

Trump demands end to Florida recount in new attack on voting rights

15 November 2018

The intervention by President Donald Trump in the Florida elections, demanding that all vote counting be halted and the Republican candidates for governor and US senator be declared elected, is an attack on democratic norms whose logical conclusion is presidential dictatorship. It would mean disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of Florida voters.

Nothing outrageous or even unusual is taking place in the Florida recount, where the procedures for handling a closely contested election are set by law and are being followed by local officials, both Republican and Democratic, under the eyes of party observers and large numbers of journalists.

County officials are counting ballots that were not tabulated on Election Day because of time constraints, limitations on machine capacity, or procedural issues—military votes, for example, may be postmarked by Election Day and are still arriving in the mail.

Florida state law requires a machine recount, essentially re-running the machine tabulation for each precinct, when a contest is within half a percent of the vote. The two main statewide contests are well within this margin. In the Senate race, Republican Rick Scott leads incumbent Democrat Bill Nelson by only 0.15 percent of the vote. In the governor's race, Republican Ron DeSantis leads Democrat Andrew Gillum by 0.41 percent.

The Scott campaign first tried to block the machine recount, with (unsuccessful) court suits and then sought to compel counties to meet a 3 p.m. Thursday deadline for the recount. Counties that missed the deadline, the Republicans argued, should forfeit their right to add in the previously uncounted ballots, even when they encountered technical problems—machines broke down in Palm Beach County—or delays brought on by the legal wrangling itself. Thus, the Scott campaign sought to use the obstacles created by its own intervention as an argument for excluding valid ballots.

Nonetheless, Trump tweeted Monday, “The Florida

Election should be called in favor of Rick Scott and Ron DeSantis in that large numbers of new ballots showed up out of nowhere, and many ballots are missing or forged. An honest vote count is no longer possible—ballots massively infected. Must go with Election Night!”

Trump's intervention recalls the 2000 Florida election crisis, in which the Republican Party stole the presidency through the intervention by the US Supreme Court, which issued an unprecedented order halting vote-counting in Florida and awarding the state's electoral votes, and thus the White House, to George W. Bush.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in 2000, the Republican theft of the presidential election, and the spineless capitulation of the Democrats to the Supreme Court ruling in *Bush v. Gore*, demonstrated that there was no longer any significant constituency within the US ruling elite for basic constitutional and democratic norms. The defense of democratic rights—including the most elementary democratic right, the right to vote—depended on the independent intervention of the working class, fighting against all sections of the capitalist class and both of its political parties.

The 18 years that have passed since the Florida election crisis have seen an intensifying assault on democratic rights, under both Democratic and Republican administrations. This build-up of a police state infrastructure—the Patriot Act, the Northern Command, the Homeland Security Department, mass surveillance, Guantanamo, indefinite detention, drone assassinations—has been carried out under conditions of unending war and the supposed requirements of the “global war on terror.”

This steady shift to the right finds its reactionary culmination in the current administration. President Trump has deployed American troops to the Mexican border, ordered tens of thousands of immigrants detained in tent cities and declared his intention to issue an executive order rescinding birthright citizenship,

guaranteed for 150 years under the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution. He glorifies police brutality and regularly incites violence against his political critics in both parties and the press. After a bullying performance at his most recent press conference, Trump ordered the White House to revoke the press credentials of Jim Acosta of CNN and threatened similar treatment to three other reporters, all African-American women.

In demanding that Florida's Senate seat and governorship be awarded to his favored candidates, regardless of the will of the people, Trump is not just reprising what took place in 2000. He is giving a glimpse of what Election Day 2020 and its immediate aftermath could look like, particularly if the election is closely contested.

Already in 2016, candidate Trump branded the election as "rigged" and declared ahead of the vote that he would not necessarily accept the outcome as legitimate if he did not win. There is little doubt that President Trump will use the full powers of his office to resist an unfavorable result in 2020.

The Democratic Party and the sections of the media aligned with it are well aware of Trump's authoritarian proclivities. But they limit any criticism to efforts to pressure Trump to adopt a more stridently anti-Russian foreign policy. Democratic Party spokesmen on the television talk shows on Sunday focused attention on defending the Mueller investigation into bogus allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election, not calling attention to the real and ongoing voter suppression in the 2018 election.

Senator Bernie Sanders, the self-styled "socialist" who defends capitalism and the Democratic Party, issued a tweet Monday that sought to connect the 2018 elections and the anti-Russia campaign, writing, "Donald Trump, like his friends in Russia, Saudi Arabia and North Korea, is an authoritarian leader who does not believe in democracy."

Particularly cowardly and unprincipled is the editorial published Wednesday in the *New York Times*, criticizing Republican claims of fraud in the Florida recount. It begins by conceding that the Republican candidates Scott and DeSantis are almost certain to win the Senate seat and governorship in Florida. It then complains that "both men are not only acting as if it's 2000 all over again, when control of the White House hinged on a few hundred votes in Florida, they are also fanning conspiratorial flames with claims of outrageous fraud, seconded by President Trump."

In other words, according to the *Times*, the Republicans are "dreaming up fraud" when there is no necessity to do so, since they were going to win in Florida anyway! Meanwhile, the editors complacently reassure their readers, "democracy did remarkably well last week," with record turnout in the midterms, and (although they avoid mentioning it) the Democratic Party takeover of the House of Representatives.

Indicative of the prostration of the Democratic Party before Trump and its indifference to the defense of democratic rights is the op-ed column by Frank Bruni in the *Times*, under the headline, "Save Us, Al Gore." The piece contrasts Gore's supposed grace and poise in 2000 to the rapacity of the Republican candidates in 2018. He credits Gore with "a commitment to democracy greater than a concern for self" because he accepted the Supreme Court decision that made Bush president.

Gore, however, was not defending democracy. He was repudiating democracy and the democratic principle that all votes should be counted in favor of preserving the stability of the American capitalist state. According to Bruni, he e-mailed one aide the message, "Don't trash the Supreme Court," although the five-member majority decided to put Bush in the White House and then worked backward to concoct legal and constitutional sophistries to support the desired result.

Gore was particularly sensitive to any signs that the Pentagon brass was uncomfortable with the protracted delay in determining who would be its "commander in chief." He told aides that he did not want to become president if the military was opposed.

Today, in Gore's party, at least a dozen graduates of the military-intelligence apparatus were elected to the House of Representatives on November 6. These "CIA Democrats" constitute a grouping with larger numbers and incomparably more influence than the handful of "democratic socialists" like Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, who provide "left" window-dressing for this right-wing party of American imperialism.

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