

Absurd Affairs of the American Government

Caroline Hilton

Department of Social Studies, College Park High School

US Government

Teacher: John Kropf

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Abstract

When examining the American government to determine what type of government it is there are four different theories. These four theories -traditional democratic, pluralism, hyperpluralism, and elite class theory- give an idea for the actual type of government in the US today. To start the examination of the government it must be decided if an institutional or structural approach will give the best basis. Ultimately, it seems that looking at the government in both an institutional and structural way will allow the most accurate and complete perspective. Once looking at the question from both these approaches, additional support and evidence is needed. Looking at how the status quo does not change, and the two major political parties are actually similar will give additional data. Finally, it can be decided that while all of the theories hold some merit, the most accurate theory is elite class theory. Knowing what type of government we have then begs the question, what type of government do we want? The answer to this is easier, democracy.

Absurd Affairs of the American Government

In looking at the American government there are four different theories pertaining to what type of government we have. First is the traditional democratic theory. This is the theory which goes along with the common answer for the type of government the U.S. has. In other words, it is a theory that says we are a true democracy with every person's vote and opinion counting towards how our government is run. The next theory is called pluralism, and it is similar to traditional democratic theory except rather than just being a single person voice reaching the government there must be a group of individuals who agree on a specific issue and then voice their opinion for that opinion to be heard. The next theory is that of hyperpluralism. This theory states that for every group of people advocating for some cause there will be an equally large group advocating against the cause. This equal support on opposing sides causes a stalemate and thus no real change is able to be enacted. The final theory is called elite class theory, and it argues that the general populace has little to no power and the elites, rich and rulers of major corporations and companies, rule. Though the populace supposedly are the ones voting in representatives, those representatives have a great tendency to make political decisions that help elites. The elite are the ones who gave representatives the support needed (mainly monetary) in order to achieve political standing. Now looking at each of these theories and the evidence it needs to be determined what kind of government we seem to have. Every one of these theories has at least some grain of truth or merit, but none are completely accurate on their own. Rather it is a combination of these 4 theories that make up our government. However, if focusing simply on only one of these theories it seems that elite class theory is the most accurate for a single theory.

Capitalism Correlation

One debated topic today is the question of whether America is a democracy? In trying to determine what type of government we have there are two different approaches: a structural approach and an institutional approach. An institutional approach assumes the answer to the question of America being a democracy is yes, and from this assumption it focuses on the different institutions of government and how the government theoretically should be running based on how the different government institutions work. In contrast, a structural approach looks at the structure of capitalism to see how it affects our government, and then draw conclusions on what type of government we have from that information. These two approaches are like the connotative and denotative meanings of words. An institutional approach is like a dictionary definition. Looking it up in a textbook is comparatively the same as learning words from a dictionary. On the other hand, connotative meanings are like using a structural approach. The connotative meaning of a word is what is implied or associated with that word, such as tone. A structural approach is similar in the fact that when looking at the government there are other factors, such as capitalism, that should be considered. Like the connotative and denotative meaning of a word an institutional and structural approach can lead to different conclusions, but both are important to fully understand what type of government we have.

To discover what type of government we have it is important to understand the perspectives of both the institutional and structural approaches. From an institutional approach, ignoring any effects of capitalism, we can see the outward structure of our government to be a form of democracy. Though “some critics of American democracy are correct when pointing out that the word “democracy” does not appear in the Constitution. [It is also true that] although America is not a direct democracy, it does not mean democracy is absent in both form and

function” (Is the ..., 2023). This seems to counter the idea that America is not a democracy. However, an assumption seems to be made here as well. They assume that when people say America is not a democracy, they are not referring to the idea that America could be something like an oligarchy. The democratic process of citizens voting for representatives is what is said to make the United States a form of democracy. Other than simply just looking at the process of people voting, what also needs to be considered is how outside sources can influence votes.

Looking at our government in a current light a structuralist view would likely focus on the fact that “for every 13 members, in fact, one may fairly be dubbed a ‘1 percenter’” (Hawkings, 2018). One of the core reasons for the American Revolution and the fact that the United States even exists is the fact that people wanted to be fairly represented. It seems that our government now is far from equally representing all the different people in the United States. Granted it would be difficult to equally represent everyone because of how diverse our country is, but the fact that “153 House members [...] and 50 senators are millionaires” seems to show an extreme disproportionality in equally representing the different social classes (Hawkings, 2018). The wealthy running the government is not new news though. The Founding Fathers were among the wealthiest in the 13 colonies, and Andrew Jackson, supposedly the President of the common man, appointed the rich to fill positions in government (Parenti, 1996). There are many other instances of the wealthy having positions of power in our government, and looking recently at President Trump, a billionaire himself, he appointed a Cabinet full of millionaires with ties to powerful corporations.

One of the most interesting and thought-provoking points about having so many wealthy people in our government is the idea that we, as the citizens of the United States, have voted in all of them into office. Supposedly, “it is ballots, not dollars, that ultimately decide who wins,

and ballots reflect the minds of voters” (Smith, 2006). Looking simply at how our government is theoretically run this is true, but it is important to also see how dollars could be affecting ballots. Additionally, this statement has a number of ideas colliding in it that also need to be addressed. First off this refers to the members of the government who we more fully get a say in, namely those in Congress. Voters' minds are not at all considered in who is made a supreme court justice. In electing a President, the citizens do get to vote, but it is the electoral college that actually decides who is made president. Voter turnout has also been depressed because millions of citizens do not feel that they have a meaningful vote in presidential elections (Berman, 2024). The other point to consider is the fact that, well, dollars cannot technically buy votes, the more money a person has to spend on a campaign the more media coverage and overall presence one will have. Being able to more effectively communicate with people, especially those who don't consider politics beyond the mainstream media they see, because one is backed by corporations, can greatly assist one's campaign. This is a problem since while talking a good talk while campaigning these politicians are going to feel obligated to help pass legislation helping the corporations who financed their campaign rather than the people who voted them in.

In the same strain of financing elections, it was said that “in 1996, the Home Depot corporation alone spent more on advertising than federal law allowed Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, and Ross Perot put together to spend on the general election” (Smith, 2006). This is likely true, but it brings to the forefront a bigger issue with this source. The opinions expressed in this source around the financing of elections is basically unusable since this is now outdated. In 2010, four years after this source was released, “the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, a controversial decision that reversed century-old campaign finance restrictions, ... [e]nabled corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited funds on

elections” (Lau, 2019). Now corporations can, will, and have spent copious amounts of wealth on the campaigns of candidates. The few large firms and ultra-wealthy individuals now have vast power because of their campaign donations and lobbying (Kurz, 2024). Though we technically were the ones to vote people in, the influence that these wealthy individuals and corporations seem to have over our representatives in government is worrying.

One of the other issues in line with big corporations giving money to politicians is lobbying. The general views of lobbying were summed up in saying “some see them as playing an essential part in the democratic process, others look at them with skepticism but allow them a legitimate role in developing policy [and] most, however, see them as sinister forces exercising too much control over Congress”. Hamilton then goes on to explain that we should not be decrying lobbyists since the various special interest groups lobbying in Washington are doing so on our behalf, assuming we identify with some of them. While it may be true that there are some groups lobbying on behalf of the more common people, it seems more likely that it is mainly big corporations who are making headway with this lobbying. It is important that “those in power don't consistently listen to the voices of the wealthy and the powerful more intently than the voices of others” (Hamilton, 2006). For the United States to truly be as democratic as our laws enable us, we must ensure that every different group gets an equal chance to have their opinions expressed in terms of influencing legislation.

With the way it is being run now giving everyone equal opportunity to have their opinions considered seems unlikely. Additionally, it now seems that the “government’s growing involvement in economic affairs was not at the contrivance of meddling Washington bureaucrats but was a response to the increasing concentration of production and wealth” (Parenti, 1996). Knowing that the government has historically been controlled by the wealthy it is not surprising

that the government has grown to be extremely involved in the economic affairs of our country. Other than just the government being involved in economic affairs some go so far as to claim that “beneath outwardly democratic political processes and generally strong civil liberties, those [first world states] were fundamentally subject to the command of centralized, hierarchical corporate power and great monied wealth—a condition that persists well into the ‘post-Cold War era’” (Street, 2006). During the Cold War there did seem to be a great emphasis on corporate power, and while rich corporations do seem to have lots of influence on the government I am not positive that they 100% control and command the country. And while corporations probably do not totally control our country, they might continue to gain footholds while “cynicism and indifference are driving too many Americans to opt out of [the political] conversation” (Hamilton, 2006). To be a democracy the citizens have to be participating as well. If citizens do not even participate there will be no need to even ask the question of America being a democracy since we will not be.

It is also useful to step back from focusing on how our government works and is affected by outside sources and instead look at the broadening topic of what the relationship between capitalism and democracy is. On this topic there are a multitude of different opinions and examples to draw information from. Some claim that capitalism and democracy need each other while others believe that these two systems are better apart. Isabel V. Sawhill claims that “capitalism and democracy absolutely need each other to survive” and that because the government is not addressing “systemic problems, democracy begins to lose its legitimacy. [The resulting] political instability begins to threaten capitalism itself” (Amico, 2020). This seems to be based only on how American capitalism and democracy relate. It is almost as though it was assumed that all other places with a democracy are also capitalistic and vice versa. Others, such

as Archon Fung and Isabelle Ferreras, instead believe that these two systems are completely separate. They cite examples of countries across the globe, like China, who practice capitalism but are not democracies (Amico, 2020). With examples of other countries practicing only one of these two systems it stands to reason that either these systems do not go hand in hand, or someone is claiming to have a system that they do not fully have.

For those who claim that capitalism and democracy are invariably linked they are seeming to only refer to the United States. One claim about the correlation between capitalism and democracy said that “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). In this it seems to go further than just saying that the best organization is with capitalism and democracy but instead that capitalism promotes democracy and these two need each other to work the best they can. This theory is hotly contested though and now “51% are dissatisfied with how democracy is working” and the feeling that capitalism is not working for everyone of lower societal class is rampant. It feels as though economic and political power no longer offset each other, if they ever did, but instead work together to exclude those who cannot economically compete.

Ultimately, while trying to answer what type of government the United States has it is important to observe from multiple perspectives. To have a full picture it is good to look first at how our government should be running based solely on the direct definitions and explanations of what the various government institutions do and then observing the actual happenings in the government and how capitalism affects how things are theoretically supposed to be run. Those with more wealth may end up having more influence, but if we want to be a democracy then the

average citizens also have to participate in not only voting but also taking the time to learn and understand what is happening in their government and try to be included.

Stagnant Status Quo

In saying “status quo” one might think of the high school musical song or the social status quo, but the more important status quo is the one of the American political and economic system. This status quo is the union of capitalism and democracy makes the best combination of political and economic systems. And with every new presidency this status quo has not changed or seems likely to change. With the current status quo it is believed that the absolute best recipe for success comes in combining the economic system of capitalism and the government system of democracy into the overall system under which our country is run. Every four years there is a general uprising of political unrest as the country votes in a new president. The country gets riled up, but is there any real change when we elect a new president? Perhaps there are tweaks here and there, however there is never any true change to the status quo. At the end of the day, we will still be a capitalist nation who holds the tying of this economic system with the political system of democracy in the highest regard. Think about it, Democrat or Republican, do politicians ever support anything that conflicts with the status quo? The answer is no. Even if we see some policy tweaks and fights over social issues with every switch in president there seems to be much more continuity than change.

One reason for such continuity can be shown by the political compass. The political compass is basically a graph that shows how you lean politically and economically. On the y-axis you have authoritarian (positive y-coordinates) and libertarian (negative y-coordinates), and on the x-axis economically left and right (left negative, right positive). Thus quadrant 1 shows authoritarian economically right, quadrant 2 authoritarian economically left, quadrant 3

economically left libertarian, quadrant 4 economically right libertarian. With how Trump and Harris are portrayed one would expect them to be on the complete opposite sides of this political compass, but the actual result might be a surprise. Instead, Trump and Harris are relatively close together being in the same quadrant, quadrant 1. Granted, Trump is a bit further to the right economically and further up (more authoritarian), but Harris is still in the same quadrant of right leaning economically and authoritarian. This compared to third party candidates like Jill Stein who is instead in the third quadrant leaning to the left economically and more libertarian is surprising (The Political Compass, 2024). Republicans and Democrats are seen as almost polar opposites in today's world, but when one actually sees how the two main presidential candidates fall on the political compass, they start seeming much more similar. In this it starts seeming more plausible that there is actually little difference between the most recent presidential candidates in terms of the status quo.

The political compass shows how Trump and Harris are more closely situated than we have been led to believe, but there are still differences, mainly in social issues and economic policy (not the system). However, though we occasionally hear about these differences it seems that more than anything the media is either slandering the candidate they are against or supporting someone because they are the lesser of two evils. This has especially been seen with our most recent election. Articles "supporting" Harris starting say things like "Kamala Harris is not a perfect candidate. The Democratic Party is deeply flawed and limited. And inequalities are deeply rooted in our institutions. But we have to beat Trump." Part of the reason for some of these statements could be that Harris was not even elected in a primary. For a number of Democrats they acknowledge that Harris is not the most ideal candidate, but nonetheless for them she is a much better alternative than Trump who is seen as "Loud. Arrogant. Ignorant.

Entitled. Racist. Violent. Misogynistic. Homophobic. Orientalist. Self-centered. Self-important. Idiotic.” and more (Koechiln, 2024). Even if Trump is disliked and Harris is a better alternative, the fact that when acknowledging flaws and inequalities in the system they plan to go along with it and not do anything is slightly astounding. The unspoken assumption that it would be better to accept a slightly lesser threat and move on with life than thinking about how “we deserve to have candidates on the ballot who truly reflect our values” but doing nothing to fix the flaws in the system seems almost ingrained into voters today (Moreno, 2024). While we feel there should be someone who actually represents the general population, nothing is seemingly being done about it. Instead, now there are just people who vote for the candidate who they see as the lesser of two evils. One specific example is from Jasmine Parish Moreno who in a recent article expressed how “Vice President Harris is far from perfect” and how Moreno is “outraged by the ways [Harris]’s adopted Republican talking points and rhetoric”, but nonetheless Moreno “will vote for Harris on November 5, but [...] not a profession of my love for Harris or my approval. It’s about making a deliberate choice to pick the playing field for the next four years” (Moreno, 2024). Moreno has voted for the candidate who is seen as a better, though not ideal, option. It is important to also note that Moreno seems to be actively engaged in what is happening in our politics and has plans to work towards a more desirable system. However, this acting on the desire for a better system does not seem as common as the simple discontent with how things are going. From an article released after midterms in 2022 by Micheal Barone it says “Are we living in an era of political contentment? Most Americans would answer that question with a bellowing “No!” But there’s a case to be made that American voters, for all their negative talk, actually don’t want a set of public policies markedly different from what we have today.” (Barone, 2022). In this case Barone seems to assume we are a traditional democracy, and the people have the

power to vote for who we think is the best candidate to support what we believe to be best and actually get those candidates. Since this change is not happening Barone instead attributes it to the idea that Americans do not truly desire different policies. This conclusion comes with the evidence of the same representatives being voted in, all of whom do not champion the desired policies. But again, this assumes that power is with the people. Instead, looking from a different angle “one of the signs that a crisis is systemic, rather than purely political or economic, is that key indicators decline or stay the same regardless of changes in political power or business cycles.” (Poole, 2019). This forces a change in thinking to not have a problem with voters, a problem with the system instead.

With assumptions that voters have power it seems that it is the voter’s fault that there is no change happening, or that there is fault with the representatives. From Pew Research Center there is a statistic saying that “More than eight-in-ten Americans (86%) say the following is a good description of politics: ‘Republicans and Democrats are more focused on fighting each other than on solving problems.’” (Americans’ dismal..., 2023). Nothing is changing with the two major parties fighting over small changes that would not get anything major accomplished anyway. “People have two options this upcoming year, and every year. Vote for the same status quo politicians and their nonsensical policies or vote for meaningful change. Whether that change is Republican or Democrat is irrelevant. We just need representatives that see our true struggles again.” (Delorme, 2024). The status quo has remained unchanging as there continues to be no one making headway towards anything that would result in a major change. We need to question, why is nothing changing?

This leads to yet another layer of reason our government seems stagnant. Though Democrats and Republicans love to shout their differences to the sky they ultimately are very

similar. Thinking back to the political compass Trump and Harris are in the same quadrant whereas Stein is on the complete opposite side of the graph. Even when a person accepts that there will be basically no change to the status quo with Republicans or Democrats they have two options; accept the system and vote a slightly less evil who can win or vote for someone who also wants change but who has no chance. In an article by Robert Reich there is a portion of a debate Reich has with Chris Hedges about less of two evil voting. Hedges argues it is better to just vote third party since the Democrats and Republicans will end up doing the same thing. An example is given where “the TPP [Transpacific Partnership] is going to go through, whether it’s Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. Endless war is going to be continued, whether it’s Trump or Clinton. We’re not going to get our privacy back, whether it’s under Clinton or Trump. The idea that, at this point, the figure in the executive branch exercises that much power, given the power of the war industry and Wall Street, is a myth.” Hedges makes the important point that both our major party candidates will be keeping the same overall policies if not to the same extent. The small differences in extent or social issues is what makes the less of two evil voters choose a certain candidate. They have almost a more realistic opinion that “one of the nominees from one of the two major parties is going to win. And if you don’t vote, or you vote for a third-party candidate, you’re inevitably hurting the candidate from one of the major parties who’s closest to you in values — and helping the one farthest from you.” (Reich, 2024). This opinion is said to be more realistic, but only for the point that the American political system is stuck with two parties and there is no room for change. When it is thought about this way it is consigning the United States to be stuck in a loop with the same candidates just different faces. The sad fact that it is the realistic opinion to vote for someone you do not want or believe will actually help you is a norm. Consistently having two bad choices with only one who is slightly better seems to show a

flaw. The problem is that we are so stuck in our loop of elections that it seems an impossibility to make any change.

It has been said that “politics is about contrast, distinction, *separation*. The aim of any candidate worth his salt ought to be the digging of a gulf between himself and his opponents. And yet, when faced with the lying demagogic child that is Donald Trump, Joe Biden has elected to emulate his foil.” (Cooke, 2023). Though this seems a bit unreasonable in stating the most important thing a candidate should do is defame opponents, the idea that candidates should be different is key. If candidates are the same, what is the point of even holding an election? Obviously, our candidates are not exactly the same, but they are similar enough that it is said “the old Republican establishment and current Democratic establishment are essentially one, and Kamala Harris is their champion” (Hunter, 2024). Rather than the duopoly we are thought to have with political parties today, the parties have seemed to move close enough to make them almost a monopoly instead. “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. (Knapp, 2022).

Trump is going to be the president come January 20, and though he has promised change it is unlikely that the kind of change people want will come. There will most definitely be tweaks to policies, but the status quo will not be changing. We have already had a Trump presidency where it was told that America would be made great again. America does not seem greater now than it did then. It seems much more likely that while Trump will be making adjustments here and there America is not becoming that much greater. The question is would a Harris presidency

have been any different from a Trump one. Either way the status quo will remain stagnant and unchanging.

Conclusion

Looking at the evidence it seems that even though we parade as a democracy we are further from a true democracy than we would care to believe. As elites control the wealth of our nation, they have also seized control of our nation's government. The status quo of capitalism and supposed democracy is stuck, but with capitalism having totally taken control. A large part of the population is not satisfied with the current system that is unfair to them. In actuality the United States no longer is a democracy as it has been hijacked by greedy and power-hungry corporate capitalists. One sign that the system is problematic is the fact that nothing is changing. This is true today despite the desire for change.

With the knowledge that we are not a democracy at the moment and instead leaning towards an oligarchy it is clear that most would resoundingly agree that this is not the government they want. This then begs the question; what do we actually want the government of the United States of America to be? The answer to this is democracy, specifically one that aligns with traditional democratic theory. There is such a diverse set of people with a vast array of opinions in this country, and though there is no way for everyone to always agree, being given the opportunity for all the people together as a whole to make decisions about how to ultimately run our country seems like the best type of government. American citizens should all have the ability to vote with equal representation and vote for policies and candidates that actually align with their beliefs and opinions rather than just being the less evil option. Perhaps one day this desire will come to fruition as the people of America fight for a government they actually want and believe in rather than one they feel stuck with.

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