

Terminally Ill: Democracy's Slow Demise

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Abstract

The American democracy is widely viewed as an exemplary model of government by peoples across the world. With its presidential elections heavily publicized both domestically and internationally, America has boldly established itself as the perfect democracy, emphasizing its liberties through any means possible, including newspapers, radio, television, and most recently, social media. What mass patriotic and pro-democratic publicity often fails to acknowledge is the deep relationship between the government and elite corporations, a relationship that effectively silences the voice of the public and pushes policymaking in capitalists' favor. Though the power balance between the two institutions has shifted over the years, capitalist control over American democracy has now become certain in spite of the undemocratic inequalities' characteristic of a capitalist economy. To ignore this powerful influence in an analysis of the American government would provide juvenile theses because the elite theory -which suggests our democracy is one funded and dominated by corporations rather than voters- most accurately describes the contemporary American system. Though the elite theory describes a rather unjust, un-American system of government, copious evidence recorded since the nation's very foundation confirms the government's corrupt nature. In order to work towards a system truly of the people, by the people, and for the people, the great corporate influence in our governing institutions must be fully understood because to only look at these institutions on paper presents a false, utopian version of society we have not achieved. The elite may reign supreme now, but status quo is defined as the "existing state of affairs" not the "permanent state of affairs," meaning our system, our status quo, can be changed.

Terminally Ill: Democracy's Slow Demise

America is a democracy, the blueprint that inspired colonial revolution and the popularization of freedoms and basic human rights for both the wealthy and the poor in a world previously void of such liberties. Most Americans and foreigners alike would assuredly claim that America is a democracy because they have never been taught otherwise, never been offered a more critical perspective of the American government in classrooms, and never chosen to look beyond schoolbooks or the nightly news. Honestly, why would they? In America, if you are financially comfortable, why would you question the system that grants you such wealth? If you are impoverished, downtrodden, unemployed, or homeless, how could it be the fault of the beloved system and not your own fault like all of society tells you? These rhetorical questions - though unfortunately understandable- are incredibly problematic because by asking them, we are ignoring the truth about our government. It makes little sense that in a nation that prides itself on its just, democratic system, the government tasked with upholding the rights of the people is unwilling to do so. Alas, this is reality.

As previously mentioned, most people would confidently claim America is a democracy but there are actually three lesser-known theories of the American government that differ from the one detailed in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and all the old, famous documents Americans love to cite when they feel their rights are being infringed upon. The first of the four theories is the widely popular democratic theory, which declares that the American government is a perfectly just system in which the peoples' voices are acknowledged and acted upon through elected officials' policies. Pluralism -the first of three critical theories- defines American government as of the groups, by the groups, and for the groups rather than of, by, and for the people. The pluralist position suggests that state and federal policies are dictated by the

wants of individual political groups, including religious communities, trade unions, civil liberties groups, and other powerful bodies rather than individual voters. From the pluralist theory of organization-commanded political change, the hyperpluralist stance which theorizes that liberal and conservative organizations have grown too strong in the modern day, rendering the government unable to pass any measures for fear of antagonizing another group. Hyperpluralists claim that for every organization championing some social, economic, or political measure, there is another that directly opposes it, and if our government promised equal political power to each group, no law could be passed that would appease all of them. While the hyperpluralist theory has some merit and could be used to explain Washington's reluctance to pass bills that actually aid the people, it is elite theory that most accurately describes the American system of government.

Elite theory challenges the idea that America could even be considered a democracy, defining our system of government as an oligarchy, a government run by the 1% and their partisan puppets. Unlike democratic theory, elite theory suggests that the wealthy share one common goal -maintaining their wealth- even in spite of their personal political beliefs and through financial support, are able to influence politicians and therefore public policy. Elite corruption is bipartisan, meaning both Republicans and Democrats have allowed for and aided CEOs in the corporate takeover of our democracy. Through the careful examination of capitalist influence in government activity and both parties' publicized values versus their actual actions, one can grasp a comprehensive understanding about how democracy and capitalism work as one entity. Understanding this twisted relationship is the first step towards adopting true democracy; by becoming more aware, we can create change and maybe someday, elite theory will describe a past rather than current America.

Corporate's Capital Country

“It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street” announced Populist orator Mary Ellen Lease at an 1890 People’s Party convention in Topeka, Kansas (Zinn, 2003, p. 288). Lease’s claim may have been a brash, radical one, but it was an incredibly precise description of the American government during that era: overtaken by big banks and political bosses subject to very few business regulations even after the passing of the Sherman Antitrust Act that very same year (Zinn, 2003, p. 290). It would be logical for anybody to reason that America has since grown both politically and economically and has left political corruption and vast financial inequality in the past. However, that is not the case. One would not be benighted to claim that our modern nation, like late 19th century America, is one plagued by unfathomable corporate growth at the expense of ordinary citizens. Further, one would be benighted to claim that this impossible economic evolution has had no influence over the American governmental system of democracy. It is highly antithetical that in a nation built upon the principles of freedom, rooted in equality for all, capitalism -a system that guarantees disproportion- has been able to grow uncontrollably for centuries. Our current political system only vaguely resembles the free one detailed in the vaguely propagandistic school assignments and state-approved textbooks we grew up on. Most of these authorized textbooks only focus on this fanciful, utopian form of democracy that seems more a myth than reality, undermining the effects of modern capitalism on the political status of the nation. The only way to truly understand America’s political system -one truthfully defined as a political economy- is to not only examine the institutions that make up the government but also explore the deep relationship forged between our institutions and capitalism; in our corporate country, capital holds unimaginable authority.

According to the 2022 Democracy Perception Index, a mere 49% of Americans considered the US to be a democratic nation. Of those 49%, the highest ranked reasons for democracy's downfall were corruption (78%), corporate control of the political system (72%), and rising power of Big Tech companies (68%) (Urie, 2023). Oddly enough culture wars -an issue heavily broadcasted in the media as a leading threat to the nation- was not identified as one of the leading reasons for democracy's failure. Data also suggests that a whopping 70% of Americans agree with the assessment that "our political system seems to only be working for the insiders with money and power" (Henderson, 2020). These statistics may be worrisome and reflective of a pessimistic side of American society, but they also identify what a majority of Americans feel to be the root of the problem facing our nation right now: capitalistic corruption. While it is no secret that money has carried great political influence since the nation's founding and has been a topic heavily contested by the lower and middle class for centuries, more and more Americans have begun opening their eyes as of late to the economic reality that has only worsened through the years. It seems that in the modern age, cash has a louder voice in political affairs, including campaigns, elections, the allocation of wealth, etc., than the people who are supposed to be represented by our politicians. All signs suggest that corporate power has become overblown and undemocratic. In a nation where the majority vote supposedly rules, why is the majority's concern going unaddressed?

The answer? The majority of the population does not hold the majority of wealth and therefore the power in this nation. Wealthy individuals, political groups, and above all, multi-billion-dollar corporations play a remarkable role in American politics because they fund bipartisan efforts in government in order to protect the political and economic status quo, successfully keeping themselves and their political accomplices in business. Politicians, major

parties, and other administrations allow themselves to be “bought” because it keeps their partisan interests in office and a steady stream of cash in their coffers. The symbiotic relationship between politicians and wealthy bodies, deemed the number one threat to democracy by the American people, has been pointed out time and time again in countless investigations demonstrating the blatantly corrupt state of the federal government. According to *Harvard Business Review*, “[bills] supported by 90% of the general population [are] no more likely to pass than proposals supported by 10%...but if the rich support a policy, it gets passed” The corrosive effect that capitalistic domination has on the government leads to acts that overwhelmingly benefit the rich and barely impact -and sometimes harm- the 90-99%, such as the 2017 tax cut, unpopular among most voters and only supported by 40% of Americans over two years later. It should be noted however that this paradoxical relationship between capitalism and democracy is a “toxic” one because while capitalists take no issue in regularly infiltrating the government, they draw the line at politicians butting into their realm of work. Government intervention, which suggests taxes, regulation, and “bureaucratic inertia” is a corporation’s worst nightmare and typically leads to business campaigns against such threats. Though it seems illogical that the 1% can get away with so much in politics while the seemingly all-powerful government is powerless in corporate business practices, from 2000 to 2010, “spending on lobbying still more than doubled (from \$1.6 billion to \$3.5 billion),” proving corporate’s control over the establishment (Henderson, 2020).

While Republicans and Democrats are at each other's throats on the daily, blaming the other for the downfall of democracy, the truth is neither of the two foremost political parties in this country do much to slash corporate power. In fact, they support it. In a *Monthly Review* article, Tabb defines political parties as “blocs of investors that back candidates who represent

their interests,” going on to comment that due to the average voter’s lack of unbiased knowledge regarding different issues or their hostility to the system as a whole, these blocs typically create most public policy without effective opposition. And while Republicans and Democrats may disagree on a variety of financial affairs, “on issues affecting the vital interests that major investors have in common, no party competition will take place” (Tabb, 2006).

It’s hard to swallow that the prominent parties running our nation are compromised by these multi-billion-dollar companies but as previously mentioned data shows, the people are aware and unhappy with these trends. Many of such unsatisfied or fearful citizens are members of the lower class, especially people of color. In an interview with Yale University, Institution for Social and Policy Studies (ISPS) faculty member Jacob Hacker stated, “you can’t understand how our political economy works without looking at race” (Harrison, 2023). Hacker’s observation introduces another layer of inequities within a political economy that are in blatant contradiction to basic democratic principles: economic inequality and political disadvantages based on race. Even prior to the nation’s founding, non-white Americans have always been at an economic disadvantage for a multitude of reasons. Not unironically, one of these reasons was plantation slavery, a highly profitable system that capitalist America -both Southern and Northern states- thrived on (Gendrault, 2020). Past and present financial inequalities under the system of capitalism do not only affect income, housing, or other physical property though but also allow for massive democratic inequalities, which directly contradicts the definition of a free, equal society detailed in many American government textbooks. While it seems wholly un-American and anti-democratic to grant systematic racism leeway in this nation, there is very little the average citizen can do to hamper it. It’s a money-maker. Just like in this nation’s dark past, if racism makes a profit, corporate America will endorse it.

Regardless of how many glaringly unequal bills they support, inept politicians they endorse, and above all, problematic systems they work tirelessly to uphold, it is still a bad look for major corporations to outright support discrimination in any form even if it is profitable. While maintaining a welcoming, tolerant company image so as not to isolate a demographic of possible customers is crucial to corporate success, many companies have been known to make under the table deals with discriminatory groups, specifically anti-LGBTQ+ organizations, to make a quick but substantial buck. Despite publicly announcing their support for the LGBTQ+ community and signing a 2021 Human Rights Campaign petition condemning discriminatory state legislations targeting queer Americans, AT&T, Comcast, Amazon, CVS, and many other companies (33 out of 280 that signed the petition) were outed for donating thousands to anti-LGBTQ+ lawmakers (Cloutier & Giorno, 2022). According to research by Cloutier and Giorno, AT&T, the leading offender in these cases, donated a total of \$80,000 to Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis (R) between January 2020 and the 2022 signing of the infamous "Don't Say Gay" bill. Though they refrained from contributing to DeSantis since he signed the bill, they did not hesitate from contributing \$5,000 to Alabama Governor Kay Ivey (R) who instituted a 2022 bill restricting access to gender-affirming healthcare for Alabama minors. AT&T still scored 100% on the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index for two consecutive years (2021-2022) despite their controversial endorsements (Human Rights Campaign Foundation [HRC], 2022).

Furthermore, corporate America is one built upon and constantly funded by bitter, vicious partisan conflict among the people. Marketing tactics such as capitalization of patriotism or identity pride in the form of gaudy 4th of July displays or garish rainbow pride arrangements, are meant to cater to highly politicized and increasingly polarized demographics including people of

color, LGBTQ+ Americans, and loyal Republicans and Democrats. While some companies are inherently politicized due to their business practices (abortion care, fracking, etc.), Columbia Business School's Professor Yue (2024) found that ordinary companies such as Patagonia or Hobby Lobby regularly announce their political beliefs in order to establish a reliable, long-term market that shares their beliefs and purchases their goods above others. Additionally, a 2018 survey on corporate public relations showed that "nearly two thirds of consumers around the world will buy or boycott a brand solely because of its position on a social or political issue" (Zahn, 2022). This data not only demonstrates the American public's consciousness in their market's transformation into a politicized warzone but also shows that while political polarization in the economy creates risk by isolating buyers, it can also be incredibly beneficial for outspoken corporations. Most importantly, it shows that a majority of consumers are actively allowing the market to fall into political disarray, further fueling the steady stream of cash flowing into corporate pockets.

The predatory capitalization of personal identity and political affiliation may seem unsavory, but it pales in comparison to "disaster capitalism," the historical, highly profitable, and controversial business philosophy summed up in the phrase "never let a crisis go to waste" (Romerio-Hermeto, 2022). Disaster capitalism, which has been around since this nation's founding, can be described simply as the corporate capitalization of wars, natural disasters, or other dire situations. In the modern era, corporations are typically able to go through the government -a government in their pockets- in order to profit off U.S. engagement in foreign affairs, such as the ongoing war in Russia and Ukraine, as well as in Syria, Nigeria, and Iran and Iraq. It is a joint effort by the American government and greedy corporations to entangle our nation in foreign affairs in the desperate quest for raw materials -the most valuable of which are

oil and rare minerals which our ally Ukraine coincidentally controls an abundance of. A journalist for Geopolitical Economy Report writes “it is not only Western corporations that want to invest in exploiting Ukraine’s natural resources, but also US policymakers who want to diversify their supply of critical minerals,” a statement backed up by comments of U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham. “[Ukraine] is sitting on a trillion dollars’ worth of minerals that could be good to our economy” Graham said, then following up his blatant remark by appealing to the public’s fear of the undemocratic Russia and China and the horrors that could befall America if those nations rather than the claimed the minerals before us (Norton, 2024). Graham said nothing about Ukraine’s claim to these precious minerals despite the fact that they lie within Ukraine’s borders, not America’s. The deliberate demonization of Russia and China -two nations that want the exact same goods as the U.S.- is a prime example of the corporate takeover of our supposed democracy. It would not be profitable if a competitor stole lucrative minerals from corporate America, therefore, it is highly dangerous for the state of the country and the well-being of our people.

This is not the first nor the last time economic interests have impacted governmental or military affairs in foreign nations. Military trends have shown that third-party intervention in civil wars is far more likely to occur when a warring nation owns or produces high quantities of oil, and an intervening nation or group is 100 times more likely to interfere if they have high oil imports, like the United States (Norton, 2024). A fine example of this comes from Pentagon and CIA involvement in the Syrian Civil War. In an underhanded plot to obtain precious petroleum imports from oil-rich Syria, the Pentagon opted to support guerilla rebels fighting troops funded by the CIA, maximizing the likelihood of increased trade between the war-torn nation and our state to satisfy capitalists and politicians alike by appealing to both sides of the fight. The

American government is not unfamiliar with this deceitful form of foreign engagement. In Nigeria, major gasoline companies Shell and Chevron have been funding the federal government while simultaneously paying insurgents to defend corporate oil shares. Similarly, during the Iran-Iraq War and the Reagan Administration, American weapon manufacturers and officials violated an arms embargo with Iran in order to illegally fund Nicaraguan rebel troops and boost profits. In each of these cases, it's glaringly evident that the governmental concern for growing the American political-economic empire takes precedence over the protection of human lives. Though foreign lives are not necessarily the responsibility of the White House, America's continuous involvement in affairs not concerning our country and motivated by financial gain highlights the intrinsic connection between our government and profit-hungry capitalists (Gallagher, 2024).

While the American public has begun recognizing these alarmingly undemocratic signs of economic and political fraternization, many would still say that this nation operates as a democracy, and from an outside perspective, it does. Textbooks will define the American system as a democracy separate from our economic system -capitalism- and in an ideal, free-market, democratic nation, these would remain mostly separate spheres of business. Of course, some government intervention in the economy is necessary for the well-being of citizens and the success of the market; prices must reflect true costs, a leading principle of the free market that is upheld by government legislation (Henderson, 2020). But when companies fight tooth and claw to shed any and all regulatory laws, how can our government -monetarily inclined to preserve corporate interest- hope to uphold said laws? The answer is it cannot -effectively at least- which creates a starkly undemocratic economic and political structure that infringes upon not only basic American rights, but human rights. For a nation that fears foreign ideologies, especially radical

ones that threaten the individual rights of man, it is unfathomable that the United States is one entrenched in corporatism. After all, Mussolini -head of the fascist Italian state in the early 20th century- famously claimed that “fascism should more properly be called corporatism because it is the merger of state and corporate power,” an almost exact definition of the current American economic system (Berlet, 2005). With this statement, Mussolini was not speaking on modern corporatism or the American political economy, an entity so powerful he could never have imagined it. Still, the fact that Mussolini made this observation is worrying on a multitude of levels; he was assessing the relationship between the state and corporations in fascist Italy nearly a century ago. Over the past 80 years, American corporations have only amassed more political power, ferrying our nation towards a distinctly fascist future at incredible speeds regardless of what the state-approved textbook says.

In a world dominated by corporate interest, it’s no shocker that “among [the] 100 most powerful economies in the world, 51 are corporations” (Kelly, 2006). In a nation specifically founded upon the principles of individualism, freedom, and equality, however, the coexistence of modern corporatist capitalism and democratic belief is impossible, antithetical, and unethical. In order to understand the impossibility of such a coexistence, one must look beyond the institutions of government that text books, the media, and many Americans vehemently praise, and embark on a trek through our war-torn political economy ravaged by big business, corrupt offices, and bitter, disheartened citizens. Upon examining the intricate and symbiotic yet simultaneously destructive relationship of our economic system and our government, the reality of American democracy becomes quite clear. As long as they continue to buy their way into office, manipulate laws with a thousand times more power than the average voter, and turn the masses against each other through expert economic politicization, we will not be a true

government of the people, by the people, and for the people. As of now, it's a corporate capital country and we're just living in it.

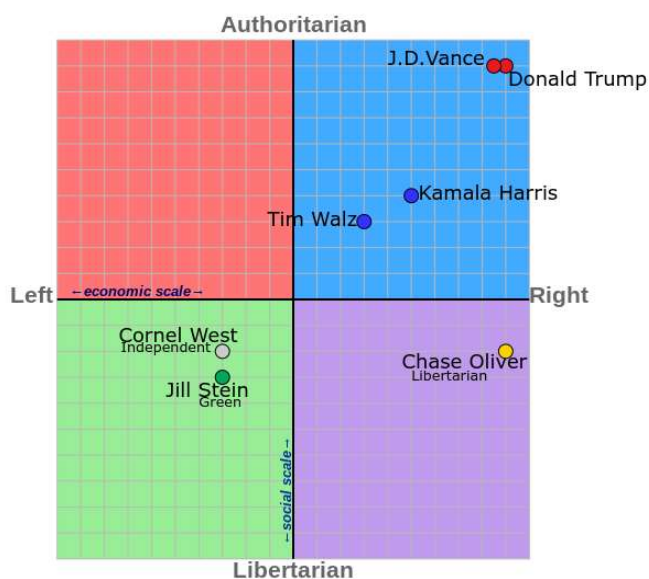
The Lesser of Two Evils

“You throw the torch into a pile of buildings, and when they are consumed, you sit back among the ruins and lament the fall” wrote Mary Shelley in her renowned 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. Like Shelley's tragic hero Dr. Frankenstein, the American people often throw a torch -an unfit presidential candidate- into a pile of buildings -the White House- and sit back to watch their nation fall to pieces but unlike Frankenstein, they were given no choice in the matter. According to a post-election FairVote poll, 47% of voters claimed to have voted for the “lesser of two evils” in the 2024 presidential elections, a statistic that demonstrates the lack of public confidence in the competence of presidential candidates put forth by the major political parties (Mantell, 2024). For a long time, trust in either the Republican or Democratic party has been difficult for the average American to maintain due to both parties' corrupt allegiance to major corporations and the reluctance to aid the 99% through political action. Despite growing disillusionment among the public, there has been no change in the capitalistic and supposedly democratic conditions that have existed since the nation's foundation. Shrewd political candidates partial to the harmful status quo have an uncanny ability to humanize themselves during election season, appealing mainly to the masses' economic interests despite an unwillingness to allocate funds to humanitarian issues. Even the Democratic party -historically, the worker's party- has earned a reputation as an untrustworthy body, unflinching in its loyalty to the 1% in the modern day. Regardless of the bipartisan faith in America's capitalist, rather hierarchical system, many voters were still drawn to the Democratic party and their 2024 candidate Kamala Harris rather than Donald Trump due to opposing positions on human rights.

While neither a Trump or Harris victory in the 2024 presidential election would promise divergence from the established political and economic status quo, the protection of human rights has come into question following Harris's loss and reinstatement of a party hostile to minorities.

In examining the multiple possible outcomes of the 2024 presidential election, it is first critical to understand that the Republican and Democratic parties are far more alike in political and economic thought than presented by both the mass media and the parties themselves. Furthermore, as proven earlier, both parties are guilty of fraternizing with major corporations and prioritizing profit over public wellbeing, sometimes even blatantly ignoring acts that would directly aid the public in favor of lining their coffers. According to a 2014 study which analyzed 1,700 cases in which “public opinion was offered about proposed policy changes” over the last 20 years, it was found that ordinary citizens have little or no “independent influence on policy at all.” Regardless of which party holds supreme office, if “opinion shifts among those at the 90th percentile of income and above, changes in policy in the direction they want become far more likely” (Ferguson, 2020). Despite biased media coverage that falsely paints Donald Trump as a tyrant or Kamala Harris a communist, the American government's shameless readiness to cater to wealthy business partners and powerful private groups even at the cost of the public is a readiness both candidates and their respective parties share. As Institution for Social and Policy Studies faculty fellow Jacob Hacker (2023) points out in a Yale ISPS interview, “organized interest groups influence...policies implemented by both Democrats and Republicans, leaving the role of elections somewhat limited.” So, in order to understand the Trump and Harris administrations' true objectives, one must mind that both parties masquerade as champions of the working class but are simply organizations dedicated to upholding an unjust, inequitable system to appease wealthy donors.

Further attestation of Republican and Democratic similitude is evident in candidates' results on the acclaimed Political Compass Test, an online tool used to assess and plot the beliefs of political figures on a grid of ideological ideals. Over the past 23 years, the Political Compass has analyzed six U.S. presidential elections and results have placed every Republican and Democratic candidate in the same grid: Authoritarian Rightist. While Republican candidates have demonstrated a higher likelihood to be more authoritarian in their social beliefs than Democratic contenders, only unelected primary candidates and third-party representatives have ever scored within the Libertarian Leftist or Libertarian Rightist quadrants. No candidate has ever been placed in the Authoritarian Leftist quadrant. Below is the 2024 ranking of Trump, Harris, their vice-presidents, and third-party runners, their position corresponding to their economic and social beliefs as gathered through speeches, voting records, and other developments.



In an explanatory passage explaining the results of the 2024 graphic, Political Compass writers disparaged Trump, mentioning little about his campaign policies and opting to recount the “venal felon’s” unsavory habits, including ““pussy grabbing’, casino operating, porn star

liaising, serial lying and so much else.” Contrastingly, Harris was described as “an attractive possibility” and “clever” (The Political Compass, 2024). Despite Pace News Ltd’s discernable bias, writers also acknowledge the Harris campaign’s resistance to discuss serious changes in international affairs and her tendency to present herself as “just not Trump.” Both Harris and Trump’s unwillingness to meddle in the political and economic systems emplaced in this nation is made plainly clear by the Political Compass, a slightly biased but mostly trustworthy, critical tool.

Though the differences between a modern Trump and Harris administration are numerous, money dictated and drove both campaigns. As billionaire BlackRock CEO Larry Fink stated in an October conference, “it really doesn’t matter [who wins]...[Wall Street] works with both administrations and [is] having conversations with both candidates” (Norton, 2024). While many marginalized communities had a lot to lose in the 2024 election with the emergence of indisputable proof of proposed discriminatory policies, for the wealthy, elections matter very little. In fact, corporations benefit from investing in one or more presidential candidates because increased spending means increased contestant exposure in the hopes to attract more voters and assure corporate power in the capital. Wall Street’s political invasion goes beyond just the White House, as Geopolitical Economy Report points out; “candidates who have the most funding win the elections in the House of Representatives over 90% of the time and in the Senate roughly 80% of the time” (2024). While capitalist interest greatly aids any politician and was deeply ingrained in both Trump and Harris’s campaigns, Harris lost the race despite receiving far more corporate support than her competitor. Raising a total of \$997.2 million between January 2023 and October 16, 2024, as opposed to Trump’s \$388 million, the Biden/Harris committee triumphed in fundraising. Super PACs -unaffected by campaign funding limitations- also poured

money into both parties' pockets en masse and starting in July, Harris received \$668.9 million, and Trump received \$194.6 million (Durkee, 2024). Both Harris and Trump' fundraising records proved only one thing; elections are money-grabs, brutal competitions fueled by corporate cash, and will result in even greater wealth for the wealthy. Neither party is looking to change that.

Despite her blatant devotion to Netflix's Reed Hastings, Lowercase Capital's Chris Sacca, and anyone else with a checkbook, many American voters still hoped for a Harris victory due to her sympathetic and defensive stance on human rights (Durkee, 2024). Though political progressiveness is often performative or demonstrated with ulterior, usually monetary motives, growing bigotry in America has left many on edge, especially when that bigotry is greatly encouraged by Donald Trump and the Republican party. Reflective of a dystopian America, Trump's views on humanitarian issues such as abortion, transgender rights, and immigration, and popular right-wing rhetoric of traditional values and gender roles have alarmed countless marginalized communities and their allies. The infamous Project 2025, a conservative manifesto detailing the total purge of wokeism -or progressive thinking- in modern America, is symbolic of the nation's deep divisiveness and was one of the major deciding factors for many voters in this year's election cycle.

Though Trump claimed to be unaffiliated with Project 2025 and his 140 former staffers that authored it, "Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts -who worked on Trump's transition team- described the organization's role as 'institutionalizing Trump'" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). Since the document's release in mid-February 2024, the Biden/Harris administration spent at least \$5 million in advertising tying Trump to its oppressive, 1950s-esque aims. The cheap political move by the Democratic party to associate Trump with positions he was seemingly disconnected from may have angered many on-the-fence voters but

following the Republican party's victory on November 5th, Trump began appointing numerous Project 2025 authors and Heritage Foundation members to high-ranking federal offices. Already, Donald Trump has tapped and appointed Breden Carr to lead the FCC, Pete Hoekstra to serve as Ambassador to Canada, and John Ratcliffe as the CIA Director, among others. The sudden departure from his July Truth Social posts where he claimed that Project 2025 proposals were "absolutely ridiculous and abysmal" has worried many voters, especially marginalized Americans who could be directly affected by policies such as education system reforms and the redirection of public funds (Wren et al., 2024).

As stated on the Heritage Foundation's website, Project 2025 aims "to restore American democracy of, by, and for the people, not of, by, and for the elites who currently control Washington," a majorly ironic statement considering the Foundation suggests the slashing of various individual freedoms which have been historically pilfered by big government. The Trump-approved project's goal to "eliminate woke propaganda at every level of government" could have untold consequences on the nation but it would certainly not return "American governance" to the people as it suggests; in fact, it would only work to further remove the people from the people's government! As suggested by Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership*, under Trump, Biden administration policies that promote the "LGBTQ+ agenda, subsidize single motherhood, disincentivize work, and penalize marriage" would be replaced "with policies that instead encourage marriage, work, motherhood, fatherhood, and nuclear families" (The Heritage Foundation, 2024). These policies, such as the removal of critical race theory and gender ideology curriculum from public schools, reflect the spirit of discrimination against the minority that was once commonplace and federally mandated. By promoting only the nuclear family, demonizing marginalized communities, and pulling diverse educational opportunities from

schools, the Heritage Foundation seeks to create an America reminiscent of the prejudiced, divisive, conformist past where people are disallowed certain liberties that have been painstakingly restored over the past century. The Trump administration's identification with Project 2025 and its oppressive goals promises societal regression rather than improvement, and despite the Democratic party's premature ad campaigns, is certainly something to be worried about in the following four years.

Among the groups that are concerned about the recent conservative attack on human rights are LGBTQ+ Americans, women, and immigrants, three of Trump's dearest scapegoats of choice. Though conservative politicians have attacked gays and lesbians during this election cycle, transgender Americans especially have become one of the nation's favorite fall guys. Transgender rights, such as access to life-saving gender-affirming healthcare, have been highly debated for several elections, with "GOP candidates dropping \$65 million on anti-trans advertising" from August through October 2024 despite the fact that trans issues ranked last among voter concerns this year. Though Harris was not as vocal in her support for the transgender community in her 2024 campaign as in her 2019 campaign, a majority of transgender and queer voters refused to cast a ballot for Trump due to his active willingness to strip them of their rights. Known as the "most anti-LGBTQ election since 2004" where Bush used same-sex marriage to scare homophobes into poll booths, the 2024 election owes much of its hostile reputation to the proposals of Project 2025 (Pauly & Szilagy, 2024). Project 2025 - which aims to ban pornography- identifies transgender ideology as pornography but fails to define "ideology," dooming transgender Americans to an untold number of years stuck in legal limbo; is receiving medical care pornographic? Is walking down the street obscene? Under Project 2025's vague laws, no one can say for sure.

Though conservative politicians regularly employ women as hypothetical, helpless victims while villainizing trans women, migrants, and other political foes, women too are in danger of being subjected to the same murky legal uneasiness as trans people under the Trump administration. Abortion -a hot political topic which 56% of Americans feel Harris would deal with better than her conservative competitor- has come to the forefront of the national morality wars in recent years due to its divisiveness (Brenan, 2024). In a post-Roe world with a hostile party in office, many women across the country find themselves greatly discouraged; how can it be a land of the free if women are treated so unjustly? Similar to trans people who could very soon find themselves labeled as “pornography,” women who suffer miscarriages have found themselves in a uniquely horrifying legislation situation. Defined as “the expulsion of a fetus from the womb before it is able to survive independently, especially spontaneously or as the result of accident,” miscarriages are horribly depressing for the women that experience them, taking an immense mental toll on individuals even when they were “legal.” With the passing of recent conservative laws in many states across the country, harsh restrictions on handling fetal remains applying to medical providers and facilities have been imposed. These restrictions do not apply to individuals who miscarry on their own though, which raises a dire question; what do women who miscarry at home -or on the toilet, which is incredibly common- do with fetal remains? Without official instructions on how to handle miscarriages, how many of those 10-20% of pregnant women who experience miscarriages, will be jailed for mishandling their own medical emergencies? (Sherman, 2024).

The fear of miscarriage has always existed but in a post-Roe America, there exists an added fear of accessing medical care for miscarriages due to societal stigma surrounding the natural emergency. “Of roughly 1,400 cases where people were criminalized for their

pregnancies between 2006 and 2022, one in three cases were instigated by a medical professional,” a statistic by reproductive justice group Pregnancy Justice shows. Though this statistic examines an era prior to Roe v. Wade’s overturning and Trump’s 2024 victory, under a modern conservative administration, there is projected to be little change in this data set. Erica Freeman, a full-spectrum doula, voices women’s concerns expertly; “Who do we trust in these circumstances, [will they] believe me...and really diagnose me properly?” (Sherman, 2024).

Trump’s stance on abortion -which unlike his understanding of miscarriage, has actually been discussed- suggests no improvement in medical conditions for women in this country. A strong supporter of Roe v. Wade’s overturning, Trump has “falsely stated that Democrats support abortions in the third trimester and after birth” in an immature political move to win over pro-life voters despite the fact that no state in the nation allows for post-birth termination. Though Trump has neither denied nor agreed to sign a national abortion ban, he has stated that he believes it to be a state-level issue rather than a federal one, dooming women in anti-abortion states that he could easily provide with medical care. Harris on the other hand “committed to signing a bill to protect the right to abortion across the U.S.” and despite her false accusation that Trump would ban abortion nationwide, was a more attractive candidate to many women (Markham et al., 2024). Though Harris proved just as willing as Trump to resort to petty lies in order to garner support, her promise to defend women’s rights rather than turn a blind eye to them rightfully earned her massive support from progressive communities.

The question of the importance of human rights following Trump’s election also greatly concerns immigrant communities, communities who unlike queer Americans and women have felt the direct wrath of Trump’s administrative policies before. Trump has boldly claimed that during his presidency he will restore his 2019 “Remain in Mexico” plan, requiring asylum-

seekers to stay behind the U.S.-Mexican border until after their cases are processed (Markham et al., 2024). While the plan itself seems only a mild bother for hopefuls seeking asylum, new Trump and ICE policies suggest a whole-sale attack on illegal immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East, and on those harboring left-wing political beliefs. Though arresting, processing, and deporting 12 million undocumented peoples could cost over \$315 billion which in turn would cause a major economic reduction between 4% to 7%, Trump has claimed that mass deportations “have no price tag,” and has suggested that military intervention will be necessary to locate and detain illegal migrants (Pahnke, 2024). Additionally, in classic dog whistle form, the Trump administration has also announced plans to enact travel bans on people who “threaten our security,” such as those from the Gaza Strip, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as communists, socialists, and Marxists (Markham et al., 2024). Though these statements seem troublesome, it comes as a consolation to many that they are more likely political braggadocio than upfront promises. As online magazine *CounterPunch* reports “[American] immigration courts are woefully under-resourced, reporting a backlog of 3 million cases...Mass arrests will only further jam up the system” (Pahnke, 2024). Mass deportation, though a scary possibility, would be a massive waste of federal funds and tax-payer dollars, and would have a negative impact on the domestic economy. It would also be an impossible feat to locate every single illegal migrant or deport individuals based on political beliefs, something one cannot legally prove. Regardless, Trump’s repeated, brutal slander of the minority, including immigrants, trans people, and others that do not fit the stereotypical, all-American image contributes to dangerous, growing national intolerance, fear, and division instead of unity and shared goals for societal improvement.

While foreign affairs rank low on topics of voter concern, American relations with international powers will look quite different under Trump than under Harris; both would do what it takes to turn a profit, but only Trump will do so through blatant pugnaciousness (Brenan, 2024). In the instance of Harris's victory, she likely would have continued Biden's policy of binational negotiations regarding migration, crime, and trade issues with Mexico but under Trump -a president far more hostile to Mexico- it is more likely he will take the route of increased tariffs, the possible nonrenewal of the USMCA, and perhaps military intervention in organized crime to deal with his southern neighbors. Trump's strategy to protect domestic industry by increasing tariffs on international goods will also negatively impact Canada, a nation which sends nearly 75% of its exports to the United States, (Berg & Harnandez-Roy, 2024) and China, the U.S. 's third largest trading partner (Norton, 2024).

In terms of non-trade related foreign policy, Trump's plan of action regarding American-involved international wars is far less aggressive than Harris's but just as juvenile as his economic and human rights policies. In regard to the war on Ukraine, Trump twice stated during the September presidential debate that he wanted it to end but declined to state whether he would be more satisfied with a Russian victory or a Ukrainian victory. In comparison to Harris's promise to donate over \$1.5 billion to Ukraine and President Biden's authorization for Ukrainian forces to use long-range American missiles, Trump's lack thereof a plan seems pitiful but perhaps more cautious (Markham et al., 2024). Despite his reluctance to engage in the war in Ukraine, Trump has also taken a similar stance on the Israel-Palestine war as current President Joe Biden; Israel must be supported due to imperial, economic opportunities within the region. As Biden stated in a 2023 Tel Aviv speech "if Israel didn't exist, we'd have to create it," referencing America's material interest in Israeli and Middle Eastern resources such as oil

(Norton, 2024). Like Biden and Harris, Trump has demonstrated a steadfast devotion to defending American assets in Israel and surrounding nations, marking just one more similarity between the Republican and Democratic parties that vehemently claim to be so different.

Regardless of whether the donkey or the elephant cozies up in the White House each night, most mornings turn out the same for the majority of America. At the end of the day, the system is and always has been corrupt, with cartoonish dollar-signs obscuring the eyes of the Republican and the Democratic regimes. For the average American, life under Trump will be exactly the same as life under Harris could have been but for some, the 2024 election mattered more than any election because their individual rights were on the line. Though Trump has made no major policy-changes regarding the liberties of women, queer Americans, immigrants, or other marginalized groups, he has made himself known as someone willing to throw the minority under the bus if it suits his wealthy donors. Harris -though just as profit-hungry as her competitor- associated herself with like-minded, supposedly progressive millionaires and promised continued defense of minority rights despite her loyalty to the political and economic status quo. In an election between two incompetent evils where third parties and moderation have been entirely forgotten, who can one vote for? The majority sacrificed human rights for lower grocery prices and if it was the other way around, we might be better off, broke but free. Or perhaps at war with Russia.

Conclusion

As history has demonstrated time and time, there has yet to be a perfect government, and that includes modern American “democracy.” From the wealthy, wig-wearing Founding Fathers to the corrupt political bosses of the gilded age to present-day out-of-touch CEOs, the elite class has always had its claws in our government, throwing cash at the two major political parties in

return for legislative power. The federal government has always resembled an oligarchy and been glaringly flagrant in its undemocratic nature, yet most Americans would still consider our country a resplendent example of democracy. Though conclusions drawn in this paper may lead one to buy into hopelessness, to surrender to capitalist overlords, and to cynically accept the state of our political economy, one should never just lie down and accept the unacceptable. If the general population claims we live in a democracy, we should strive for such. On paper, the American democratic system based upon fair elections looks flawless and if Washington could be purged of capitalist influence, the idealistic government splashed across the pages of history textbooks could become a reality. While it is certainly easier said than done to talk about eliminating corporatism in our modern governmental system when we live in a world wholly built upon capital, we can start by deconstructing the system through honest rather than nationalistic education. Understanding the reality of the political economy is the first step towards dismantling the corrupt oligarchy hiding behind patriotic masks and empty promises.

Creating a democracy that is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people is no simple feat considering the immense established power of the elites and their valuable economic assets, but it can be done. Howard Zinn recalls in his 2003 narrative *A People's History of the United States* a hopeful quote once chanted by 20th century garment workers that modern Americans aspiring to change the system would do well to look to:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!
Shake you chains to earth, like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you-
Ye are many; they are few!

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