

Shifting the Status Quo

Ethan Perlada

Diablo Valley College

Abstract

The 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton resulted in Trump becoming the 45th president of the United States. Yet, with Trump in the Oval Office, our political and economic system is really not that different. American democracy is unable to truly represent what the people want, and while capitalism puts more money into the pockets of the elite 1 percent, the 99 percent continue to search for a solution to their problems. The solution does not lie with the Democrats or Republicans, but rather a third party for the 99 percent. However, it will require American citizens to vote, and vote for what they believe in.

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Introduction

When Donald Trump announced that he would be running for the 2016 presidency, many doubted that a businessman with no political experience could ever be taken seriously. However, Trump's campaign ended up being extremely successful. He was selected as the Republican candidate for the 2016 election and defeated Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, despite her lead in forecasts and public polls going into election day (Mercer, Deane, & McGeeney, 2016). But now that Donald Trump is the President of the United States, is our political and economic system that much different? Although many of Trump's viewpoints have been controversial, the reality is that a world where Hillary Clinton is president would not be much different than the Trump presidency that we face today because the status quo still remains the same. Until a new party of the 99 percent is able to make a difference in our capitalist society, America will continue to be the same as it has always been.

In regards to America's political system, the United States is a democratic republic. When the colonists grew tired of the British government, they began to consider the possibility of a revolution. According to Heineman (1998), James Wilson stated:

All men are, by nature, equal and free: no one has a right to any authority over another without his consent: all lawful government is founded on the consent of those who are subject to it: such consent was given with a view to ensure and to increase the happiness of the governed, above what they could enjoy in an independent and unconnected state of nature. The consequence is, that the happiness of the society is the first law of every government. (p. 27)

Thus, the colonies declared independence and fought Britain to become the United States of America. The Constitution was created, outlining a three-branch government with separation of powers and checks and balances. In addition, representatives were to be elected by the people (Heineman, 1998). Our country was created with the idea of giving the people a say in the government, creating the democracy we see today. At the same time, checks and balances make sure that no part of the government can be overly controlling. Democracy has become a part of America that people take pride in and many would never want it to change.

Many of Trump's actions during his first year in office may have caused some to fear that our democratic system would change, but they ultimately did not succeed thanks to checks and balances. For example, Trump's travel ban on various Muslim countries was very controversial, and it was shut down by the Supreme Court several times. Moreover, some of the more radical judges that Trump appointed did not pass the vote by the Senate (Beauchamp, 2018). Trump has also expressed views that are anti-democratic, such as pledging to prosecute Hillary Clinton, threatening media with legal action, and questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2016). Both the legislative and judicial branches have played a role in keeping Trump's power in check by preventing him from using his power in ways that would compromise the democratic system, which many people feared when Trump became president. Therefore, we should not expect the democratic system to change either despite Trump's authoritarian views.

While capitalism is the current economic system in America, humans have used several different economic systems throughout history. According to Nilsson (2017), these include kinship production, feudalism, and slavery in addition to capitalism. Kinship production is the

oldest, which involves a production group made of people of the same family. For example, a kinship group could consist of a family of farmers that worked to meet their own needs for survival. Feudalism, which existed in Europe from the 900s to the 1400s, involved two separate classes: lower class serfs that worked for the more powerful lords that owned the land. Between 1600 and 1900, slavery in America allowed masters to buy and sell slaves, who were forced to work without any pay. Capitalism started gaining traction from the 1700s to the 1900s, which focuses on profit by the production of commodities by paid employees (Nilsson, 2017). Because the goal of a capitalist is to make profit, the system tends to cause an elite 1 percent to make decisions that benefit themselves, no matter the effect on the 99 percent composed of the working class. In fact, in 2017, the richest 1 percent earned 82% of all of the wealth created that year, while the poorest 50 percent did not have any increase in wealth (Kottasová, 2018). Given that it takes hundreds of years to transition between economic systems, we can expect that Trump, who is part of the elite 1 percent, will not be able to change the current system of capitalism in any significant way even if he was willing to.

Since Trump took office, there have been no signs of any significant changes to the economic system. Although President Trump made many promises of economic reform during his campaign, he has failed to fulfill many of them a year into his presidency. Trump was able to win votes from the working and middle class and ultimately the election due to unfulfilled promises that included increased incomes for workers and reforms that would end the destruction of jobs (Kagarlitsky, 2018). Even though it is true that every president makes promises that they are unable to keep, Trump's empty promises have demonstrated that he is pro-capitalism. As an experienced businessman, it makes sense that he would favor helping corporations over workers.

According to elitist theory, an elite minority tends to make decisions that benefit themselves, even if it would hurt non-elite groups (Heineman, 1998). To illustrate, the only major economic legislation under Trump so far has been the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. The bill reduces taxes for every income bracket, but the reduction is three times greater for business owners compared to workers and could actually increase taxes for the middle class within the next 10 years. In addition, the tax cut adds \$1.5 trillion to the federal deficit (“Trump Claims,” 2017). With this bill, Trump made it clear that capitalism is not going away any time soon. While the bill is disguised as a gift to the American people, it only helps corporations increase their profit at the expense of the middle class — a concept that is very capitalist.

As seen in 2016, a central part of democracy in the United States is the election system. For someone to become president, they need to go through the election process. First, a candidate needs to be nominated by a political party. Currently, the two main parties in America are the Democrats and Republicans, while the Green Party and Libertarian Party are other less popular parties. Primary elections are held in each state to determine which delegates vote for the presidential candidate. Once each party nominates a candidate, the candidates begin to campaign for the general election. Campaigns consist of advertising, debates, rallies, and fundraisers to fund the high cost of the campaign. After the campaigns are over, registered citizens over the age of 18 vote to determine which candidate becomes president. However, they do not directly vote for president. Rather, voters in each state select electors from the Electoral College who vote for the president. The number of electors per state is equal to the number of senators plus the number of representatives, giving more populated states such as California and Texas a higher number of

electors. Out of 538 electoral votes, a candidate needs 270 to win the presidency (Heineman, 1998).

Despite America operating under a democratic system, there are reasons to believe that the average citizen does not truly have a say in the government. Because it is an indirect election, there have been several occasions where a candidate won the popular vote, but lost the Electoral College: Samuel Tilden losing to Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, Grover Cleveland losing to Benjamin Harrison in 1888, Al Gore losing to George W. Bush in 2000, and Hillary Clinton losing to Donald Trump in the 2016 election (Revesz, 2016). Out of the 58 presidential elections in American history, 4 have resulted with a candidate winning by receiving less votes. Even though 4 seems like a small number, having the loser be able to win at all seems unfair. As a result, there has been a lot of controversy — especially recently — over whether the Electoral College system should be changed. If the candidate that receives the most votes is able to lose the election, does it belong in a democratic society where the people are supposed to decide? Certainly, Trump would think it does after becoming the beneficiary of the Electoral College in 2016.

Now that a candidate that the majority did not vote for president has taken office, there are not many options for citizens who are unhappy with the results. The Constitution will still require future elections to be decided by the Electoral College with no change in sight. In addition, it also sets the time between elections at 4 years, meaning that voters will have to wait until 2020 to get someone else in the Oval Office. The Constitution also describes a process for impeachment of the president, but that requires a majority of the House to impeach and two-thirds of the Senate to remove (Street, 2018). In a legislative branch where both the House

and Senate are controlled by Republicans, impeachment or removal of President Trump seems rather unlikely. Unfortunately, disappointed voters will have to live with the fact that our president is Trump, not Clinton.

After the 2016 election, a Hillary Clinton presidency did not become a reality. Even with the Electoral College, a mere 80,000 votes across Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania would have won Clinton the election (Podhoretz, 2017). If Hillary managed to get those votes and win the election, would America be much different under her than it is under Trump? The Political Compass is a useful tool to compare Clinton's and Trump's political viewpoints. It allows users to take an online survey to determine their political views, placing them on a 4 quadrant graph. The graph displays the traditional economic left-right spectrum, with left leaning towards communism and right leaning towards capitalism. However, the Political Compass adds another dimension of political views, with lower on the graph representing more libertarian views and higher on the graph representing more authoritarian views. Adding the libertarian-authoritarian axis helps distinguish people such as Stalin and Gandhi, who both leaned left but held dramatically different political views. On the Political Compass, Trump and Clinton both fall in the upper right quadrant signifying capitalist and authoritarian views, with Trump being more authoritarian but slightly less capitalist than Clinton. ("The US Presidential," 2016).

Since Clinton is slightly more rightist than Trump, it is safe to say that Clinton would not want to change the economic system like Trump, as she would also benefit from a capitalist society. On the topic of capitalism, Clinton stated that "When I think about capitalism, I think about the small businesses that were started because we have the opportunity and the freedom in our country to do that. I don't think we should confuse what we have to do every so often in

America, which is save capitalism from itself. But we would be making a grave mistake to turn our backs on what built the greatest middle class of the world” (Ontheissues, 2016).

Furthermore, our political system has remained the same under Trump. So, our political system would definitely not be different under Clinton, who is less authoritarian than Trump. Clinton would also have to deal with a Senate and House of Representatives that have a Republican majority, preventing her from doing anything significant (Podhoretz, 2017). Overall, a world where Clinton is president would mostly be the same as our world today. So, is there any way for America’s political and economic systems to change for the better?

For a change to be made, there needs to be a significant shift in the current status quo. Throughout history, there have been several party systems agreed upon by scholars: The Federalist-Republican system from the 1790s to 1815, the Democratic-Whig system from the 1820s to the 1850s, a first Republican-Democratic system from 1860 to 1896, a second Republican-Democratic system from 1896 to 1932, and the New Deal party system from the early 1930s until the present (Silbey, 2002). Each of these systems consist of 2 parties that each have their own views. Currently, the status quo involves modern versions of the Republican and Democratic parties. However, as shown by the Political Compass, their political viewpoints are more similar to each other compared to third parties (“The US Presidential,” 2016). As they are both in the upper right quadrant of the Political Compass, they both support capitalism because they tend to be of the elite 1 percent class that benefits from such an economic system. On the left-right political spectrum, Republicans and Democrats are more moderate and fall next to each other near the middle of the spectrum. Because their political views are similar to each other and they benefit from the status quo, radical changes will not happen in a Republican-Democratic

system. As long as the current status quo of Republicans and Democrats remains the same, it will be almost impossible for the United States to stray from democracy or capitalism.

While Republicans and Democrats will not bring about meaningful change, it is possible that third parties could. On the Political Compass for the 2016 election, Green Party candidate Jill Stein and Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson showed significantly different views than Clinton and Trump, falling in the lower left and lower right quadrants respectively. Though Johnson of the Libertarian Party is more rightist than both Clinton and Trump, he is significantly more libertarian. Stein of the Green Party is slightly more libertarian than Johnson, and is extremely leftist relative to the other three candidates. In fact, Stein is the only candidate to fall on the left side of the Political Compass (“The US Presidential,” 2016). While a change would obviously not happen overnight, the viewpoints of these third parties are different enough from the status quo that the election of a third party candidate could mark the beginning of a shift in America’s political and economic system.

In particular, Jill Stein of the Green Party seeks to put an end to the capitalist system that is hurting the working and middle class. According to Ontheissues (2016), Stein stated that “we have got a 1 percent that’s rolling in dough as much as ever” and that “the wealthiest 1% in America now own[ing] as much wealth as 90% of all Americans...is unacceptable, unconscionable, and un-American”. While Trump and Clinton are concerned with how capitalism helps them, Stein sees how it affects the people who decide the president in the first place. A third party candidate such as Stein could be successful in initiating a change that actually helps the majority of Americans.

However, third party candidates rarely get more than a few percent of the vote, let alone win the election. While Trump received over 62 million votes and Clinton received over 65 million votes, Gary Johnson only received around 4.5 million votes and Jill Stein only received around 1.5 million votes (“2016 Presidential,” 2016). When third party candidates struggle to even come close to the vote totals of Republican and Democratic candidates, it seems impossible that a third party could ever start gaining traction. Nonetheless, the right candidate could give a potential new party a boost. In 2016, Bernie Sanders’ campaign was extremely successful, despite being a self-proclaimed socialist. According to the Political Compass, Sanders lands directly in the middle of the authoritarian-libertarian axis, while being slightly leftist. In addition, his positions are closer to Jill Stein of the Green Party than they are to Trump’s or even Clinton’s (“The US Presidential,” 2016).

A big problem that third parties face is their inability to fundraise as well as the two main parties. The lack of funds makes it hard to campaign, causing their presidential runs to be less successful than their opponents. Yet, Sanders has shown that it is possible to deviate from the status quo and still have a successful campaign, raising \$44 million in the month of March 2016 while Clinton raised \$29.5 million. Compared to other Democrats such as Clinton, Bernie’s viewpoints are more radical left-wing rather than the moderate status quo (Sawant, 2016). Had Bernie Sanders decided to run as a third party candidate, it is possible that he would have enough of a following to make a difference, even if he did not win the election. If a radical candidate is able to similarly capture the attention of the 99 percent, a new party could be built that would shift the status quo in America and bring about change.

Conclusion

Although Trump campaigned with the slogan “Make America Great Again,” we should not expect his presidency to accomplish that goal. American democracy has failed to represent the people’s opinions, and capitalism continues to hurt the 99 percent. History has shown that significant changes to political and economic systems do not happen overnight. So, while it definitely will not happen within one presidency, Trump’s first year in office has shown us that he is unwilling to make any changes to support the 99%. Even a Clinton presidency would not be enough to make a difference in our economic system. Third parties have tried, but failed to make a true change in America. In order for a difference to be made, a new party for the 99 percent needs to be made to shift the status quo away from a Republican-Democratic system, where both parties refuse to make any meaningful change in favor of benefiting themselves. However, the citizens also need to play a role in this change. Recently, voter turnout has been declining, dropping from 63 percent in 1960 to around 50 to 55 percent in the 1990s (Heineman, 1998). According to File (2016), voter turnout has since rebounded back to around 61 percent in the 2016 election. But of the part of the population that does vote, many choose to vote for the “lesser of two evils” between Democrats and Republicans as a vote against the other candidate rather than what they truly believe in (Mercier, 2016). While today’s youth have not been as involved with politics as previous generations, many of those in the young demographic have rallied behind candidates such as Bernie Sanders who stray from the two-party system by presenting more radical views. People, especially the youth, need to start making a difference in our society. If the 99 percent expects to make any difference in our society, they need to start voting — and voting for what they want, not against what they fear.

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