

The Presidential Elections in the United States

By EARL BROWDER

A MAJORITY in the Electoral College of 523 against 8, and a popular majority of more than ten million votes, elected Franklin D. Roosevelt for the second time as President of the United States, as the climax to a campaign conceded by all camps to be the most crucial in American history since the birth of the Republican Party in 1856. In Congress the reactionary Republican opposition was further reduced, in the Senate to 20 per cent and in the House to only a fraction more, of the total membership. In the various states, Democrats succeeded to Republican administrations, in all but a few cases. Nothing like the sweeping character of this electoral victory has been seen in American politics since 1820.

Why was this overwhelming judgment of the electorate such a surprise to the country? How could there have been such a preponderance of popular sentiment on one side, and at the same time a general feeling of uncertainty about the outcome almost up to election day? How was it that almost all predictions of victory for Roosevelt enormously underestimated the extent to which it materialized? The answers to these questions immediately give us a central key to the significance of the election results.

A deep-going shift in political alignments had taken place, a fundamental regrouping of which no objective measurement had even been taken. Meanwhile, its extent and direction had been hidden by systematic distortion of expression of public opinion.

Thus, throughout the campaign, the overwhelming majority of daily newspapers were actively for Landon and the Republican Party, and an additional number were passive. Only a small fraction of American newspapers supported Roosevelt, and many of these with serious reservations. When in September the present writer, addressing the National Press Club in Washington (representatives of all the nation's greatest newspapers), estimated that 80 to 85 per cent of the press was actively or passively opposing Roosevelt, who they all admitted at that time held approximately half the voters in his support, this figure was never challenged—on the contrary, it was adopted as the currently accepted estimate. An analysis of the circulation of these newspapers showed that 14,000,000 copies per day supported Landon, while less than 7,000,000 copies per day supported Roosevelt or were neutral.

The election returns, therefore, were a complete reversal of all expectations based upon newspaper expression. Never was there a more

emphatic rejection of the leadership of the press than in the voting on November 3.

American newspaperdom was not engaged in an independent adventure in politics. It is a big business, highly trustified, with a thousand ties with Wall Street, with finance capital. The newspapers were only expressing a general movement of big capital, which had almost unanimously determined to defeat Roosevelt at all costs. The financial magnates had rallied all business organizations to their crusade—the Bankers Association, the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, the Manufacturers Association, etc. They rallied all their old leading politicians of both parties, and organized them around the American Liberty League, financed principally by the Morgan-du Pont interests (steel and munitions), and during the campaign in a new organization called “Jeffersonian Democrats”. Every element of the population that took its political leadership directly from the circles of organized finance and big business was rallied against Roosevelt and for Landon, in the bitterest campaign seen in America since the Civil War.

Most striking evidence of the class line-up was furnished by the famous straw vote (preliminary sampling of the voters to forecast the election results) conducted by the weekly journal *The Literary Digest*. This was the fifth consecutive presidential election campaign during which the *Digest* has conducted such a poll, mailing ballots to millions of voters (20,000,000 in 1932, 10,000,000 in 1936) and receiving returns from about 20 per cent. In all previous polls, the *Digest* ballot had forecast the final results with amazing accuracy, and had gained tremendous prestige. This year, on the eve of the elections, it predicted a 60 per cent victory for Landon, almost exactly the opposite to what occurred. These ballots were always sent to registered automobile owners and telephone subscribers, necessarily the great majority upper and upper middle class; in the past these voters had been distributed between the two major parties in about the same proportion as the general population, but in 1936 they had swung to Landon with the same unanimity with which the workers, farmers and lower middle classes had swung in the opposite direction, to Roosevelt.

As never before in American history, it is clear the voters divided on property and class lines, with the propertyless voting for Roosevelt. In this election, more than at any previous time in the struggle against the Tories, the working class was the leader in the struggle against reaction. It was able to cement the spirit of true progressive America in the fight against the main enemy—the reactionary forces. The Communist Party declared without qualifications that the Landon-Hearst-Wall Street combination was the chief enemy of the liberty, peace and prosperity of the American people. Long before the elections, the Party had emphasized that the victory of reaction would carry our country along the road to fascism and war. The slogans of the Party in the election campaign indeed became the slogans of millions of America's people.

The Central Committee of the Communist Party, in its statement summarizing the election results, therefore declared:

"The campaign and the election results clearly show the sharpening of class lines in the United States. On the one side stood the great mass of the voting population. On the other stood an unprecedented concentration of organized wealth and reaction. Never before was the political struggle so much a question of the poor and downtrodden against the rich and the oppressors."

It is clear that the class basis of support of the two major parties was significantly transformed in 1936. The two traditional banners of the two-party system—Democratic and Republican—rallied armies behind them of a fundamentally new composition. That this process was taking place was long clear, before and during the campaign. What the November 3 voting revealed was the *extent* to which this had taken place, the *speed* with which the entire population had been realigned. The *size* of Roosevelt's majority, and its *sweeping* character which overwhelmed all the old sectionalisms and engulfed all but two of the forty-eight states—these are the *new* features, in the light of which future prospects and tasks must be re-evaluated.

Chairman Farley of the Democratic Party declared in his post-election statement that the election was not a victory of the Democratic Party but of the mass of the people. This is truth of significance far beyond the understanding of Farley. The defeat of Landon and the forces massed behind him was, in truth, a great victory for the American people, a rebuff to reaction, fascism, and the war-makers. But it was an incomplete victory for the people, precisely because it involved such a sweeping occupation of positions of power by the Democratic machine in which the mass of the people are not represented, and which included decisive elements standing closer to Landon and Hearst than to the voters who swept them into office.

The tide which made up Roosevelt's immense majority was composed of the currents moving towards a great People's Front against fascism and war; but the administration which it swept into power is not a People's Front administration. Both sides of this estimation are equally important in approaching the future tasks. It has been rejected from two points of view, representative of which can be taken as typical, the reactionary *Chicago Tribune* and the Socialist Party candidate, Norman Thomas.

The *Chicago Tribune* saw, in the sweeping re-election of Roosevelt, the emergence of an American Leon Blum, an administration of the People's Front, a victory for the Comintern and its Seventh Congress, the beginning of the Bolshevization of America. This was also the evaluation given by Father Coughlin, the notorious radio priest, who was most open in his fascist denunciations in the campaign. This is the viewpoint of the hard-boiled fascist elements, the doctrinaires of the Right, the extremists of reactionary agitation.

Norman Thomas takes an equally doctrinaire position to arrive at the opposite conclusion. For him, Roosevelt or Landon would "lead to about the same thing". He is "pessimistic" about the results of the elections, and still plays with the thought expressed before election day,

that a victory for Landon might have been the best thing, in order to "put new iron in labor's blood". Thus his opposition to the extreme reactionary view is at the same time equally a head-on collision with the trade union progressives who began independent organization of their political forces around support to Roosevelt.

A realistic evaluation must recognize the beginnings of a People's Front movement in those new forces in various stages of development which gave the broad sweep to Roosevelt's majority; these were expressed in Labor's Non-Partisan League, which rallied almost the entire labor vote to Roosevelt; the American Labor Party in New York, which took a further step by bringing this support partially through an independent place on the ballot; the Washington Commonwealth Federation, which moved into the Democratic Party and occupied a dominating position on its ticket; the Epic movement in California, which independently captured a large part of the Democratic ticket in the primaries; the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation in Wisconsin, which occupies a dominating position in the Progressive Party of the La Follettes in that state, and won an overwhelming victory in alliance with Roosevelt; and the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, which won an unexampled victory after a section of the Roosevelt Democrats withdrew from the elections in its favor. All of these forces are clear signs of the rise of the People's Front movement, of its growing strength and maturity.

At the same time, it must be clearly seen that the Roosevelt administration, to which this movement gave its sweeping victory, is not dependent upon this movement nor representative of it. True, it is this progressive movement which won for Roosevelt the possibility of a Congressional majority independent of the reactionary Democratic "solid South"; but at the same time the time-serving Democratic politicians and the reactionaries always provide Roosevelt with an alternative majority without the progressives. Roosevelt, the constitutionally middle-of-the-road leader, will doubtless continue that role, the role of mediation between the people and Wall Street, without departing from the fundamental interests of finance capital. If Roosevelt turns Left, in any but a purely tactical sense, it will only be to the extent that the overwhelming repudiation of reaction and fascism, and the growth of the progressive mass organizations, have turned the path of national politics as a whole in that direction. Roosevelt seeks to find the center of political gravity. He is subject to the influence of reactionary and progressive camps. The Tories began to make love to Roosevelt again the day after election, and even apologized for the hard names they had called him. It would be unrealistic to expect a fundamental change in Roosevelt's role. That is why we must say that the victory over reaction, a victory made possible by the rising forces of the People's Front, did not produce a people's administration.

If we are to cause American political life to move Leftward, this must be based on the further growth, activity, organization and political maturity of the new progressive people's organizations, and especially the increased unity and hegemony of the organized labor movement

within the broad people's movement. That is a reasonable perspective involving many tasks.

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The 26,000,000 Roosevelt votes, overwhelmingly composed of toilers and unemployed, clearly recognized the camp of Landon as a threat against their economic interests and democratic rights. To defeat this threat, they subordinated their dissatisfactions with Roosevelt's first administration, and rallied around the cause of his re-election as the immediate practical alternative. Roosevelt's platform offered extraordinarily little of a concrete nature; it stood on the record of the first administration which, however unsatisfactory to the masses, was a distinct advance over Hoover, and a contrast to the open reaction of Landon's managers took the path of demagogic promises of all things Landon's platform. As the campaign progressed, however, and as to all men in the frantic search for votes, Roosevelt was pressed into more definite commitments which took on enormous importance in the eyes of the masses and aroused mass enthusiasm. This was climaxed by Roosevelt's final speech in Madison Square Garden, New York.

In the Garden speech Roosevelt made two points which resounded deeply among the masses. First, he recognized the hatred of "organized money", declared he "welcomed" it, and expressed the hope that if history recorded that in his first administration "organized money" had "met its match", then in his second administration it "met its master". Second, he recognized the utter inadequacy of the measures of the first administration to relieve the miseries of the masses; declared for shorter hours, higher wages, the end of child labor, wiping out of sweat-shops, support for collective bargaining through trade unions, and reiterated the slogan—"For all these things we have only just begun to fight".

Without speculations on the quality of Roosevelt's future "fight" for these things, we can say definitely that these words crystallized the moods, aspirations, and ideas of the millions who flocked to the polls a few days later to cast their votes for Roosevelt. The huge majority they rolled up became a mandate for the fight for higher living standards, more democratic rights, and for peace. That is the common understanding of the masses of the people. That is a political fact of the most far-reaching consequences.

Most instructive were the experiences of the minor parties with independent presidential candidates. Three of these, the Union Party of Lemke-Coughlin, the Socialist Party, and the Communist Party, we will examine, disregarding the negligible vote and influence of the Prohibition and Socialist-Labor Parties.

The Union Party, with its candidate Lemke, was an adventure, organized from above, attempting to take in tow the mass dissatisfaction with Roosevelt and divert it into reactionary channels, and as much as possible to Landon. It speculated upon the mass sentiment for a new Farmer-Labor Party, and endeavored to capitalize this sentiment for its own reactionary ends, in the absence of a national Farmer-Labor ticket. For a time it looked formidable, when it promised to unite the agrarian following of Lemke, the old-age pension movement under Dr.

Townsend, the followers of the radio priest, Father Coughlin, and the remnants of the Huey Long Share-the-Wealth movement under Rev. Gerald K. Smith. For a short while it succeeded in penetrating statewide Farmer-Labor Parties in Iowa and Michigan, and even seriously threatened to influence the successful Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota. Only the determined and relentless campaign of exposure, organized and led first of all by the Communists, smashed its influence in one after another of its strongholds, sharpened its inner contradictions, and finally brought it to an inglorious collapse, completely isolated from the organized Farmer-Labor Party movement, and casting only a small fragment of its expected vote, considerably less than that of Norman Thomas in 1932.

The Union Party, and especially its chief spokesman, Father Coughlin, echoing all the main slogans of Landon and Hearst, played the role of vanguard for the reactionary camp, testing out the ground for the more openly fascist slogans, as when Father Coughlin raised the issue of bullets to overthrow a possible "dictatorship" of Roosevelt. Its collapse was of the same political significance as that of the Republican Party, with many additional lessons for the political education of the American masses, which will have to be studied thoroughly and in detail.

The Socialist Party came to an inglorious debacle in the course of the election campaign. Disorientated by the collapse of European Social-Democracy, it yet stubbornly rejected the overtures of the Communist Party for a united front, and came out in principle most bitterly against the conception of the People's Front. It tried to find a new course by submitting to the poisonous influence of Trotskyism and by amalgamating with the Trotskyists. It opposed the Farmer-Labor Party efforts in the various states, it denounced Labor's Non-Partisan League, it declared the only issue of consequence was that of the immediate transition to socialism, and for this Left-sounding slogan gave a most reformist interpretation. By this course it played into the hands of its Right-wing elements and came to an unprincipled split with its local organizations which had something of a mass base in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, split with the New York Old Guard that was tied up with the trade union bureaucracy, and saved a split with Wisconsin only by making that state an "exception" which resulted in practical liquidation of the S.P. into the Farmer-Labor Federation. Its course brought about the public resignation from the Party of many of its members prominent in trade union work, and the withdrawal from active politics of the others, both of Right and Left tendencies. Its whole campaign was for votes for itself, but it failed of this aim more completely than ever in its history. Its total vote will be only about 20 per cent of that of four years ago, and less than half of the Socialist vote of 1900, when it made its first national campaign. The Socialist Party is now in a deep crisis, with its lower organizations ravaged by bitter factionalism organized by the Trotskyites.

The Communist Party conducted the most effective campaign of its history, widely extending its connections and influence. Its chief slogan was "Democracy or Fascism", under which all efforts were directed toward laying the foundations for a broad People's Front in the form

of a Farmer-Labor Party. (For a detailed explanation of this policy see my article in the September, 1936, issue of *The Communist International*.)

From the reactionary camp every effort was made to place Communism as the central issue of the campaign. Initiated by the newspaper chain of Hearst, the cry of "the menace of Jewish Bolshevism" became the chief slogan of the Republican Party-Liberty League combination, especially in the last days of the campaign. According to the reactionaries, President Roosevelt was heading a People's Front under the instructions of the Comintern Seventh World Congress, taking America straight toward a Communist revolution. Hearst even went so far as to fabricate "documentary evidence" of "orders from Moscow", with photographic reproductions of pages from the Russian edition of *The Communist International* with distorted and false translations. Republican orators and newspapers kept the Communist Party constantly before the country, in news items and editorials, in their effort to establish an identity between Roosevelt and the Bolsheviks. They spoke of "Comrade Roosevelt", and even talked about "the red flag over the White House". The traditional "Red scare" was worked overtime, with a thousand new angles and, as the campaign progressed, more and more in the style of Hitler.

All this served to multiply the audience of the Communist Party. Millions of voters wanted to hear at first hand what these "dangerous Reds" had to say for themselves. The Communist estimate of parties, issues, and candidates was thereby made of direct interest to millions who had never known the Party seriously before.

Our Party used its opportunities as never before, over the radio, in the capitalist press, in thousands of meetings, in tens of millions of leaflets, in millions of pamphlets and in our own press. A series of ten radio talks, over a nationwide hook-up including over fifty broadcasting stations from coast to coast, supplemented by hundreds of local radio broadcasts, was the outstanding feature of the Party campaign.

We declared that the issue in the election was not socialism. While the Communists are fully confident that socialism is the only solution to our national problems, and we used this campaign to explain our socialist program, at the same time we declared that the main task of the day is to establish a broad united front of all anti-fascists and progressives, all friends of peace, and first of all the organized workers, to defeat the menace of reaction moving toward fascism and war. We declared our fundamental agreement with the objectives being fought for by the labor and progressive circles which rallied to Roosevelt, but pointed out the danger of relying upon his middle-of-the-road policies to attain them; we called for the independent organization of the labor and progressive forces, supported such organizations wherever they appeared, while conducting our own campaign for our own candidates in the absence of an independent Farmer-Labor Party national ticket.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Communist Party strengthened itself manifold by this campaign. The masses responded very sympathetically, and contributed to the Party election funds tenfold

more than in any previous election. Millions of those who still voted for Roosevelt came out of the campaign with respect and sympathy for the Communist Party. Even many who still remained hostile to the Communists had to revise completely their estimates of our Party, which became generally accepted as an integral part of the American political scene, as an American party and a serious party, the views of which were of interest and value to the whole country.

The decisive rebuke to the Red-baiters given by the electorate in the balloting, which defeated almost every candidate who tried to use the "Red scare", served to confirm and consolidate the broad sympathetic contacts established in the campaign.

The vote for the independent Communist candidates, in this situation, is no measure of the effectiveness and broad influence of its campaign. The Communist vote is yet only partially reported, and can only be estimated on the basis of localities, like New York City, where the full report is known. In New York City the vote for the general local ticket, compared with 1932 (previous presidential election year), rose from 24,000 to 65,000, although for the presidential ticket the rise was only to 37,000. This shows that some 28,000 voters, while voting generally for the Communists, cast their presidential votes to the American Labor Party and Roosevelt. This New York City vote also revealed the significant development that, for the first time in history, the general Communist vote surpassed that of the Socialist Party, which was around 60,000.

Another significant result of the election was the strengthening of the progressive wing of the trade union movement, in relation to the reactionary officials of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor.

The progressive unions, united in the Committee for Industrial Organization under the leadership of John L. Lewis and the miners, are threatened with complete exclusion from the American Federation of Labor for the "crime" of breaking the traditions of craft unionism by going out to organize steel, auto, rubber, and other unorganized mass production industries on the basis of industrial unions in disregard of the unused jurisdictional claims of the many craft unions which have been unable to organize these workers. In the election campaign, these progressive unions smashed another A. F. of L. tradition, when they organized their support of Roosevelt independently of the Democratic Party, in what they called Labor's Non-Partisan League, which in New York State went a step further and set up the American Labor Party. The election results are generally understood as an overwhelming verdict of the union membership in support of the Lewis line of independent and aggressive participation of labor in political life. It has thus made more difficult the position of the Executive Council, which had fully intended to split the whole labor movement from top to bottom rather than to tolerate the aggressive industrial union policies of the Lewis group.

There is already arising after the elections a great wave of organization and struggle in the basic industries, analogous to that which followed the victory of the People's Front in France, though on a much smaller scale as yet. The employers, seeing this rising movement, are

making a series of voluntary increases in wages, hoping thereby to curb and control the wave of organization and strikes.

In the field of foreign relations, on the questions of war and peace, there was no clearcut posing of the issues in the campaign between Roosevelt and Landon. Nevertheless, there was a clearcut division between the tendencies of the supporters of the two chief candidates; those of fascist and warlike tendencies unanimously went to Landon, the anti-fascist and peace sentiment was overwhelming for Roosevelt. In this sense the election returns were a great demonstration of sentiment against fascism and war. That Roosevelt is not committed to any definite or consistent peace policy does not alter this general significance of his vote.

Within the Roosevelt camp, the very extent and depth of the electoral victory is serving to hasten a differentiation which is leading, sooner rather than later, to a deeper split. The Democratic Party is already crystallizing a conservative opposition to the more liberal program of social and labor legislation that will be advanced by its progressive wing. This conservative opposition was profoundly displeased by Roosevelt's appeals and promises to the masses. They are determined to try to force Roosevelt to retreat, and failing that, to prepare a split and new alignment. Roosevelt's role, whether he chooses a Right or Left orientation, will probably determine whether that coming split will be of the Left wing or of the Right wing. If the Right wing splits, that will encourage progressive elements to remain in the Democratic Party; if the Right wins Roosevelt to its side, that will hasten the national independence of the broad mass of labor and progressive forces. While this question is being fought out, there will probably be no broad national convention to establish the Farmer-Labor Party, which is thus delayed, even though on a state and local scale the building of Farmer-Labor Parties is in many places hastened by the election results.

The first tasks before the Communists after the elections may be summarized in four points:

1. To stimulate and help in every way the mass movements to extend trade union organization, and fight for improved conditions, especially in the unorganized and basic industries; to fight for realization of the program of the Committee for Industrial Organization, while at the same time fighting for a united American Federation of Labor and against the threatening split.

2. To stimulate and organize the growing demand for more advanced social and labor legislation, for extension and protection of democratic rights; to help bring about the broadest possible united front of workers, together with farmers, lower middle classes and progressives, for this purpose, while always pressing for independent organization of the advanced elements, and pushing forward the Farmer-Labor Party in every way.

3. To crystallize a more definite and effective movement for peace, which can influence the policies of the American government, throwing its influence on the side of the democracies threatened by fascism, for help

to embattled Spain, for active efforts in collaboration with the peace forces of the world to combat the war danger.

4. To extend and strengthen the organization of the Communist Party itself, to conduct a big recruiting campaign on the basis of the favorable conditions resulting from the Party's work in the elections, to raise new cadres of leaders for the Party and the mass movement, to educate and train these cadres and the whole Party membership in the spirit of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, in preparation for greater tasks and struggles, solving the immediate tasks in such a way as to lead the American masses increasingly toward the understanding of socialism and the struggle for its realization.

While the Tories received a tremendous setback from the great majority of the American people in the elections, there is still the possibility that with the use of maneuvers the reactionary forces will try—in fact they are already trying—to strengthen their influence, pressing the Roosevelt administration to the Right, attempting to make gains at the expense of the toiling masses. The Communist Party has consistently stressed the fact that Roosevelt is not a barrier against reaction, that only the organized strength of a mass movement—of a united working class, together with the farmers and middle class people—can press the present administration into fulfilling the promises it made during the election campaign, and thus secure and guarantee the welfare of millions.

It would be the biggest mistake now to come to the conclusion that reaction is routed and that Roosevelt will move along in the direction of safeguarding the interests of the American people. We say to the workers again that success does not come of itself, as it did not come automatically in checking the reactionary forces in the elections. It was necessary to organize the masses and to fight for that success. Now, as to who will carry the burden depends upon all progressive forces in the country; the direction must be: Make the rich pay.