

Frozen America: How Special Interests Gridlocked Our Government

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Abstract

The United States of America prides itself as a shining example of democracy, where people can freely voice their opinions in government, and enjoy rights proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the Constitution. However, what happens inside Capitol Hill is far from democratic. Behind closed doors, special interest groups lobby Congress endlessly, leaving the government in constant gridlock, preventing any compromises from being reached, stalling agenda items, and freezing essential government functions. Furthermore, some of these special interests are bankrolled by the richest 1%, keeping the American populace divided over trivial issues and ignorant of the real issues affecting Washington. As we examine the Four Theories of American Government, it can be reasonably inferred that the US government is frozen by hyperpluralism. Under the current governance structure, large corporations and special interests get their way, while average Americans are left in the dust.

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What kind of government does America have? There are four theories on the American government: democratic theory, pluralist theory, hyper-pluralist theory, and elitist theory. Each theory has a different methodology to explain how the government is structured and places political power into the hands of one or multiple groups.

The first theory is the democratic theory. “Theories of majoritarian electoral democracy, as positive or empirical theories, attribute U.S. government policies chiefly to the collective will of average citizens, who are seen as empowered by democratic elections” (Gilens & Page, 2014). This is the traditional way of how the US Government portrays itself. Ideally, everyone has one voice and one vote to elect representatives to represent us at the federal level. Those representatives then speak on behalf of their constituents and propose bills accordingly to better the lives of the general public. Although this theory is popular among the American populace, some believe that the government does not represent them at all.

The second theory is the pluralist theory. “Pluralism is the theory that a multitude of groups, not the people as a whole, govern the United States. These organizations, which include among others unions, trade and professional associations, environmentalists, civil rights activists, business and financial lobbies, and formal and informal coalitions of like-minded citizens, influence the making and administration of laws and policy. Since the participants in this process constitute only a tiny fraction of the populace, the public acts mainly as bystanders” (Reynolds, n.d.). The pluralist theory assumes that individual citizen voices are weak on their own, so joining interest groups allows their concerns to be amplified as the organization lobbies the government on behalf of its members. Although lobbying is more common according to this theory, the government is still relatively democratic.

The third theory is the elitist theory. “Elite theory is a concept in philosophy, sociology, political science, and economics that claims that a select few individuals hold a majority of power and control over society. This elite group is often policymakers and leaders who control the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of society. For example, it may include business leaders, government officials, members of the military, influential media personalities, or the wealthy” (Milton, 2023). The elitist theory takes teachings from Marxism and assumes that people are divided between socioeconomic classes, and states that an elite minority control most of the power compared to the much larger working class.

The final theory is the hyper-pluralist theory. In a way, it is similar to the pluralist theory, but it turns pluralism completely on its head.

It is simply not the case that a host of diverse, broadly-based interest groups take policy stands—and bring about actual policies—that reflect what the general public wants.

Interest groups as a whole do not seek the same policies as average citizens do. “Potential groups” do not fill the gap. Relatively few mass-based interest groups are active, they do not (in the aggregate) represent the public very well, and they have less collective impact on policy than do business-oriented groups—whose stands tend to be negatively related to the preferences of average citizens. These business groups are far more numerous and active; they spend much more money; and they tend to get their way (Gilens & Page, 2014).

Because there are so many interest groups lobbying the government, the government has to either choose a side and anger the other side or do nothing. In many cases, nothing is done, and the government is left in gridlock. This is the current state of our government, and this is how the special interest groups froze it into gridlock.

American Government: An Institutional Approach

To understand how to approach American government, one must know two main ways to study government. The first way is the institutional approach. “The institutional approach in political science is the method that focuses on various governmental systems. This studies how power is regulated in a particular political system, i.e. through duties, rights, economic organization, and, to some degree, cultural codes and values” (What Is the..., n.d.). This is often a straightforward approach since the US government consists of three different branches (legislative, executive, and judicial) with multiple institutions within them that do certain tasks. Because of the straightforward nature of the institutional approach, it is popularly used in schools and textbooks to teach about government.

However, there is a second way to study government. The second way to study government is the structural approach. “The structural approach is a significant tool when analyzing political systems. It frames the social, economic, legal, and political connections that shape a society. By delving into these relationships, you gain a deeper understanding of the functions and consequences of different political structures” (Structural Approach..., n.d.). This approach focuses more on how economics influences government institutions but can confuse government research. “Critics argue that the Structural Functional Approach struggles to account for social and political change effectively. It is argued that this approach is static and doesn't accommodate changes within a system over time effectively” (Structural Approach..., n.d.). The structural approach already assumes that the system of government does not work due to the economic system in place while failing to account for other government institutions that are still working. Also, the structural approach conflates studying politics and economics together, which makes government research challenging, as they are two separate subjects.

There is a reason why the institutional approach touches on politics and economics separately. In the textbook *Magruder's American Government*, a book considered to be institutional by structuralists, the book only defines capitalism and tends to focus on government institutions, saying, "Capitalism is an economic system in which individuals are free to own the means of production and maximize profits. Many aspects of capitalism will be familiar to you because the United States and most other nations in the world today have adopted this economic system" (Shea, 2023, p.628). The institutional approach usually teaches about government and economics separately because they are completely separate subjects. Government focuses on the work that agencies and institutions do daily, while economics focuses on how a national market works, as well as how businesses use the factors of production to create and sell products. This is why American high schools have separate textbooks and separate classes to teach about government and economics. However, there are instances where government and economics intersect, so the book, nonetheless, has sections dedicated to how the government influences and acts on the economy.

Structuralists criticize the institutional approach for failing to adequately explain how the government affects the economy, or vice versa, when in fact, institutionalism does. *Magruder's American Government* has an entire chapter on how the government interacts with the economy, titled "Fiscal and Monetary Policy".

The Federal Government tries to support [the American free enterprise system] by attempting to ensure fairness in the marketplace, and, with it, the health and well-being of both consumers and workers... In addition to fostering competition and entrepreneurship, both the executive and legislative branches help set fiscal and monetary policy. To this

end, a number of independent agencies within the executive branch have [important roles] in the regulation of economic activities (Shea, 2023, p.639).

The textbook continues this chapter by explaining the functions of key government agencies, such as the Federal Reserve, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and the Department of Labor, to name a few. Moreover, the chapter continues with headlines explaining governmental fiscal and monetary policies. Even with such explanations, some structuralists complain that *Magruder's* explanation is too basic, and doesn't explain enough about government and the economy. These structuralists claim that a more complex dive into the American economic system is necessary to truly understand America's political system. However, for an average high school civics class, basic explanations are necessary to introduce and teach someone who knows little about how the government works. Institutionalism simplifies and streamlines, while structuralism overcomplicates.

On the world stage, America is portrayed as a democratic capitalist state, but structuralists claim that capitalism is incompatible with democracy. However, an institutional approach would disagree, and say that democratic capitalism does work in a free society. "Viewed as a means to the end of political freedom, economic arrangements are important because of their effect on the concentration or dispersion of power. The kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it separates economic power from political power and in this way enables the one to offset the other." (Friedman, 2003, p. 94). This, once again, showcases how government and economics are more or less separate.

Special Interests & Hyperpluralism

Earlier, we mentioned that the US government is stuck in a hyper-pluralist state, but how did we get there? The answer lies within the special interest groups. A special interest is “a collection of people who share certain views on public matters and work to shape public policy to their benefit. They try to persuade public officials to respond to their positions favorably” (Shea, 2023, p.538). Most interest groups have specific focuses, like labor unions, trade associations, economic organizations, etc. These groups lobby government institutions, especially Congress, to tailor bills to fit their agendas or to get an “unfavorable” measure struck down. The problem with special interest groups is that they are always seeking to grow and expand their influence, and as a result, there’s now at least one special interest for any imaginable cause in each sector of society, from economic powerhouses to specialized professionals to retirees, etc. Jonathan Rauch’s *Government’s End* explains how this phenomenon in the US government came to be.

As groups became bigger and more numerous, they also, not surprisingly, started taking up a large share of the economic space... These [special interest] groups represent every conceivable collective interest... The groups engage in every conceivable kind of activity, including, but not limited to, educating, licensing, confabbing, holding contests, setting standards... Sooner or later, however, someone in a group usually figures out that it would be worthwhile to seek what Mancur Olson called a collective good: some benefit that the members can obtain from nonmembers by lobbying and agitating as a group (Rauch, 1996, p. 46).

Over time, the political landscape has become flooded with special interests around every corner of the governmental process, and the groups lobby the government relentlessly, believing that

each one is serving the public interest, while, ironically, stalling what the people want passed in the government. Rauch continues, stating,

...These [special interest] groups are just as dedicated to transferring resources as any other group is. When they lobby, they want society to divert more resources to some activity they like and away from some activity they don't like... It is completely legitimate for [special interest] groups to say, and believe, that they serve a broader public interest... The corporate lobbies that pursue profits and the narrow groups that chase subsidies neither admit nor, usually, believe that they're crassly hunting money. Automakers that lobby against environmentalists see themselves as saving jobs threatened by unreasonable demands. Textile companies that seek import barriers see themselves as protecting low-wage workers and strengthening a vital American industry... and on and on (Rauch, 1996, pp. 48-49)

The preceding argument may seem structuralist, but it does line up with the institutionalist approach. "...Some interest groups have an influence far out of proportion... to their importance or contribution to the public good... Many groups do not in fact represent all of the people for whom they claim to speak" (Shea, 2023, p. 542). As more and more interest groups grow and multiply, they start forgetting about their original mission, and start chasing money and benefits, or outright seeking to kill legislative measures outright, leading to the political process to being stalled.

This problem has only gotten worse in recent times. Many special interests run political action committees (PACs) and Super PACs, serving as the political arms of the special interests (Shea, 2023, p. 608). PACs raise money for or against candidates and ballot measures, and will spend that money on a candidate's campaign, or run advertisements on TV, newspapers,

billboards, etc. Normally, the system has laws in place to cap the amount of political money spent, like the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971, and the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002. The BCRA had a provision that outlawed campaigning by nonpartisan groups within certain timeframes before general elections and primary elections. However, these limits were removed by a conservative majority in the Supreme Court in 2010, opening up the floodgates for all sorts of campaign money, from “soft” money, to “dark” money. “In a 5-4 decision, the Court ruled that unions and corporations were entitled to spend money from their general treasuries (without the use of PACs) on federal elections” (Shea, 2023 pp. 615-616); (*Citizens United v. FEC*, 2010). This meant that now special interests could spend unlimited funds on elections, no matter the time in the campaign season, leading to more potential cementing of gridlock in government.

Elections 2024: The Biden-Trump Rematch

As the 2024 US Election season is gearing up, it appears to be a rematch between incumbent President Joe Biden and disgraced former President Donald Trump. Both candidates claim to change America’s status quo, but will the status quo change, depending on the winner? In a dictionary, the status quo is defined as “the existing state of affairs” (Merriam-Webster). Currently, the status quo in America is viewed as a clash between the liberal Democratic Party and the conservative Republican Party for control over a democratic capitalist nation. However, the state of democracy is constantly put into question because of the government being stuck in gridlock due to special interest hyper-pluralism. The Democrats and Republicans portray each other as the problem, and that voting for their side will bring change. No matter who wins the election in November, the status quo will only change minimally, if at all.

America's Political Spectrum: Where's the Left?

If we were to look at the Political Compass, we would see that Democrats and Republicans are actually politically close to each other, compared to other political party rivalries in other countries, more notably European countries. “Our essential point is that Left and Right, although far from obsolete, are essentially a measure of economics. As political establishments adopt either enthusiastically or reluctantly the prevailing economic orthodoxy — the neo-liberal strain of capitalism — the Left-Right division between mainstream parties becomes increasingly blurred. Instead, party differences tend to be more about identity issues. In the narrowing debate, our social scale is more crucial than ever” (politicalcompass.org, 2023). On the Political Compass, both the Democrats and the Republicans fall on the authoritarian-right quadrant, with the Republicans leaning slightly more right and authoritarian. For individual candidates, President Biden and Donald Trump are also both in the authoritarian right quadrant, however, Biden is slightly closer to the center compared to Trump.

When it comes to party platforms, both parties appear to have different visions for America's future, at least on paper. Democrats tend to portray themselves as fighters for equality. “Democrats across the country are working hard to build a better America. We're fighting to build an economy that works for everyone by lowering costs for working families and investing in the middle class. Democrats are dedicated to ensuring a stronger and more just future for every American” (Democratic National Committee, 2019). On the other hand, Republicans portray themselves as upholding “traditional” values and protectors of freedom. “Republicans believe in liberty, economic prosperity, preserving American values and traditions, and restoring the American dream for every citizen of this great nation. As a party, we support policies that seek to achieve those goals. Our platform is centered on stimulating economic

growth for all Americans, protecting constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms, ensuring the integrity of our elections, and maintaining our national security. We are working to preserve America's greatness for our children and grandchildren” (Republican National Committee, 2020). Despite these promising words from the major political parties, some argue that not much will change in American politics, no matter which party controls the government. However, while the Democrats are staying mostly the same, Republicans appear to be shifting even further to the right and up, perhaps even going out of the boundaries of the normal Political Compass.

January 6th & Project 2025: The Republican Creeping Towards Fascism

When Joe Biden became President-Elect at the end of the 2020 elections, then-President Trump refused to concede, and tried every possible avenue to overturn the results of the election. Trump filed many lawsuits challenging the results of the 2020 election and failed virtually every single one (Sherman & Valverde, 2021). He also tried to get fake electors to certify falsified electoral votes to attempt to win the Electoral College (Cohen & Cohen, 2022). Finally, when that also failed, Trump decided to incite an insurrection against the government to stop the certification of the electoral votes. On January 6th, “[A pro-Trump] mob broke into the Capitol, ransacked offices, and left widespread destruction in their wake. Their actions forced lawmakers to suspend certification of the presidential election results until later that evening, after the Capitol had been cleared of the danger” (Shea, 2023, p.187) In the aftermath of the attack, Donald Trump was impeached for a second time for “incitement of insurrection” by the House of Representatives but was later acquitted 43-57 in the Senate.

Later on, the House of Representatives formed the January 6th Select Committee to investigate the details of the insurrection, how it happened, and why it happened. On December

22nd, 2022, the Select Committee released its final report, which includes 845 pages of evidence that the January 6th Insurrection was not an accident.

In the Committee's hearings, we presented evidence of what ultimately became a multi-part plan to overturn the 2020 Presidential election. That evidence has led to an overriding and straight forward conclusion: the central cause of January 6th was one man, former President Donald Trump, whom many others followed. None of the events of January 6th would have happened without him (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, 2024).

In the Select Committee's Final Report, symbolic criminal charges were recommended to the Department of Justice, which includes conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding, and conspiracy against rights. (Diaz, 2023) As of 2024, the Justice Department has gone ahead with some of the indictments, and the court case against Donald Trump is still pending.

Finally, there's the case of Project 2025, a campaign initiative created by the Heritage Foundation laying down the groundwork in case of a 2nd term for Donald Trump.

With a nearly 1,000-page "Project 2025" handbook and an "army" of Americans, the idea is to have the civic infrastructure in place on Day One to commandeer, reshape and do away with what Republicans deride as the "deep state" bureaucracy, in part by firing as many as 50,000 federal workers... The unprecedented effort is being orchestrated with dozens of right-flank organizations, many new to Washington, and represents a changed approach from conservatives, who traditionally have sought to limit the federal government by cutting federal taxes and slashing federal spending. Instead, Trump-era conservatives want to gut the "administrative state" from within, by ousting federal

employees they believe are standing in the way of the president's agenda and replacing them with like-minded officials more eager to fulfill a new executive's approach to governing (Mascaro, 2023).

Project 2025 appears to be a plan to completely overhaul the US government in plain sight. Assuming Trump decides to follow this plan, we could truly see the government's end if federal employees are fired en masse and replaced with like-minded individuals. This could give special interests a chance to further embed themselves into the US government, as if they were not already embedded in the first place. In this case, the status quo of liberals vs conservatives in government could be replaced by unquestioning loyalty to the President, which is not only undemocratic and authoritarian, it is a descent into possible fascism.

Conclusion

To wrap up, the government of the United States is constantly stuck in a gridlocked hyper-pluralist state, with special interest groups lobbying both sides, leaving important bills and measures unfinished or forgotten. This state of government has only been made worse by the *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) case to the Supreme Court, flooding our political system with dark money and bribery in broad daylight. Where can we go from here? Well, we can start by asking what kind of government do we want? The current state of affairs is not a stable method of running a government that is supposed to watch over 340 million Americans.

What we need is a return to regular pluralism in government and reinstate our nation's campaign finance laws. Furthermore, we must push Congress to adopt stronger regulations to keep the special interests in check, so they can stop gridlocking the government. Advocating for greater transparency and accountability will help to free up government resources to finally tackle key issues and allow our elected officials to tend to the needs of the constituents.

This can be achieved through grassroots movements to support candidates who will reform and restore campaign finance laws, as well as those who will put the people first instead of the special interests. This way, we can finally remove dark money out of politics and rein in the special interests, staying one step ahead of local and national politics and continuing our task as the public of building a more perfect union. Until then, we have a long way to go.

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