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AUDIENCE:

You mentioned before, like we were talking about Trump not winning the popular vote. So how do you feel about our system of voting in the United States versus a preferential voting system?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, it's a kind of a-- it's a fact known among political scientists, but not the population that the American political system is so regressive that it would not be accepted by the European Court of Justice. Literally.

Some of the East European states that have come into the European Union have proposed voting systems like the American one and they're rejected because they're so undemocratic.

This goes back to the-- If you take a look at a-- we don't have any political parties in the United States. Remember, they do in Europe. You can't be a member of the Democratic Party.

What you can do is go into the voting booth and put an x somewhere. That's your role as a citizen. Elite party managers set up the programs, pretty much pick the can-- they vet the candidates. Only certain ones get through.

You look at a ballot, it says, Republican, Democrat, nothing else. Those are your choices. So these are candidate-producing machines. The role of the citizen is to show up every couple of years and put in an x, and then go home. That's not democratic politics. But that's a deeply ingrained system. It comes out of the way the party system developed here in the 19th century post-Civil war, mainly. I mean, these are really serious issues. It makes it almost impossible for an independent party to participate.

And those things are not graven in stone. They can all be changed.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Talking about black matters, there's been claims that this system of voting reflects earlier concerns about blacks in America.

NOAM CHOMSKY: It does.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: So can you say something about that?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah. Well, you go back to the-- slavery lasted until the Civil War. And incidentally, it was the most vicious system of slavery in world history. There was never anything like it. Slavery is bad enough, but the American system was unique.

Also, it's worth remembering that the slave system is the basis of our prosperity. The main commodity in the early 19th century was cotton. Cotton was the fuel of the 19th century Industrial Revolution. Cheap cotton led to the manufacturing industries in New England.

The early manufacturing, big manufacturing industries in Lowell and Lawrence were textiles. It led to the development of the financial system. Credit, loans, and so on, was mostly for the cotton-based system.

Same in England. That's why Liverpool was one of the richest countries in the world. It's where the slave cotton came in.

So cotton, if you look at it, was the real basis right through the 19th century for commercial and industrial development. And it was based on extremely cheap and highly-productive labor.

The productivity of labor was improved by technology, but the technology was very simple. It was the whip and the pistol. That's all you needed to improve technology. The whole story is unbelievably hideous when you look at it.

OK, theoretically it ended with the emancipation declaration. But that was only theoretical. There was a 10-year period, the Reconstruction, in which federal troops were in the South, union troops. And that's one of the decades in which African Americans had a small chance to get into the system. And they did. They were elected. There were people running towns and legislatures. There was a bit of economic development and so on.

It ended in 1877 with a North-South compact that essentially left the South free to do whatever it wanted. So what they did was re-institute slavery. Literally. In fact, the main book on this is called *Slavery by Another Name* by a Wall Street Journal bureau chief who studied it in some depth. Scholarship [inaudible] wrote a good, popular book about it.

What happened was black life was criminalized. So if a black man is standing on a street corner, he can be charged with vagrancy and given a fine which he can't pay. So he's in jail forever.

If a black men look, somebody says somebody looked at a white woman. OK, he's charged with attempted rape and he's in jail for the rest of his life. And pretty soon, most of the black male population was in jail. That's a wonderful slave labor force. From the point of view of the capitalist, it's much better than slavery because you don't have to sustain your workforce.

If you have slaves, you have to keep them alive. If it's a prison population, the taxpayer keeps them alive. You just get the profit.

And a large part of the second wave of industrialization in the United States was based on that. Mining, steel, so on, used essentially incarcerated slave labor. I mean, we were familiar with the chain gangs because you see them. We don't see them, but you did see them. The agricultural workers. But it was happening all over the economy.

Well, that lasted almost until the Second World War. And now we have another version of it. The massive incarceration since the Reagan years is kind of reconstituting that in many ways.

Well, all of this has to do with voting. These people don't vote. What's more, we have very harsh voting laws. People convicted of what's called a felony, which could be being caught with pot three times or something, they don't vote anymore. They're out of the system. This is a big part of it.

Also, their families are destroyed, so they don't vote. They live in-- I once took a walk through-- with a sociologist friend who studies these things through an area of the Bronx, which I happen to know from childhood because a lot of my family lives there. There used to be immigrant communities, poor communities. But now, they've been gentrified. High rises, and so on.

And I asked this woman, sociologist from Columbia, what happened to the people? She said, well, the men are in jail in upstate New York. The women and children sort of followed them, so they can visit them on Sunday. So they're in upstate New York. And now, the rich people live here. Things like that. That is happening in South Boston.

We've seen it in my lifetime. It's happening all over the country. These are things that are going on constantly right in front of our eyes.

And voting? Sure, it's knocking a large part of the population out of the voting list.

By now, I'm sure you know the Republicans particularly are dedicated to trying to reduce the vote. Because the more people vote, the more trouble they're in. So you have all these

ludicrous-- Jeff Sessions, the Department of Justice, head of Department of Justice, is now in charge of trying to figure out ways to, what they call, prevent voter fraud. There's virtually no voter fraud. It's so minuscule, it's physically undetectable. But on that claim to try to readjust the voting so that you can keep the poor and black people out.

The French election, if you noticed, was on Sunday. There's a good reason for that. Sunday. People are free, so they can go and vote. Here, it's on a workday, making it hard to vote. Except for the rich. They can do it easily. If you're an executive, leave your office. Or a college professor, you can take off.

But for a lot of people, you just can't vote on a workday. And there are all sorts of other rules now. You have to have a driver's license, photo ID. And a lot of people don't have that. OK. Poor people. Along with the gerrymandering, which is by now a bad joke.

Many devices are being used to try to prevent the limited democratic system from functioning. But again, all of this can be changed. Bigger gains have been won in the past.

Forget blacks. Think about women.

I mean, if you go back to the early days of the republic, women were not considered people. Literally, they were property. In our constitutional system, the early days, a woman is the property of her father, which is transferred over to her husband. Then she's his property.

In fact, if you take a look at the early debates about whether women should be allowed to vote, one of the arguments against it was that it would be unfair to unmarried men because a married man would have two votes, his own and the property's vote. And this lasted for a long time until pretty recently.

It wasn't until 1975-- not that far back-- that women had a right to serve on federal juries meaning being treated as peers. That's half the population. It's not African Americans. It's been a long way to go to achieve some kind of real right.

And a lot has been achieved. Lot of victories. It's a sign of where you can go. A lot of things we take for granted just didn't exist years back. Take this class.

When I came to MIT in 1955, it was white males, period. Well-dressed, ties and jackets, deferential, do your homework. That was MIT. It's not what it is now. And it didn't happen that way-- change by magic.

