences of individual internet users are commercially available in astounding detail and quantities for relatively modest prices – even details of individual credit card purchases. The American giants for sure harbor abundant data on the constellation of bots, I.P. addresses, and messages that streamed to the electorate..."

“...stories hyping ‘the sophistication of an influence campaign slickly crafted to mimic and infiltrate U.S. political discourse while also seeking to heighten tensions between groups already wary of one another by the Russians miss the mark.’ By 2016, the Republican right had developed internet outreach and political advertising into a fine art and on a massive scale quite on its own. Large numbers of conservative websites, including many that tolerated or actively encouraged white supremacy and contempt for immigrants, African-Americans, Hispanics, Jews, or the aspirations of women had been hard at work for years stoking up ‘tensions between groups already wary of one another.’ Breitbart and other organizations were in fact going global, opening offices abroad and establishing contacts with like-minded groups elsewhere. Whatever the Russians were up to, they could hardly hope to add much value to the vast Made in America bombardment already underway. Nobody sows chaos like Breitbart or the Drudge Report....”

“...the evidence revealed thus far does not support strong claims about the likely success of Russian efforts, though of course the public outrage at outside meddling is easy to understand. The speculative character of many accounts even in the mainstream media is obvious. Several, such as widely circulated declaration by the Department of Homeland Security that 21 state election systems had been hacked during the election, have collapsed within days of being put forward when state electoral officials strongly disputed them, though some mainstream press accounts continue to repeat them. Other tales about Macedonian troll factories churning out stories at the instigation of the Kremlin, are clearly exaggerated.”

The Sanders Tease: “He Couldn’t Have Done a Thing”

Perhaps the most remarkable finding in FJC’s study is that Sanders came tantalizingly close to winning the Democratic presidential nomination against the corporately super-funded Clinton campaign with *no support from Big Business*. Running explicitly against the “Hunger Games” economy and the corporate-financial plutocracy that created it, Sanders pushed Hillary the Goldman candidate to the wall, calling out the Democrats’ capture by Wall Street, forcing her to rely on a rigged party, convention, and primary system to defeat him. The small-donor “socialist” Sanders challenge represented something Ferguson and his colleagues describe as “without precedent in American politics not just since the New Deal, but across virtually the whole of American history...a major presidential candidate *waging a strong, highly competitive campaign whose support from big business is essentially zero.*”

Sanders pulled this off, FJC might have added, by running in (imagine) accord with majority-progressive left-of-center U.S. public opinion. But for the Clintons' corrupt advance- control of the Democratic National Committee and convention delegates, Ferguson et al might further have noted, Sanders might well have been the Democratic presidential nominee, curiously enough in the arch-state-capitalist and oligarchic United States

Could Sanders have defeated the billionaire and right-wing billionaire-backed Trump in the general election? There's no way to know, of course. Sanders consistently outperformed Hillary Clinton in one-on-one match -up polls vis a vis Donald Trump during the primary season, but much of the big money (and, perhaps much of the corporate media) that backed Hillary would have gone over to Trump had the supposedly "radical" Sanders been the Democratic nominee.

Even if Sanders has been elected president, moreover, Noam Chomsky is certainly correct in his recent judgement that Sanders would have been able to achieve very little in the White House. As Chomsky told Lynn Parramore two weeks ago, in an interview conducted for the Institute for New Economic Thinking, the same think-tank that published FJC's remarkable study:

"His campaign... [was] a break with over a century of American political history. No corporate support, no financial wealth, he was unknown, no media support. The media simply either ignored or denigrated him. And he came pretty close—he probably could have won the nomination, maybe the election. But suppose he'd been elected? He couldn't have done a thing. Nobody in Congress, no governors, no legislatures, none of the big economic powers, which have an enormous effect on policy. All opposed to him. In order for him to do anything, he would have to have a substantial, functioning party apparatus, which would have to grow from the grass roots. It would have to be locally organized, it would have to operate at local levels, state levels, Congress, the bureaucracy—you have to build the whole system from the bottom."

As Chomsky might have added, Sanders oligarchy-imposed "failures" would have been great fodder for the disparagement and smearing of "socialism" and progressive, majority-backed policy change. "See? We tried all that and it was a disaster!"

I would note further that the Sanders phenomenon's policy promise was plagued by its standard bearer's persistent loyalty to the giant and absurdly expensive U.S.-imperial Pentagon System, which each year eats up hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars

required to implement the progressive, majority-supported policy agenda that Bernie F-35 Sanders ran on.

“A Very Destructive Ideology”

The Sanders challenge was equally afflicted by its candidate-centered electoralism. This diverted energy away from the real and more urgent politics of building people’s movements – grassroots power to shake the society to its foundations and change policy from the bottom up (Dr. Martin Luther King’s preferred strategy at the end of his life just barely short of 50 years ago, on April 4th, 1968) – and into the narrow, rigidly time-staggered grooves of a party and spectacle-elections crafted by and for the wealthy Few and the *American Oligarchy*’s “permanent political class” (historian Ron Formisano). As Chomsky explained on the eve of the 2004 elections:

“Americans may be encouraged to vote, but not to participate more meaningfully in the political arena. Essentially the election is a method of marginalizing the population. A huge propaganda campaign is mounted to get people to focus on these personalized quadrennial extravaganzas and to think, ‘That’s politics.’ But it isn’t. It’s only a small part of politics...The urgency is for popular progressive groups to grow and become strong enough so that centers of power can’t ignore them. Forces for change that have come up from the grass roots and shaken the society to its core include the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the women’s movement and others, cultivated by steady, dedicated work at all levels, every day, not just once every four years...sensible [electoral] choices have to be made. But they are secondary to serious political action.”

“The only thing that’s going to ever bring about any meaningful change,” Chomsky told Abby Martin on teleSur English in the fall of 2015, “is ongoing, dedicated, popular movements that don’t pay attention to the election cycle.” Under the American religion of voting, Chomsky told Dan Falcone and Saul Isaacson in the spring of 2016, “Citizenship means every four years you put a mark somewhere and you go home and let other guys run the world. It’s a very destructive ideology... basically, a way of making people passive, submissive objects...[we] ought to teach kids that elections take place but that’s not politics.”

For all his talk of standing atop a great “movement” for “revolution,” Sanders was and remains all about this stunted and crippling definition of citizenship and politics as making some marks on ballots and then returning to our domiciles while *rich* people and their agents (not just any “other guys”) “run [ruin?-P.S.] the world [into the ground-P.S.]”

It will take much more in the way of Dr. King's politics of "who' sitting in the streets," not "who's sitting in the White House" (to use Howard Zinn's excellent dichotomy), to get us an elections and party system worthy of passionate citizen engagement. We don't have such a system in the U.S. today, which is why the number of eligible voters who passively boycotted the 2016 presidential election is larger than both the number who voted for big money Hillary and the number who voted for big money Trump.

(If U.S. progressives really want to consider undertaking the epic lift involved in passing a U.S. Constitutional Amendment, they might want to focus on this instead of calling for a repeal of the Second Amendment. I'd recommend starting with a positive Democracy Amendment that fundamentally overhauls the nation's political and elections set-up in accord with elementary principles and practices of popular sovereignty. Clauses would include but not be limited to full public financing of elections and the introduction of proportional representation for legislative races – not to mention the abolition of the Electoral College, Senate apportionment on the basis of total state population, and the outlawing of gerrymandering.)

Ecocide Trumped by Russia

Meanwhile, back in real history, we have the remarkable continuation of a bizarre right-wing, pre-fascist presidency not in normal ruling-class hands, subject to the weird whims and tweets of a malignant narcissist who doesn't read memorandums or intelligence briefings. Wild policy zig-zags and record-setting White House personnel turnover are par for the course under the dodgy reign of the orange-tinted beast's latest brain spasms. Orange Caligula spends his mornings getting his information from FOX News and his evenings complaining to and seeking advice from a small club of right-wing American oligarchs.

Trump poses grave environmental and nuclear risks to human survival. A consistent Trump belief is that climate change is not a problem and that it's perfectly fine – "great" and "amazing," in fact – for the White House to do everything it can to escalate the Greenhouse Gassing-to-Death of Life on Earth. The nuclear threat is rising now that he has appointed a frothing right-wing uber-warmonger – a longtime advocate of bombing Iran and North Korea who led the charge for the arch-criminal U.S. invasion of Iraq – as his top "National Security" adviser and as he been convinced to expel dozens of Russian diplomats. Thanks, liberal and other Democratic Party RussiaGaters!

The Clinton-Obama neoliberal Democrats have spent more than a year running with the preposterous narrative that Trump is a Kremlin puppet who owes his presence in the White House to Russia's subversion of our democratic elections. The *climate crisis* holds little for the Trump and Russia-obsessed corporate media. The fact that the world stands at the eve of the ecological self-destruction, with the Trump White House in the lead, elicits barely a whisper in the reigning commercial news media. Unlike Stormy Daniels, for example, that little story – the biggest issue of our or any time – is not good for television ratings and newspaper sales.

Sanders, by the way, is curiously invisible in the dominant commercial media, despite his quiet survey status as the nation's "most popular politician." That is precisely what you would expect in a corporate and financial oligarchy buttressed by a powerful corporate, so-called "mainstream" media oligopoly.

Political Parties as "Bank Accounts"

One of the many problems with the obsessive Blame-Russia narrative that a fair portion of the dominant U.S. media is running with is that *we had no great electoral democracy to subvert in 2016*. Saying that Russia has "undermined [U.S.-] American democracy" is like me – middle-aged, five-foot nine, and unblessed with jumping ability – saying that the Brooklyn Nets' Russian-born center Timofy Mozgof subverted my career as a starting player in the National Basketball Association. In state-capitalist societies marked by the toxic and interrelated combination of weak popular organization, expensive politics, and highly concentrated wealth – all highly evident in the New Gilded Age United States – electoral contests and outcomes boil down above all and in the end to big investor class cash. As Thomas Ferguson and his colleagues explain:

"Where investment and organization by average citizens is weak, however, power passes by default to major investor groups, which can far more easily bear the costs of contending for control of the state. In most modern market-dominated societies (those celebrated recently as enjoying the 'end of History'), levels of effective popular organization are generally low, while the costs of political action, in terms of both information and transactional obstacles, are high. The result is that conflicts within the business community normally dominate contests within and between political parties – the exact opposite of what many earlier social theorists expected, who imagined 'business' and 'labor' confronting each other in separate parties...Only candidates and positions that can be financed can be presented to voters. As a result, in countries like the US and, increasingly, Western Europe, *political parties are first of all bank accounts*. With certain

qualifications, one must pay to play. Understanding any given election, therefore, requires a financial X-ray of the power blocs that dominate the major parties, with both inter- and intra- industrial analysis of their constituent elements.”

Here Ferguson might have said “corporate-dominated” instead of “market-dominated” for the modern managerial corporations emerged as the “visible hand” master of the “free market” more than a century ago.

We get to vote? Big deal. People get to vote in Rwanda, Russia, the Congo and countless other autocratic states as well. Elections alone are no guarantee of democracy, as U.S. policymakers and pundits know very well when they rip on rigged elections (often fixed with the assistance of U.S. government and private-sector agents and firms) in countries they don’t like, which includes any country that dares to “question the basic principle that the United States effectively owns the world by right and is by definition a force for good” (Chomsky, 2016). Majority opinion is regularly trumped by a deadly complex of forces in the U.S. The list of interrelated and mutually reinforcing culprits behind this oligarchic defeat of popular sentiment in the U.S. is extensive. It includes but is not limited to: the campaign finance, candidate-selection, lobbying, and policy agenda-setting power of wealthy individuals, corporations, and interest groups; the special primary election influence of full-time party activists; the disproportionately affluent, white, and older composition of the active (voting) electorate; the manipulation of voter turnout; the widespread dissemination of false, confusing, distracting, and misleading information; absurdly and explicitly unrepresentative political institutions like the Electoral College, the unelected Supreme Court, the over-representation of the predominantly white rural population in the U.S. Senate; one-party rule in the House of “Representatives”; the fragmentation of authority in government; and corporate ownership of the reigning media, which frames current events in accord with the wishes and world view of the nation’s real owners.

Yes, we get to vote. Super. Big deal. Mammon reigns nonetheless in the United States, where, as the leading liberal political scientists Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens find, “government policy...reflects the wishes of those with money, not the wishes of the millions of ordinary citizens who turn out every two years to choose among the preapproved, money-vetted candidates for federal office.” Trump is a bit of an anomaly – a sign of an elections and party system in crisis and an empire in decline. He wasn’t pre-approved or vetted by the usual U.S. “deep state” corporate, financial, and imperial gatekeepers. The ruling-class had been trying to figure out what the Hell to do with him

ever since he shocked even himself (though not Steve Bannon) by pre-empting the coronation of the “Queen of Chaos.” He is a homegrown capitalist oligarch nonetheless, a real estate mogul of vast and parasitic wealth who is no more likely to fulfill his populist-sounding campaign pledges than any previous POTUS of the neoliberal era. His lethally racist, sexist, nativist, nuclear-weapons-brandishing, and (last but not at all least) eco-cidal rise to the nominal CEO position atop the U.S.-imperial oligarchy is no less a reflection of the dominant role of big U.S. capitalist money and homegrown plutocracy in U.S. politics than a more classically establishment Hillary ascendancy would have been. It’s got little to do with Russia, Russia, Russia – the great diversion that fills U.S. political airwaves and newsprint as the world careens ever closer to oligarchy-imposed geocide and to a thermonuclear conflagration that the RussiaGate gambit is recklessly encouraging.