

**The Death of Democracy and a Plea for Its Rebirth**

Shealyn Higgins

Department of Social Studies, College Park High School

US Government

Teacher: John Kropf

December 15, 2023

### **Abstract**

Democracy is crumbling under the weight of corporate corruption. Capitalism and the status quo are protected by the leaders of a so-called democracy at the expense of the well-being and lives of its citizens. The ruling class have learned to hide their influence, resulting in a population that, at large, refuses or is unable to acknowledge the harms of capitalism upon democracy, despite decades of historical precedence and increasingly dire current conditions. However, the upcoming election, in all its corporate glory, has many Americans paying closer attention, and the wide-spread dissatisfaction with both candidates has the public beginning to question the merits of a system that would dare to present such inadequate options at all. The 2024 Presidential election promises disappointment, even disaster, yet in this catastrophe is borne the strengthening of a movement that calls for the removal of capitalist power and influence. Perhaps in the wake of the coming election the country will finally be able to see the suffocation capitalism inflicts on democracy and the inaction and complicity of the government in its doing so and arise to reclaim the power promised to the people by the founding principles and laws of the nation.

## **The Death of Democracy and a Plea for Its Rebirth**

“The government does not care. We, the people, must help each other!”

- Seth Tobocman

Many have sought to define the United States' style of government. Children in schools are taught to celebrate the established system and all are led to believe in the truth and justice of American Democracy. Yet children grow up and are faced with economic and political realities that call into question the sanctity with which American democracy is treated. In light of the 2024 Presidential election, more Americans than ever are faced with a crisis of faith and are called to question the legitimacy of the claims that a democracy reigns justly over the American public.

There are four theories of American government: democracy is just one. A democratic system follows the will of the people. Supposedly, Americans live underneath a representative system. In the current political and social climate, many Americans don't feel this is accurate to what actually takes place in the United States. So, what about the other theories? The first is pluralism, which argues that individually, voters have little to no political power, but by forming groups or organizations, they can shift social and political influence enough to effect change. Hyperpluralists follow a similar school of thought, but argue these groups often end up clashing with one another. For example, a group fighting for reproductive rights may be matched in strength and ability by a group fighting to restrict reproductive rights. The result is a stagnant political landscape where organizations are unable to effect change. Finally, the last theory argues that no one person or group of ordinary citizens holds power in the US, and in fact, all political power has been aligned with an elite class. In light of the current socio-economic status of America, it has become harder and harder to find evidence of any citizen or group holding significant power, eliminating the possibility of any other theory besides elite class theory from accurately explaining the American political sphere and who dominates it. As the upcoming election will inevitably prove, Americans live under the ruling 1%, the capitalist, corporate elite: capitalism has transformed our treasured democracy into a plutocracy.

## **The Subtle Corruption of Capitalism**

Capitalism is often hailed as a champion of democratic principle. The name “free market”, which is a moniker capitalism is often given, certainly seems to lend itself to such a title. Hardly is capitalism suspected of impeding the democratic processes of the nation, or at least, this is the assumption that is purported by the leaders of the country and its government institutions. This idea that capitalism operates separately from or in harmony with the principles of government requires an institutional approach to studying the function of the US government. However, institutional approaches fail to acknowledge that however distressing, it is an irrefutable fact that capitalism greatly influences and impacts the United States government. A structural analysis of capitalism reveals that the economic system smothers democracy by allowing the interests of the nation’s elite to control the United States government, breeding inequality while simultaneously restricting the democratic means the people should have at their disposal to resolve this inequality, thus retaining elite, capitalist power.

Institutional approaches to studying government examine the institutions of government. It relates how these various institutions work, or perhaps more accurately, how these various institutions are *supposed* to work. However, the institutional approach lacks context. It is unable to recognize the significant effects of capitalism on American society and government, and as such, is unable to properly assess the functions of our government. This failure is evident in our very own U.S. Government textbooks used at College Park High School, in which capitalism is mentioned less than ten times throughout the entire text. Furthermore, lacking in these short mentions is any sort of critical analysis of capitalism. The text says of the economic system, “capitalism is based on freedom of choice” (Shea, 2023), which is an aggressive oversimplification of how capitalism operates, and seems to draw the implication that capitalism is a system that is in support of the supposedly democratic ideals of the nation. In fact, this could not be further from the truth. Corporate capitalism has never conformed to the ideals of

democracy. One book that articulates a structural approach to studying the U.S. government only briefly describes Capitalism in four short pages yet still refuses to shy away from the harsh realities of the capitalist system. The text notes that not only was the rise of the corporate system in America always accompanied by a government that supported elites, so too were the conditions for the working man ones that were always either dangerous or exploitative and totally without opportunity for democratic processes to improve or resolve these conditions (Parenti 1996). In one specific example from the era of Great depression, the book describes certain working conditions in capitalist settings as such:

“...thought and speech control so intense in some plants that workers never spoke except to ask or give instructions, inability to question deductions from paychecks, beatings by strikebreaking Pinkertons and thugs, and compelled acquiescence to the searches of their homes by company men looking for stolen articles” (Parenti 1996).

Any one of these things enforced by the U.S. government would be in contradiction with a citizen’s rights, including the first amendment right to free speech or the fourth amendment right to protections against unreasonable searches. Yet in a corporate setting, for decades such violations were widely accepted as normal. Of course, many who argue in favor of capitalism would argue that today such conditions are no longer prevalent in the U.S., that these conditions, horrible as they may be, from a century ago do not exist in the modern workplace. However, this ignores the fact that capitalist systems have always operated on the basis of corporate power exploiting their workers in order to turn a profit, and that it is the very nature of capitalism which encourages such behaviors, as capitalism is a system which is without mercy for the working class, and which hails the dollar as its god.

The blind faith in the merits of modern capitalism and the belief in its independence from influencing the government of the United States requires ignorance of historical precedence. Furthermore, this faith dangerously underestimates how capitalism upholds the power of the elite and how much of a threat this power is to American democracy. According to *Democracy*

*for the Few*, the United States has always been plagued with corporate influence. As early as the revolutionary days was capitalist power resented by those of democratic ideals, and this influence remained steady and only continued to grow at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Parenti 1996). Furthermore, it may be relevant to note that the power of the corporation has become synonymous with the power of the elite, and henceforth, it may be assumed that corporate power can often be compared almost to aristocratic power, which certainly was of higher global influence during the American revolution. Thus, we see the beginnings of what appears to be a paradox between capitalism and democracy, the latter of which spurns aristocratic power. Capitalism is often pointed out by structuralists to be contradictory to democracy. In a recent article, the author writes of democracy and capitalism, “one believes in a completely equal distribution of political power, ‘one man [sic] one vote,’ while the other believes that it is the duty of the economically fit to drive the unfit out of business and into extinction” (Street 2006). Capitalism totally rejects the principles of democracy, pushing not for total political equality but for a cutthroat system that gives power to those with wealth, pushing people into totally unequal sects where a few at the top hold all the capital, and therefore, all the wealth. And yet we are told the system is “fair” because, in theory, anyone should be able to claw their way to the top (taking out some innocent people on their climb to the acme, of course).

This corporate influence in America was obvious in decades which enjoyed corporate giants such as the railroad barons. One can also “the same government that had not a dollar for the indigent (poverty being a matter best left to private charity) gave 21 million acres of land and \$51 million in government bonds to the few railroad financiers”. This is a singular example of historic precedence of government aiding the interests of capitalists, indicating that the so-called laissez-faire economic system enjoyed in the U.S. is perhaps not as government-free as it is sometimes idealized to be. The government has often found itself in bed with corporate power. Again, perhaps historical precedent does not necessarily mean that modern capitalism enjoys

the same corrupt government that the railroad owners of the 1800s were able to abuse. But to assume so would be to ignore the more than two centuries that the American government has been in the pocket of corporations and capitalists and would also ignore the obvious fact that capitalist elites still hold power, they just do so more subtly today. Even in eras of progress where it seemed capitalist power was finally being put in some kind of check were corporations simply reforming their influence to be less obvious. The author notes that Presidents hailed as stepping up to regulate corporate giants really never made a concerted effort to do so as assumed. Teddy Roosevelt, for example, is said in the book to have both condemned unions and made himself accessible to capitalist elites, despite being “hailed as a ‘trustbuster’”. Policies that now may have been remembered as harming big business actually were still catered to the interests of corporations. Corporate powers simply changed strategy, and pushed for legislation that still suited their designs (Parenti 1996).

For example, today if corporations want to avoid particularly annoying regulations or legislation in the US, they simply take their production out of the country and find labor somewhere else where it can be more easily exploited. When analyzing the effects of economic globalization and its effects on the power of labor, one can see “globalization brings with it ever expanding opportunities for relocation to other countries—and this adds to corporate leverage and the capacity to threaten departure unless demands are met” (Alperovitz 2003). The elites have the means to move their productions from the country, even when this comes at the expense of democratic power in the economy and the livelihoods of American citizens. Of course, it's not the policy of capitalists to bow down to ideals of the American government but instead to do anything to turn a profit. Even now politicians still rest in the clutches of corporate interest. It is also true that money is necessary to be elected, so if you want to be in government, you better either have wealth already or find yourself someone that does. Capitalists give politicians money, which they need to get elected, and are thus expected to fulfill corporate wishes. However, their position demands they represent the people who have

interests that contradict those of corporate elites. Thus, there is a Catch-22 in American government, where politicians find it difficult to become elected without succumbing to corporate influence. Furthermore, not only are most politicians unwilling to throw off corporate power, but the pool also provides these funds is small. The author writes, "There are 100,000 people in this country who give virtually all the money spent in political campaigns" (Tabb 2006). The external, elite group that commands such important political power is terrifyingly small, and their interests come at the expense of everyone else. In light of such realities, the conditions of the 1800 in which nearly all wealth was concentrated into the hands of only 10% of the population who subsequently exercised such wealth to command political power no longer seem irrelevant and archaic (Parenti 1996). In fact, some authors argue that corporate power has actually been increasing in modern times. The author writes, "For the past couple of decades... corporate will has been enthroned, increasingly reigning supreme over every aspect of our lives—economics, politics, culture, and nature itself" (Hightower 2006). This argument only gains merit as the government continues to make strides that support or increase elite capitalist power while ordinary people's bids for reform are ignored, year after year.

So historical precedence has become modern reality. The influence of capitalist and corporate power is prevalent. Yet still it may seem we can cling to the hope that as time passes, capitalist power lessens. This is not the case, and it is the same myth that provides the illusion that the elite have any less power than they did 200 years ago. The government still has not taken action to control the excessive influence of capitalists. In fact, as recently as 2010 corporations were invited by the Supreme Court to increase their influence by giving money towards politicians in the case *Citizens United v. Fec*. The decision ruled in favor of corporate spending towards politicians, removing previous restrictions on spending on the grounds that these restrictions were a violation of first-amendment rights. One article notes that these restrictions were placed in order to prevent corruption within the government, and that far from provoking little change in America's political landscape, "The ruling has ushered in massive



increases in political spending from outside groups” which has in turn increased the power of the capitalist elite within politics (Lau 2019). Already it was established that corporate influence could be purchased and not even two decades ago has our “modern” government removed the meager safeguard that had attempted, even if weakly, to protect against such corruptive influence. This seeks to prove not only the inability of capitalism to coexist with democratic government, but how it has instead produced a government hostile towards ensuring the protections of democracy against the corruption of capital.

Blatantly, our government has undermined democratic processes in favor of corporate power. One author tries to dissect why Americans are content, or perhaps even ignorant, accepting the reality of a government that will not protect their rights, arguing that within America, economic growth (represented in the Gross National Product) has become “the standard for ‘progress’”. The author says the American people are told that economic upturn is the standard for the nation’s success, and thus, no matter the harm of where this “progress” takes us, it is ultimately in the best interests of the nation. This shows how capitalism has in a sense overthrown democracy. If the nation’s success hinges on the increase of wealth and thus the increase of capital, then what use have we for democracy? We can simply let capitalism run the American public over like a train in the quest for glorious, glorious money. Boyer says of this phenomenon and its devastation on democracy, “there is no reason to organize with others to take control, for to apply democracy to the economic system is the supreme heresy” (Boyer 2003). Evident perhaps is capitalism’s inherent anti-democratic properties is in the clash between corporate power and unions. Unions are a democratic force within the hierarchical capitalist society, representing the will of the worker, thwarting power from the Boss of the Company. Historically, for example, it never was the government that enacted regulations on corporations but the power of the union which forced their hand into doing so. Yet even so, one author notes the lack of a strong union presence in the USA. The author examines how the highest percentage of worker participation in unions in the US was just under 35%, and how it

has decreased to a startling “mere 12.9 percent in 2003” (Alperovitz 2006). The hostility of the capitalist elite to unions in itself is unsettling but not surprising: unions undermine the power of the elite by forcing them to reduce exploitative practices. However, if we are truly a democracy, how is it that the economic system which controls so much of our daily lives finds itself with such a meager democratic check on elite power? If capitalist systems are inherently undemocratic, and capitalism deeply affects US society, and there is little to no democratic process within that system, how can we say capitalism exists in harmony with democracy? Its very nature denies such coexistence, and there are few safeguards within the system to fall back on to wrestle such a harmony into actually existing. The lack of union presence in the US is a triumph of capitalism. In one analysis of this phenomenon, author discusses the need of the corporate elite keep the American public complicit in their own oppression, writing:

The secular aristocracy today clings to its sustaining myths, for those myths provide the base of its legitimacy, without which the amassing of wealth begins to seem indefensible. The core myth— that shareholder returns must be maximized—is thus considered unchallengeable (Kelly 2006).

The corporate elite have evidently found, in the modern age, that obscuring the nature of their power has proved effective in diminishing the democratic power of labor. Capitalist elites have convinced the people of the necessity of capitalism, of the necessity of the elite hoarding wealth, of the dangers of dissenting, and of the apparent unanimity of democracy and capitalism. These perceptions are designed to suppress democracy. One author writes of the struggle to maintain democratic power in a country where the elite are constantly working to diminish it, and furthermore expresses that historical precedence has always indicated the need of the people to fight tooth and nail to receive the democracy that was promised to them in the constitution. The author asserts how the wealthy elite are enemies to this fight, writing, “the moneyed powers relentlessly press to gain supremacy and assert their private will over the majority” (Hightower 2006). Capitalism, lorded over by the corporate elite as it is, has always been, and likely always

will be, the enemy of democracy, and to deny such a blatant fact would be to deny over 200 years of US history.

The government is complicit in this manipulation of the public to both favor capitalist interest and to quell any hesitance or resistance in its mission to increase the influence of the corporation and the capitalist. When our democracy fails due to the hold of elite, capitalist wealth in the government, we are told not to point the finger at capitalists but instead at a scapegoat. Usually this is found in the form of a minority, or an enemy of capitalism. One author writes of an example of the latter in which the fear of Communist takeover in the early twentieth century distracted the American public from a violation of their rights, in which the working class was targeted, and the government used the fear as an excuse to “violently [mistreat] strikers” (Parenti 1996). In recent years, the distraction of the blame-game has become more evident in party divides, in which Republicans proclaim Democrats are to blame for the downfall of the country while Democrats scream back the same. Democrats, which have often been hailed as the “liberal” party, have become more and more entrenched in hypocrisy in recent years. As pointed out by one author, democrats “campaign on the platform that they can run the system better and hope that this mild promise will attract voters and bring rich individuals and corporations to back them”. Despite promising to remedy the economic woes that are brought on by capitalism and its corporate leaders, they too receive money from elite capitalists and are therefore just as indebted to be swayed to the influence of corporations as the Republicans. *The Power of the Rich* notes how this influence results in Democrats bending to the desires of the wealthy elite (Tabb 2006). Such, the facetious nature of our government is revealed. Politicians are complicit in the capitalist processes which slowly suffocate democracy, and they are complicit in manipulating the public into the belief of the harmony of American democracy and American capitalism. Politicians, too, would have you believe that the interests of the elite are being stalled, that there is *someone* in the government who is looking out for you, the working

man. However, when even the so-called “liberal” party finds itself bending to corporate control, it is clear that the capitalist elite have mastered the art of hiding their power.

The power of corporate interest, or more accurately *elite* interest, is evident even when the capitalist system totally fails. In the event of an economic crisis, it should be the responsibility of the government to serve the people, rather than the corporations that caused the economic crisis. Yet in 2008, the exact opposite happened. In another example of how the legacy of corporate interest becoming the national government’s priority over that of the people it was made to serve continues into the 21st century, the crash of the housing market exhibited the power of capitalists. The crisis was devastating, sometimes being recognized as the worst in the US since the Great Depression (Merle 2018). The collapse began with the housing market. In the years since, it has become evident that fraud, on the part of the banks, played a significant role in causing the crisis. One article describes the fraudulence as such:

...underwriters facilitated wide-scale fraud by knowingly misreporting key loan characteristics, credit rating agencies catered to investment banks by inflating their ratings on both mortgage-backed securities and collateralized debt obligations, originators engaged in mortgage fraud to increase market share, and real estate appraisers inflated their appraisals in order to gain business. (“Fraud and the Financial Crisis”, 2022).

The result was banks on the verge of collapse, and millions of working class, everyday people found themselves in a financial crisis. Who was it that the government then came to the aid of? The banks. The banks were given billions in government funding. The official US treasury website estimates the total bailout money to be somewhere around 475 billion dollars (“Troubled Asset Relief Program”). This would of course be money that originated in the pockets of the American people. Not only was it used to aid the corporations that caused the crisis, but it was also done so without providing genuine relief to the everyday and working class people the crisis had actually hurt. In fact, some company owners and CEOs took part of the bailout money

for themselves. Despite the evidence of fraud, there was no major flushing out of corruption by the government. One article notes that “No major bank CEOs were criminally charged with causing the financial crisis”. In fact, this same article notes that many of the large banks that were affected by the crisis stand today, in light of the bailouts, with significantly heavier pockets. Today, some banks have as much as a trillion dollars more now than they did before the crash in 2008 (Merle 2018). So, the system totally failed, and it did so because of corruption and greed within corporate power. Instead of the capitalist elite finally facing some regulation and consequences, they were given billions of dollars that originated from the very people who their disaster hurt the most. The 2008 economic crisis is an example of how corporate, capitalist power has stalled the democratic process. The law and the ideals of our government seemingly halt in the interest of elite power. It is one of the most blatant examples of the corruption of capitalism in the modern day.

So, the final question is answered: capitalism is unable to support a democratic society. Perhaps one of the greatest evils of modern capitalism is duping the American public into believing modern capitalism had ever given the working-class equal footing with the wealthy. Elite power has become so insidious as to hide from obvious view that when the average American is faced with financial distress, they question not the system that bred that distress but whatever issue or group the political and economic elites have selected for them to blame. Furthermore, these same elites have convinced America that capitalism is a system totally aligned with the values of democracy, so that its dominance within American society is not challenged by a populace that clings so tightly to their rights. However, structural analysis of capitalism reveals what institutional approaches turn a blind eye to: the corruption of capitalism and the power of the elites, and how these elites both historically and in modern eras thwarted democratic practices in favor of their own interests. Today, the threat to democracy comes within the subtlety of their doing so, and the complicity of our government of aiding and abetting them.

## **The Election and the True Face of American Government**

Just like that, four years have passed by, and it comes time for another Presidential election. It seems the winds are blowing in the direction of another showdown between Trump and Biden. In the coming months, most Americans will either draw themselves out of the battle for survival or, alternatively, lift their heads out of the sand to pay attention to American politics for something so crucial as the election for the President. Arguably most Americans will look forward to the election as a lose-lose scenario, with only a select, zealous few actually having a desire to see either candidate in office. In such a tense battle between Biden and Trump, questions about the American government are raised. Is the system that produced such hated, and arguably more similar than different, candidates actually a democracy? Of the four theories of American government, democracy is what most Americans are taught to answer when faced with the question, "What kind of government do we have?". However, the election provokes a crisis of faith, since it is abundantly clear neither candidate represents what voters want. Pluralism likely falls short, as it argues that groups of people can motivate change, and no such groups exist that hold enough power to make significant change in the country. Hyper-pluralism also lacks substance, since groups in America aren't just stagnant due to being equally matched with each other; any power that they may have is actively suppressed. No, there is exactly one active body that suffocates the power of the people and any collective power they may try to grasp, and that is the wealthy, the capitalists, the 1%, or what elite class theory describes. In the era of elections such as those between Trump and Biden, it becomes abundantly clear that America, under a capitalist economy, is being ruled over by a plutocracy.

The status quo has become the world on Atlas's shoulders to many Americans, the weight almost too much to bear. Arguably, most Americans write off this burden, waving off the increasing costs of living and ineffectiveness of government as just "the way things are". What, exactly, is the status quo, and how is it harming Americans?

Economically, the United States is under capitalism. In analyzing our government and

the political and social “status quo”, however, things get more sticky. On paper, the US is organized into a democracy. In reality, the economic system, inextricably linked to our government, distorts democracy into a mere symbol that hides the true power in the country: the top 1%, those who hold economic power. Under capitalism, the status quo has become plutocracy.

That isn't to say the country is totally without democratic process. Americans can, and have, used their power as the people in order to effect change that opposes the overreaching power of capitalists. In 2015, for example, voters in Maine strengthened election laws to “[strengthen] public financing, [tighten] requirements for donor disclosure, and [increase] penalties for candidates that violate the law”. These efforts, pushed forwards by ordinary working people, aimed to limit the influence of the wealthy in elections. In a similar spirit, since the passing of the supreme court decision Citizen United, millions of Americans have petitioned for the reversal of the case, showing a distaste for and willingness to work against the overreach of capitalist power (Mason 2016). This is just one example of many American stories of resistance. It would be foolish to say that Americans have no ability to make change. The power of the collective is evident, especially in forcing the hand of the government to allow its people, to whom it owes its authority, the ability to inform and shape public policy. However, capitalists and the wealthy in the US actively work to strangle this power in order to retain their own influence and authority. The effects of this effort to maintain power are found in the existing “status quo” and the necessity of Americans undermining this capitalist rule are seen in its devastating effects.

One of the most significant byproducts of the status quo is the exorbitant cost of living. Almost all Americans feel this increasing burden, and its rise is overwhelming, affecting the price of food, healthcare, housing and more; essentially, everything a person needs to live is becoming increasingly expensive. Americans feel these pressures even more acutely as their wages fail to rise with that of the costs of necessities. One article notes that “average hourly

earnings today are essentially the same as they were in 1970 when inflation is factored in". In comparison, "the average cost of undergraduate tuition has more than doubled when adjusted for inflation ... and per capita healthcare spending is close to five times higher". Necessities like healthcare are notoriously expensive in the US. How can we call ourselves a rich, free democracy when a person not being able to afford healthcare likely means they'll die? Furthermore, access to education becomes more difficult to attain every year as more and more students shy away from college out of fear of going into massive debt. The facts are plain and simple: Americans cannot keep up with rising costs, because they are literally not being paid enough to do so. They cannot afford the necessities. The result is that survival itself is becoming an uncertainty in the United States for the American public. Furthermore, the worker's ability to protect themselves against this predicament is limited in the increasingly union-hostile corporate environment of the US, with the trend pointing downward for Union influence and membership in America (Poole 2019).

Even more insidiously, the concern these types of economic trends should raise is often smothered by the media's tendency to focus on the "growth of the economy". For example, one article offers the solution that prices are not going back down, and that Americans should just get used to it, brushing past genuine concerns for the extreme prices of necessities like shelter, sustenance, and healthcare. It does so in favor of condescendingly suggesting that everyone has to get used to the fact that "your \$7 latte isn't magically going to be \$5 like it was in 2015" (Stewart 2023). Arguments such as these fail to address larger concerns, instead falling back on vague sentiments about economic growth while dismissing the fact that many Americans are now facing a reality in which they may not be able to feed themselves, afford healthcare in the case of getting sick, or put themselves or their children through further education. Supposedly the US is one of, if not the, richest countries in the world. But with so many Americans just barely scraping by, that begs the question, where is all the money going? Clearly, it's not being pointed at wages, at least, not in the capacity some sources would have the public believe.



In short, it's being funneled into the hands of the wealthy, with one source noting that "the wealth share of the top 1 percent has substantially increased, while the bottom 50 percent saw virtually no growth in their share" (Poole 2019) since the 1970s. This is done in a variety of ways, however, one of the most blatant and violent methods, as well as the one most inextricably linked to the US government is military spending.

The US Department of Defense has 1.5 trillion dollars at its disposal and plans to use at least 1.3 trillion dollars out of that budget, according to an official government website (Department of Defense 2023). One article estimates that "\$15 billion a month" is spent on foreign wars alone, and notes that "although the U.S. constitutes only 5% of the world's population, America boasts almost 50% of the world's total military expenditure, spending more on the military than the next 19 biggest spending nations combined" (Whitehead 2020). The sheer magnitude of what is spent in itself is staggering, and its implications are even more disquieting. The first and most obvious concern is that the huge amounts of money that go towards funding wars and imperialist ventures in other nations detract from social programs. Instead of the taxpayer dollar benefiting the taxpayer, the US is expanding its military influence. The government could afford to provide its citizens with healthcare, better education, affordable housing, but instead, chooses to pour money every year into the military industrial complex. The motivations for doing so also reveal the influence of capitalism and those at its helm. For example, many arms manufacturers in the US have a vested interest in military spending and wars the US can involve itself in becoming exacerbated because they will directly profit from such scenarios. After all, if conflicts are settled diplomatically and with less bloodshed, who will buy all those guns, tanks and rockets they're selling? This kind of relationship encourages American engagement and encouragement of wars and violence. Masquerading as spreading democracy and freedom, our government engages in wars and prolongs them, for the sake of profit, destroying thousands of lives in the process.

Beyond such specific and tangible reasons for capitalists to encourage the bloated military budget exists the very ideology of the US's global military presence, which it has been building since it emerged as the leading global superpower after World War II, which is modern imperialism. Imperialism is directly tied to capitalism and capitalist power. If imperialist ventures strengthen the military power of the US, then they simultaneously strengthen capitalist power. After all, imperialism is rooted in seeking capital outside of one's home country by procuring markets and production in the nations or states under imperial control or influence. The enormous government spending on the military thus directly benefits capitalists and the ruling class. Comparing how much the US spends on its military compared with everyone else in the world makes it obvious there's no feasible reason to be spending over a trillion every year, except for capitalist greed. Many Americans are aware to some degree of the gravity of this yearly expense and its cost to the American people and want the government to pump the brakes on military spending. One article reports that "More than six in 10 likely voters, including 80% of Democrats, want Congress to keep the military's budget at the level President Joe Biden and the U.S. Defense Department requested" indicating a disapproval for the ever-increasing expense of the US military. Furthermore, "[even] 51% of Republican voters said they do not think the military budget should be raised further". Most voters, even those that are traditionally associated with fully supporting expanded military budgets, are wanting military spendings to be capped at the very least, yet this important political opinion is completely ignored in favor of a capitalist-fueled agenda to protect the military-industrial complex at the expense of other social programs in the US (Poll: Likely Voters 2022).

All of this gives capitalists another tool of control over voters. No one can focus on shaping public policy holistically while being denied basic necessities. Further straining the burdens of the poor and impoverishing the middle class creates further opportunities to divide the working class. In assessing this dire economic situation and its effects on the election, my mother said to me, "People will vote for who they think will feed their families". It's a statement

that sums up how the ruling class utilizes these increasingly grim economic realities (that they engineer) not only to hoard wealth, but also to generate leeway in order to ascertain political power. If capitalists can first convince Americans that it's not a result of capitalism that they're slowly finding themselves crushed by the cost of living, they can just as easily present the issue as one that can be solved with a single election, a single leader, a single law. For example, in 2020, Trump was presented as a "man of the people" despite being a part of the 1%. Capitalists have convinced the country that the reason they can't afford things like milk, insulin, and homes is because of a brief economic downturn, or perhaps simply because that evil "other" party is in power: something that can be solved with the proper candidate, if you'll only give them your vote!

It can be deduced that a status quo consisting of capitalism and a ruling class of elite capitalists has proved to be nothing but detrimental to Americans, and that if the country wishes not only to survive, but to retain their democratic power, the necessity will be removing power and wealth from the plutocracy. The ruling class benefits from a divided working class, thus its unification is necessary for their overthrow. As the 2024 election approaches, Americans should be considering how candidates will affect the status quo, and need to face a more pressing question: with the status quo imposing dire conditions on Americans, should the effort to alter it really be pointed at the Presidential election?

The Presidential election has been orchestrated into a parade of pointing fingers and fanciful promises. Voters are poked and prodded in every direction, until the election seems to be at times critical and at others inconsequential. This coming election, the American public will seemingly be faced with the same choice they had in 2020, between Democratic party nominee Biden and the Republican Trump. However, despite what the Democrats and Republicans would have you believe, how different are the two parties, truly? And how much does each vote really matter in either direction?

The political compass is an assessment of a person's political ideology. Instead of just assessing social policy, it also takes into account a person's feelings about economic policy, creating a left and right on the x-axis for economic policy and the same on the y-axis for social policy, resulting in a four-quadrant compass. Joe Biden and Donald Trump both can be located in the first quadrant of the compass, appearing in a proximity that should concern voters, especially voters wanting to put their faith into a left-leaning political party. Their quadrant is for those right leaning economically (capitalism) and for those holding more authoritarian beliefs about how a government should run. In short, Biden and Trump, while having a little distance between them, are more similar than they are different, according to the compass. In fact, a majority of American politics takes place in this quadrant, with only a few politicians in America finding themselves barely outside its margins (Second Thought 2020).

What this means is that voters should be aware that whether they vote "democrat" or "republican", either way they are throwing their vote to an authoritarian-leaning capitalist. This shouldn't come as a shock, since Trump himself is a billionaire with a "net worth at \$2.6 billion" (Picchi 2023) who has come to be viewed as a power-hungry threat to American democracy, and Biden has found himself in the pockets of the 1% since the very beginning of his campaign, when he told a room full of billionaires that "Nothing would fundamentally change" should he be elected (Higgins 2019). The truth of the matter is, both Trump and Biden are in the hands and power of the top 1% in the country, and as such neither will be making any moves to disrupt the status quo of a capitalist system ruled over by plutocracy. However, the concern now seems to be that while Biden will remain stagnant, leaving the country to slowly crumble, Trump will actively erode the foundation of our democracy in order to further suppress the power of the people.

This is a valid concern. It would be ignorant to assume that since both Biden and Trump are tools of the current leaders of the status quo that absolutely nothing will change regardless if Trump or Biden wins. There is no denying that Trump's presidency gave rise to an alarming

increase in right-wing activity in America. Fascist, racist and alt-right groups were given confidence by a President that refused to condemn white supremacy. In fact, one article notes that in a post-Trump era, far right and white supremacist groups are making a concentrated effort to envelope themselves into Republican parties and local governments across the country (Pitt 2019). Minority communities of people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and women saw their rights threatened and, in some cases, outright denied or removed. Furthermore, many Americans came to see Trump's brazen nature in inviting neo-fascist groups and tendencies to gain traction and power as a threat to American democracy. When people's rights are on the line, it's insensitive at best, dangerously ignorant at worst to claim absolutely nothing would change should Trump get elected. These kinds of oppression are associated with capitalism and can be used as tools to keep the 1% in power, and as a member and agent of the wealthy elite, Trump's willingness to invite the evils of racism, homophobia, sexism, and xenophobia, to a name a few, into the government should come as no surprise. However, this fact doesn't erase the real harm another four years of Trumps will do to minority communities.

Biden is far from a preferable alternative, and frankly, almost all of Biden's supporters are aware of this. Many of those trying to generate backing for the current President continue to do so not on the basis of any of Biden's merits but simply on the argument that Trump is worse. One article writes that everyone is "perfectly clear that Biden and what he stands for are repugnant. There is not a single good reason to vote for him – except that not to do so will help Trump win a second term as President." The article then follows up by noting that once he's in office, those who voted for him should continue to make concerted efforts against everything he stands for (Brown 2020). What Biden stands for is hardly different from Trump, as he too is an article to be used by elite capitalists. Agendas supported and arranged by the capitalist elite go totally unopposed by Biden and Republicans alike, such as military spending, a lack of affordable healthcare, a lack of corporate regulation, and more. It was in fact Biden's four years of inaction with devastating consequences that have many who fear Trump more asking

Americans to vote for the Democratic candidate again. One article notes that lack of disparity between Trump and Biden, and at large, Republicans and Democrats in the instance of healthcare,

“According to the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine study in 2015, a conservative estimate is that 250,000 people yearly are dying from preventable conditions. Neither Congress nor the Executive Branch has an effort remotely up to the scale required to reduce this staggering level of mortality and morbidity.”

These kinds of conditions, created by the earlier mentioned status quo, are left unresolved by Biden. If he was a man for the people as he portrayed himself in his campaign, surely, he would have done better than Trump in attempts to remedy these startling statistics (Nader). In another example of Biden’s loyalty first to the ruling class in his support for Israel. An article posted by the US Department of Defense noted that “The United States will also continue to support its Israeli allies” (Garamone 2023). This support is of course coming in the form of money and weapons, with one article noting that Biden’s “administration began shipping weapons to Israel within hours of the Hamas attack on Oct. 7, and so far, has refused to release a full list of what those weapons are” (O’Brien, et al. 2023). In light of the alarming death toll in Palestine in what many are calling a genocide, Biden’s support to Israel and the recent US veto on a UN-proposed ceasefire in Gaza (Moench 2023) is making many voters hesitate to support a candidate that obviously is only marginally different from Trump politically. All of this makes it easy to see why Americans are deeply unsatisfied with the current choices for the election. Americans who support Trump refuse to see the danger he poses to what’s left of our democracy or are so right-wing they understand and support his policy. Everyone else either hates or at least strongly dislikes Biden, but hates Trump more, making ol’ Joe seem like the only other viable option. Both major parties seem ready to put forth candidates in the same vein of capitalist lap dog, no matter how they may pretend to be otherwise, and as such, they’ll use

the power entrusted to them by the American people to guard, loyally, the status quo engineered by the top 1%.

Unfortunately, most people write off voting for a third party or independent entirely. To an outsider unfamiliar with the American political system, this may come as a surprise, since third parties offer a more diverse range of political ideologies, identities, and viewpoints. In some cases, these candidates would probably appear to be leaders that more accurately represent the will of the people. For example, Cornel West is an independent candidate running for the Presidency in 2023. Denouncing corrupted capitalists and their power, West's campaign is "centered around health care, a living wage, housing, reproductive rights and "de-escalating the destruction" of democracy and the planet". Standing for a disruption of the current status quo that is suffocating so many Americans, he would likely gain a lot of support from Americans who continue to feel the mounting expenses of living in the US (McCarley 2023). The Green Party too is a notable option for Americans unsatisfied with the Democrats and Republicans. One article calls the Green Party "an international grassroots movement" that opposes "the militaristic corporate hijacking of the United States domestic and foreign policy, and its methods of imperialist oppression through open and covert warfare" and urges that the Green Party should be considered as a serious alternative to the corporate parties in power (Smith 2020). Others suggest that the formation of a new party may be in order, due to the Democrat's unwillingness to let any progressive ideas or efforts gain any traction. One article argues that "There is greater potential of building a party from the grassroots than from the top down", arguing the focus should not be on the Presidency but the careful construction of a foundation for a new party. It furthers this argument by pointing out that notable progressive figures in politics today gained their standing not in elections as ambitious as the Presidency but in city or state elections (Rall 2020). Evidently there are qualified candidates, willing to run, likely to more easily gain enthusiastic support from voters, because they represent more accurately what

voters actually want. It should come as no surprise then that the system was designed so that these parties would have slim to no chances at all of winning, ever.

The problem lies, at least, when it comes to the Presidency, in the election system itself. One article notes of the enduring nature of the Democratic and Republican parties, “[the] two have survived in part because of American electoral laws, which favor the existence of two and only two parties by making it very difficult for smaller ones to win elective offices” (Mandelbaum 2020). Our own high school textbook writes of the electoral system:

“Under the electoral college system, at least three possible scenarios can happen in any election: (1) the winner of the popular vote is not guaranteed the presidency; (2) electors are not required to vote in accord with the popular vote; and (3) any election might have to be decided in the House of Representatives.”

It should concern the American public that the electoral college makes it so difficult for third parties to gain significant power. It should also alarm them that the election for choosing the leader of the nation may not even come down to their vote: it may come down to the votes of a few chosen “electors”. How can America call itself a democracy if we cannot even vote for our own leader? The textbook also notes that the reason third parties have a difficult time gaining traction and the reason your vote may not even matter is “the winner-take-all feature of the electoral college system” (Shea, 2023). Even if a large portion of voters vote for one candidate, the majority leader in their state takes all their electorate votes. So, for example, if someone is in a state that traditionally votes red, for example, the most likely outcome is all their state’s electoral votes will be red too, and theirs won’t matter. What it means for keeping the Democrats and Republicans in power is that even if there’s a significant portion of third-party votes in a state, if it can’t beat out the Dems or Republicans, it’s washed away like it was never there at all. It’s ridiculous that this is how the election process is organized and yet the country still calls itself a democracy. If America wants to become an actual democracy, the electoral college and its winner-takes-all facet must be dismantled. It works to displace working class Americans from



power and facilitates making sure those who think they “should be” in power, i.e., the corporate elite, are. In this election system, Americans are unable to hold either party accountable in elections. Republicans are free to get bolder every year in how they deny Americans their rights and antagonize minority populations in America. On the opposing side, “with each presidential cycle, Democrats keep moving further and further to the political right” (McCarley 2023) because they can continually fall back on the platform “Well, at least we’re not the Republicans!” placing voters in a perpetual and ever-worsening Catch-22. Increasingly, Americans are faced with the reality that a diverse political landscape is non-existent in the US. One article sums up this phenomenon, saying of the two major political parties,

The Republicans and Democrats aren’t really two separate parties. They’re a single ruling party comprised of two large feuding factions which continually re-balance power and divvy up the spoils between themselves through a burlesque of “representative democracy” rigged, by force of law to preclude meaningful competition.

This lack of differentiation between the two parties, evidenced earlier in the concentration of American political figures to just one section of the political compass, should alarm Americans, because it signals a weakening of our democracy. Political diversity and representation is the heart of democracy, and the heart of America’s democracy is being choked by the uniform goals of the Democrats and Republicans in protecting the status quo and capitalist power (Knapp 2022). Furthermore, even if someone is hesitant to recognize that Democrats and Republicans are two sides of the same coin, the fact that “half of all US voters identify as politically independent” should prove more heartily that our democracy has failed to truly be representative, if half of the country no longer identifies as either Democratic or Republican (likely due to both party’s failing to actually represent voters). One article recognizes this lack of visibility for the country’s actual political identity by noting that, “in a truly representative democracy, half of our candidates should be third-party or independent candidates, with viable, visible and well-funded campaigns” (McCarley 2023).

The lack of power allotted to any party, group, and even the voter outside of the two main parties (which represent a singular body of elite power) disproves all theories of American government except elite class theory. There is no democracy, no pluralism, no hyper-pluralism: just the ruling capitalist class, who have convinced the country democracy resides in the “left and right” of the Democrats and Republicans. Yet if neither party answers to the will of the people and both reside firmly in the pockets of the top 1%, and no other political party better aligned and representative of the people’s will are then able to gain any sort of genuine political power, we cannot call the US a representative democracy.

Thus, the American public cannot count on the government to restore or protect their rights, nor can they expect the government to represent them as it is bound to do by the funding principles of democracy. It is up to us, the people, to unite, to organize, and to seize power however we can. Using the resources still available to us, and the fundamental rights still protected by law, we must restore democracy by ensuring that the government is actually representative of the people. Voters should be able to see a range of political candidates that represent the diverse political landscapes, and minorities should not be swept away in favor of the established capitalist elite. The people need to re-engineer the status quo to fit their needs. In doing so, the country must seriously consider the merits of maintaining a capitalist economy. In breeding the ruling elite, it has proved to be an active opponent to the processes of democracy, and the working class must consider and take upon its reformation in order to establish a true democracy. The power of capital must be ousted, and it needs to be replaced by the power of the people.

## References

- Alperovitz, G. (2006). *America beyond capitalism: Reclaiming our wealth, our liberty, and our democracy*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 1 – 77
- Brown, S. (2020, July 20). Imagine yourself with two abusive boyfriends . . . *CounterPunch.org*.  
<https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/07/20/imagine-yourself-with-two-abusive-boyfriends/>
- Boyer, W. H. (2006). *Myth America: Democracy vs. capitalism*. Apex Press.
- Fraud and the financial crisis. (n.d.). *American Economic Association*.  
<https://www.aeaweb.org/research/charts/financial-crisis-fraud-ten-years-evidence#:~:text=In%20the%20run%2Dup%20to,engaged%20in%20mortgage%20fraud%20to>
- Garamone, J. (2023, December 12). U.S. remains steadfast in support of Ukraine, Israel. *U.S. Department of Defense*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3615576/us-remains-steadfast-in-support-of-ukraine-israel/>
- Higgins, E. (2019, June 19). Vowing not to 'demonize' the rich, Biden tells billionaires 'nothing would fundamentally change' if he was elected. *Common Dreams*.  
<https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/06/19/vowing-not-demonize-rich-biden-tells-billionaires-nothing-would-fundamentally-change>
- Hightower, J. (2006). This land is your land. In W.F. Grover, & J. G. Peschek, *Voices of dissent: Critical readings in American politics*, 4th ed. Longman.
- Kelly, M. (2006). *The divine right of capital: Dethroning the corporate aristocracy*. Barrett/Kohler.

- Knapp, T. (2022, July 8). Third party? America doesn't even have a second party. *Information Clearing House*. <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/57118.htm>
- Lau, T. (2019, December 12). Citizens United explained. *Brennan Center for Justice*.  
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>
- Mandelbaum, M. (2020, January 27). American politics change, but American parties endure. *The American Interest*. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/01/27/american-politics-change-but-american-parties-endure/>
- Mason, J. (2016, February 9). Ordinary Americans fought big money and won in 2015. *Truthout*.  
<https://truthout.org/articles/ordinary-americans-fought-big-money-and-won-in-2015/>
- McCarley, E. (2023, June 23). Instead of trashing Cornel West, here's what Democrats could do if they actually cared about social and economic justice. *Counterpunch*.  
<https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/06/23/instead-of-trashing-cornel-west-heres-what-democrats-could-do-if-they-actually-cared-about-social-and-economic-justice/>
- Merle, R. (2018, September 10). A guide to the financial crisis - 10 years later. *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/a-guide-to-the-financial-crisis-10-years-later/2018/09/10/114b76ba-af10-11e8-a20b-5f4f84429666\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/a-guide-to-the-financial-crisis-10-years-later/2018/09/10/114b76ba-af10-11e8-a20b-5f4f84429666_story.html)
- Moench, M. (2023, December 9). U.S. receives backlash for vetoing U.N. resolution calling for Gaza ceasefire. *Time*. <https://time.com/6344440/us-vetoes-un-resolution-gaza-ceasefire-backlash/>
- Nader, R. (2021, October 2). While Americans sleep, our corporate overlords make progress impossible. *Common Dreams*. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2021/10/02/while-americans-sleep-our-corporate-overlords-make-progress-impossible>

O'Brien, C., et al. (2023 December 13). 'A disservice to the American public': Democrats rip Biden over weapons sale to Israel. *Politico*.  
<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/13/israel-weapons-democrats-congress-00131524#:~:text=The%20administration%20began%20shipping%20weapons,of%20wh at%20those%20weapons%20are>

Parenti, M. (1996). *Democracy for the few*. Bedford / St. Martin's. (pp. 63 – 75).

Picchi, A. (2023, October 4). Donald Trump drops from the Forbes 400 list of richest Americans. Here's what's changed. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-net-worth-forbes-400-2023/#:~:text=Trump%20is%20still%20a%20billionaire,on%20the%202022%20rich%20I ist>

Pitt, W. (2019, March 9). White supremacists are infiltrating the GOP from the ground up. *Truthout*. <https://truthout.org/articles/white-supremacists-are-infiltrating-the-gop-from-the-ground-up/>

Poll: Likely voters overwhelmingly oppose more Pentagon spending. (2022, June 7). *Public Citizen*. <https://www.citizen.org/news/poll-likely-voters-overwhelmingly-oppose-more-pentagon-spending/>

Poole, I. (2019, June 17). These statistics show why the status quo is failing most Americans. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/these-statistics-show-why-status-quo-failing-most-americans/>

Rall, T. (2020, April 9). Why we need a new progressive party and how we can create it. *Counterpunch*. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/04/09/why-we-need-a-new-progressive-party-and-how-we-can-create-it/>

Second Thought. (2020, April 24). *America's stunted political spectrum*. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULYWIDcUOY4>

Shea, D. (2023). *Magruder's American government*. Savvas Learning Company.

Smith, L. (2020, July 15). Truth + justice = Green Party's trailblazing world peace platform.

*Black Agenda Report*. <https://www.blackagendareport.com/truth-justice-green-partys-trailblazing-world-peace-platform>

Stewart, E. (2023, November 14). The problem isn't inflation. It's prices. *Vox*.

<https://www.vox.com/money/2023/11/8/23951098/economy-inflation-prices-job-market-sticker-shock>

Street, P. (Nov 2006). Capitalism and democracy 'don't mix very well': Reflections on globalization." *Z Magazine Online*.

Tabb, W. K. (2006 July / August). The power of the rich. *Monthly Review*.

USAspending.gov. (2023, November 29). <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/department-of-defense?fy=2023>

Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP). (n.d.). *U.S. Department of Treasury*.

<https://home.treasury.gov/data/troubled-assets-relief-program>

Whitehead, J. (2020, November 3). America after the election: A few hard truths about the things that won't change. *Information Clearing House*.

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/55818.htm>