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The US elections and the American plutocracy

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The 2014 midterm elections mark a further development in the disintegration of American democracy. Only eight days from Election Day, the general population evinces little interest in the campaigns or candidates of the two official parties. This is not because working people are satisfied or apathetic. On the contrary, there are many signs of growing concern and anger over ceaseless war overseas and relentless attacks on social conditions and democratic rights at home.

But the election process, more openly than ever, excludes any expression of the concerns or democratic will of the vast majority of the people. The issues that affect the masses—growing poverty and inequality, declining living standards, police violence and repression—are ignored by the two parties and the media. To the extent foreign policy is discussed, both sides indulge in chauvinist and militarist demagoguery, seeking to outflank one another from the right.

Behind the mutual mudslinging and attack ads that insult the people's intelligence, there is agreement on the need for more austerity, more government spying, more tax breaks for the rich, and a militarist agenda that leads inexorably to a Third World War.

It is little wonder, with none of the Democrats or Republicans proposing any policies to address the jobs crisis or the rise in hunger and homelessness, and both parties supporting savage attacks on the working class such as the bankruptcy of Detroit, that November 4 is expected to see a new record low turnout for a midterm election.

According to the most recent polls, hostility to the congressional Democratic Party is at a 20-year high, with only 30 percent approving and 67 percent disapproving. Congressional Republicans are even more unpopular, with just 25 percent of Americans approving, while 72 percent disapprove.

Popular alienation from the political system coincides with the ever more naked domination of both parties and the manipulation of elections by a handful of multi-millionaires and billionaires. A report issued last week by the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) projects that the 2014 election will cost nearly \$4 billion, a record for a midterm election.

Candidates and the Democratic and Republican parties will raise and spend about \$2.7 billion, while outside political action committees, which have mushroomed since the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, will spend another \$1 billion.

Candidates and campaign committees are spending more than \$100 million on the Senate races in Kentucky and North Carolina, and the governor's race in Florida, and sums only slightly smaller in other close statewide contests, in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Colorado, Massachusetts, Louisiana and other states.

According to a chart published in this week's *Time* magazine, spending on US political campaigns has risen 555 percent in the past 30 years, far more than the cost of health care or college education, and nearly four times the increase in household income. The vast sums expended have not won either party any genuine popularity—something that is impossible given their adherence to virtually identical ultra-right programs dictated by the needs of the super-rich.

The Republican Party will likely win a narrow victory on November 4, maintaining its control of the House of Representatives, retaining the majority of state governorships, and winning or narrowly missing a 51-seat majority in the US Senate. This reflects, at least in part, its roughly equivalent lead in the spending race, with the CRP projecting \$1.92 billion in pro-Republican campaign fundraising compared to \$1.76 billion for the Democrats.

However the two parties divide control of the White House, the Senate and the House of Representatives, the financial aristocracy maintains a vise-like grip on all three institutions and on the entire machinery of government.

Last week, the *New York Times Magazine* published a cover story on the role of billionaires backing rival candidates in the Florida gubernatorial election. This was followed by a report in the daily *Times* on so-called "dark money," funds that go unreported to the Federal Election Commission that now comprise half of all outside campaign expenditures.

On Sunday's "Meet the Press," NBC journalists Chuck Todd and Luke Russert chatted about the "group of modern-day oligarchs" funding the 2014 campaigns.

These conditions make a mockery of claims that the US elections embody genuine democracy. The United States has been transformed into a plutocracy, a country where government of, by and for the wealthy is openly admitted, and in some quarters, celebrated.

American politics is being brought openly into alignment with American economics. American society has divided into two great camps: a handful of the super-rich at the top, with a layer of upper-middle-class hangers-on; and the great mass of working people, struggling from day to day to make ends meet.

Last week, social scientists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman posted an article under the headline “Exploding wealth inequality in the United States.” In documenting the massive growth of social inequality over the past four decades in the US, they noted that the share of total household wealth owned by the top 0.1 percent increased from 7 percent in the late 1970s to 22 percent in 2012.

The colossal class divide between an oligarchic elite and the mass of working people underlies the collapse of democratic processes in the United States—and increasingly around the world. Democratic rights cannot be defended apart from a revolutionary struggle by the working class against the capitalist system, which is the source of inequality as well as imperialist war.