

A Clear Look at the American Government

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Abstract

As time goes on and the rich get richer, the validity of America's democratic label gets questioned more and more. The democracy that America has painted on its flags and stamped to postcards is finally decaying in front of our eyes and many people are now arguing that America is no longer a democracy. The lack of equality between the lower classes filled with millions of impoverished citizens and the elites of America flaunting their billions concerns many Americans about the equality of this system that we have developed for our government. In order to truly determine the nature of the American government, we will first examine the four main theories about government. To figure out which one best represents our government, we will determine if the structural or institutional approach is better to evaluate it. Another necessary factor is the status quo and its malleability, especially with the recent election and drastic shift in party control. It is also needed to differentiate between the government that represents us currently and the one that we want for the future of America.

A Clear Look at the American Government

As time progresses, the American people's distrust of their own government grows increasingly, begging the question of whether we can still consider the United States a democracy. The capitalistic American dream which has been the slogan of America for so much of its history has fallen into the hands of the wealthy and is no longer working for the average citizen. The main ideas that motivate capitalism and profits have been the downfall of the American people as capitalism and the government work significantly more in favor of the wealthy than it does for the rest of the population. But if our government looks less and less like a democracy, then what is our government really?

There are four main theories about our government, the first and most common theory is the traditional democratic theory. This entails that not only does every citizen's vote count, but they all play an equal part in determining how the government operates, and the decisions made by the policy-makers that represent the people. This idea is most often taught in schools and propagandized to the American public, promising equality for each individual, but its current state acts as a representative democracy that does a lackluster job of representing the American public.

The second theory is the idea of pluralism. This is the belief that there are many interest groups, larger than the individual, that compete with one another to shape the public policy of the country. This allows the people to select what groups to align with based on their views and fight for a common cause together. In a working pluralist society, there is a compromise between the groups and the politicians making the laws, but our society instills too much fear about not getting reelected by the politicians to the point where they are very unwilling to compromise.

The third theory is hyper-pluralism, which says that groups of people can make an impact on the government, but too many groups are overwhelming the government and have an alternative effect of not representing what anyone wants instead of what the majority wants. The hyper-pluralist ideas state that due to the various different points of view on each topic and the many people that support every side, it has no use in convincing lawmakers of any one opinion and represents no one.

The final theory of government is the elite class theory. This states that society is split up between the elites, generally the top one percent, and the rest of the people with the elites being in charge of the government and economy. This includes making the laws, running businesses, and keeping the power in the hands of the top one percent to continue the status quo. Despite what is consistently claimed about the American government, the elite class theory is the most accurate description of our government. While pluralism and hyperpluralism maintain some resemblance to a democratic system, the elite class theory is certifiably undemocratic, and yet it rules “the greatest democracy in the history of the world” (Harris, 2024). Although the creation of this country looked to create a fair representative democracy, the ties of capitalism in democracy have shifted the government to favor the elite class and big businesses and away from that of the people. Additionally, the status quo that keeps the elite at the top has rooted itself so strongly in American society and now the president that is elected to office will make little to no change in the structure of our nation, further maintaining the status quo.

Is Democracy Even for the People Anymore?

For an American schoolchild, we are constantly fed the idea that America is the best democracy in the world. It is told to us through textbooks, teachers, and any other form of propaganda they can throw at us. The institutional approach of viewing our government, that is

only looking at the organizations that the government consists of and not considering the greater context of capitalism, severely shrinks our view of the government we live under. The idea of this separation of government and economics is present in our very own school as the US government class is taught at a separate time from the economics class. This comes with the intent to separate the two systems of democracy and capitalism, but in reality, they operate together to make up our government. The capitalist and democratic union has worked for many years, particularly for the upper class, but as time goes on, the cracks in this system are becoming inescapably clear to the lower class in America. The idea of viewing the government without considering the economic effects on the government, being the institutional approach, fails in a society as advanced as today's. The structuralist approach says that evaluating our government must involve the broader context of how our branches of government interact and are affected by capitalism and the economy. Examining the government without taking into consideration the effects that capitalism has on how it operates does not allow for an accurate perception of the United States Government. It instead requires a structuralist view of our government to gauge how our government is run most accurately. Considering capitalism as a factor in our government opens the discussion to aspects such as the effects of lobbying and unequal representation of the lower class in comparison to the upper class when making laws, as well as the contradictory relationship between the ideals of capitalism and democracy and how they oppose each other in our government.

As corporate influence continues to plague the government, this leads our government to look more and more like a fascist state due to this heavy blending of government and business. One critic says that:

The classic definition of fascism is a situation in which Big Business and Big Government are formally united in their aims and in many aspects of their administration. Government directs business toward what and how much to produce, and business looks to the authority of government to establish and protect its interests. (Campbell, 2020)

In its current state, the government is not guilty of entirely directing big businesses, but big businesses are quite close to directing the government. The capitalist idea to gain the most capital has caused many of these top companies like Goldman Sachs to turn to the government for growth once they run out of space in the free market. Getting the government to make legislation in favor of these large corporations has been done for years through lobbying and makes the government a safety net for them to rely on. These types of activities push America further away from being a democracy due to the undemocratic policies that come through the large amounts of lobbying.

Lobbying has gotten more and more popular as time has gone on, with “the total lobbying spending in the US in 2023 was around 4.26 billion dollars. In 1998 it was only around 1.45 billion dollars” (“Total Lobbying Spending...”, 2023). This excessive amount of money will convince just about every elected official, causing bills that will greatly benefit corporations to get often voted into law. The widespread acceptance of so much lobbying hurts our democracy, for “when we have so much collusion between the public and private spheres at every level of government [...] can it not be legitimately argued that what we have in the United States is a quasi-fascist system” (Campbell, 2020). The overlapping between private businesses and the government shows how we are moving in the direction of a quasi-fascist system with state and business being so tightly knit. The influence of capitalism on this part of the legislative branch is

too large to understate and is one aspect that shows why capitalism has such a large role in our government.

These lobbyists, large corporations, and the top one percent also sway the ideas and policies of presidents. For example, Pizzigati (2024) says “Donald Trump ‘asked oil industry executives to raise \$1 billion for his campaign and said raising such a sum would be a deal given how much money they would save if he were reelected as president.’” (para. 10). The wealth and impact of the top 1 percent and large corporation owners on the election through campaign funding has a great impact on the success of a candidate as well as their policies once in office. If a presidential candidate gets a lot of support from oil companies, they will be less strict about laws concerning the oil businesses to repay their campaign support. This distorts the idea of democracy in our nation as the voice of the people is nearly silenced when compared to the voice of the corporations who are sponsoring these candidates. The relative wealth of the top 1% has also only grown over time. This gives them more control over the election as well as over congresspeople and senators as they are also influenced and helped by these big corporations to sway their vote to the side they want. This snubs the working class and lower-class citizens of America out of a say in our “democracy” because the large corporations and these elites are basically commanding our representatives through lobbying.

This perceived insignificance of the lower class by the wealthy and upper class shows the imbalance between the two groups and how the elites are getting significantly favored in politics. Gilens and Page conducted a study and found how Congress’s decisions line up in comparison to the opinions and beliefs of different groups of people, as is seen in Figure 1.

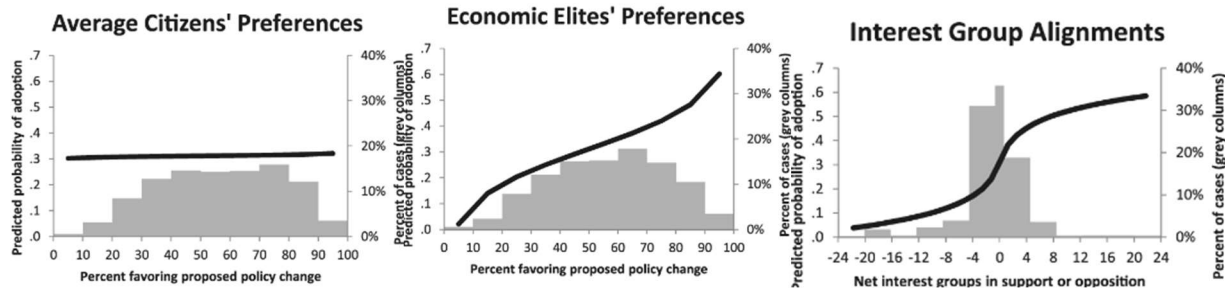


Figure 1

From “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens.” (Gilens & Page, 2014)

These graphs illustrate how the preferences of the elites and the preferences of the lower class are valued very differently in the eyes of our lawmakers. The preferences of the elites are shown to be greatly more valued than those of the people, even though the people are the majority of the country. According to this study, the chance of the bill being passed based on the average citizens of the US is equal no matter how much support is given to the idea and how much the people like it. This disparity in how much the government cares for the feelings of the people in comparison to that of the wealthy top percent is too wide for the government to be considered an utter democracy. The lack of care for the majority of the population makes the capitalist-run government undemocratic.

The history of the elite class in America shows that they are constantly far wealthier than much of the rest of the American population. Pizzigati (2024) notes that the “top 1 percenters are now grabbing 21 percent of our nation’s income, over double the top 1 percent income share in 1976.” (para. 4), further emphasizing the chasm between the wealth at the top one percent and the bottom 99 percent. This wealth inequality goes beyond just the money though, because “high-income constituents predict the voting behavior of their Senators to a much larger degree than low-income citizens, who have little or no power.” (Traber, et al., 2021) showing that the

economic class difference affects governmental policies as well. This is harmful to the democracy of our country and stems from the capitalist ideas that are interwoven with our government. The elites get more heavily favored because they take up a larger part of the economy and therefore their struggle when laws contradict what they want makes the elite class threaten not to elect the officials again. This cycle keeps the officials willing to help the elites in office and keeps the elites in power. This vast power difference between the elites and the normal people is what makes the capitalist government officials help benefit the elites since they will give more money than normal people will. Since money drives our economy and government, it keeps the cycle and power gap necessary to capitalism's success alive but perpetuates the American people's struggles.

Lastly, there are the purely opposite core beliefs that lie within democracy and capitalism. Wolff (2020) states that

Capitalists must block employee majorities from undoing the workings and results of the capitalist economic system and especially its characteristic distributions of income, wealth, power, and culture. To that end capitalists seek portions of the employee class to ally with, to disconnect from other, fellow employees. They usually work with and use political parties to form and sustain such alliances. (para. 7)

Many of the main ideas of capitalism rely on the inequality of the market to promote growth and the idea of gaining as much capital as possible. If everyone is trying to gain as much capital as possible, then it is inherently unequal. This does not jive with a system like democracy which is built on the ideas of everyone being equal and having an equal say in how the actions of the country end up being executed. The need to gain so much capital is then used to buy the votes of congresspeople and form the policies of presidential candidates in order to further gain them

more capital and keep the cycle going and keep them on top, richer, and more politically powerful than the rest of society. As Merkel (2014) puts it, “Capitalism is not democratic, democracy not capitalist.” (para. 1). These two systems work with opposite ideals in a system together and are a source of much of the corruption as well as the imbalance of the government. This aspect of their conflicting views is another reason why you cannot properly evaluate our government without considering the role capitalism plays in it.

An argument that can be made is that the government and economy of the United States can be evaluated separately, but this is blind to the impact that capitalism and capitalistic principles have on the makeup of our government. Many if not all of the systems of our government are greatly affected in some way by capitalism whether it be lobbying, economic biases, or inadequate representation of the lower-class population. These clear issues that are blatantly overlooked when taking the institutional approach invalidate any credibility it had because it just is not accurate to our real government. The institutional approach is more of an ideal situation rather than the one we have now.

In the end, can the United States truly be called a democracy? The structuralist method will give you an answer that looks much deeper into the inner workings of our government to see more about what is happening behind the scenes of government between the officials and businesses. This shows the one evaluating the systems a greater look into how the government operates and the true pillars it stands upon rather than what it says it does. The institutional approach gives more of a look at how the government was intended to be, but the corruption of people and evolution of capitalism has made evaluating the government more complex. Looking strictly through the foggy lens of the institutionalist method, it will fabricate the fact that America is a democracy. However, it is truly much harder to judge than that due to the factors

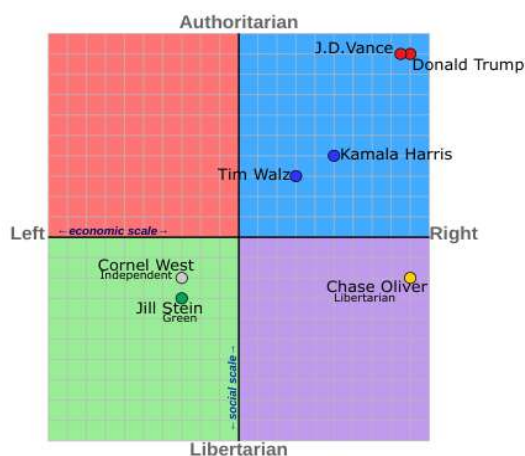
that the economy and capitalism add to the government. Therefore, because it opens up the discussion to more of the reality in our government of corruption and greed, both root causes of capitalism, it is much more effective to use the structuralist method to determine if America is a democracy or not.

America: Maintaining the Status Quo

The United States has a history of consistently similar policies between the two main parties, despite the fact that they are intended to be different options for the American people. Recent years have shown this to be much greater of an issue than before as the policies of both parties blend together to solely benefit the economic elite. Both Democrats and Republicans work under parallel policies that maintain America's status as a powerhouse of the world, but at the same time withhold that power and glory from the large majority of its population. The status quo, as it stands, serves to take the power out of the hands of the people and place it in the hands of the wealthy and powerful elite class, dooming the broader American people to do nothing but observe their opinions being ignored. Our current status quo runs directly contrary to the basis of America's creation, which was intended to take the power out of the hands of the elite in Britain and give it to the people of the American colonies to decide for themselves how they wanted to live. In theory, the status quo could change, but due to the bipartisan-dominated government, the chances of third-party officials being elected are nearly zero. This leaves many Americans to begrudgingly decide between two candidates that do not fall in line with their hopes for the country moving forward, leading to many people choosing the "less bad" candidate rather than one that they actually want. But regardless of which party is elected to office, the economic and political status quo will continue to disproportionately benefit the elites of America and sustain its dominance.

One main way that they keep the status quo is by working toward the same ideas, despite supposedly opposing parties. The political compass shows that they are actually quite similar to one another in ideology.

The US Presidential Election 2024



Contrary to popular belief, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump's political and economic beliefs lie very close to each other. This strategy of gaining votes by alienating the opposing side rather than promoting their own policies and goals is used to hide how similar their ideas are. As seen above, both candidates occupy the blue quadrant on the political compass, being socially authoritarian and on the economic right, making neither too far removed from the other in core beliefs. Their similarity causes there to be very little difference in the main electoral candidates for the American people, and due to the bipartisan nature of the current political system, leaves little opportunity for significant change in the lives of the American people. This maintains a stagnant state in our government that limits any chance for change in the status quo since none of the Republican or Democratic candidates would dare try and change the system that benefits them.

This lack of a significant divide between the main parties has caused some policies to be adopted on both sides. For example, “Liberals who opposed the border wall, deportations of immigrants, aggressive militarism, continuing student debt, promoting oil drilling, and escalating defense budgets when these were Trump policies are happily sucking up when Biden continued and even upped the same measures” (Harris, 2023, para 16). The policies of the Republicans and Democrats have blended so much to the point that the very plans that the Democrats opposed while Trump led the country are being massively supported by Democrats under Biden. The Democrats’ weak spine has led to unfulfilled promises and policies that completely counter what the people voted for. For example, “Oil production has soared on public lands under Biden, growing by roughly 530,000 barrels a day since 2020” (Richards, 2024, para 13). Many environmentally conscious Democrat voters are worried for the environment as Biden, who promised to end oil drilling on public lands, has made America the largest crude oil producing country in the world. Even Trump has given Biden props for his work in expanding America’s oil industry, for it is parallel to the policy that Trump pushed during his presidency (Richards, 2024). This shows that the two-party system may as well be one party since even though they claim different policies, they are both moving America in the exact same direction. Their similarity is a major reason why Trump winning over Kamala in the election will be inconsequential in the status quo, for they would both enact policies that overall support the current status quo.

Another way that the status quo would remain gridlocked is through economic policies. Because America is in such an elite-class-dominated society, the election would not have affected this part of our society. Kamala Harris and Donald Trump are two candidates who would ultimately put many more resources into helping the upper-class population than they

would the working-class and poor people. This system to help the upper class constantly benefits government officials as many of them have connections with these big businesses or receive money from them for campaigns or lobbying. This leads to the people who get set in charge of this nation of nearly 335 million people being focused primarily on the people who have the most money, maintaining the elitist status quo and leaving behind the greater population. De la Cruz and Garica (2024) say that “every injustice working people experience in society, boils down to the question of who has power. Under the current capitalist system, a tiny clique of rich bankers and CEOs have the power and will do anything to maintain it”. This campaign slogan from Claudia De la Cruz and Katrina Garcia shows how the blending of corporations and the government has led to the power to persist in the hands of the wealthiest people who are able to pass laws and regulations that can further their profits. The government and corporations work together under capitalism and keep the status quo still and the top at the top. The large emphasis on maximizing capital that is so deeply embedded in our society gives advantages to the wealthy and powerful that are often used to further their reign. They do this by endorsing officials to vote for laws that benefit them and in return get government bailouts, fewer restrictions, and lower tax rates. For example, Donald Trump plans to cut tax rates and raise tariffs on imported goods from places like China (Source 9), which seems like it would help the American people, but in reality, the tax cuts only help the top one percent, and the tariffs will just spark greater amounts of inflation in the economy. These lower tax rates have historically proven to cause great detriment to the lower and middle-class citizens as the deficit in the government’s budget is left to be covered by these citizens. Since the wealthy are contributing less tax totals for the country, the trillions of dollars that this country uses to run will be taken out of the pockets of the middle and lower class, increasing the class divide in America and making those who are poor even poorer.

Having the wealthiest Americans paying less taxes than they would at higher rates will also continue to help keep their elite status as their capital will only grow, widening the gap even more between the elite and lower classes. Heightened tax rates on the wealthiest individuals, despite hurting the profits of America's corporate billionaires, would cause widespread welfare for the rest of the nation. Wolff (2024) states that "[the employees] had gained the most from the 1945-1975 prosperity. ." (para 8). This post-war period was one of the most prosperous in our nation's history, and it was not just for the elites, by no coincidence, this was also a period where the highest tax rate reached almost 95% (Source 6).

Lower tax rates always seem to be beneficial to the American public, the times with low tax rates for the rich, such as right before the Great Depression and the time leading up to the 2008 housing crisis, have been the economically worst times in American history. Therefore, further tax cuts that Trump plans to put into place are doing nothing to help the greater American population. This is not only Trump though, as Kamala is helped by many similar large corporations that would have wanted to get tax cuts as well, tossing the American people aside just for that extra bit of profit that comes with tax cuts no matter who was elected. These low taxes along with recent years' adaptations of moving business operations offshore to reduce costs draw a bold line between the elite class and the working class as the elite class works to widen

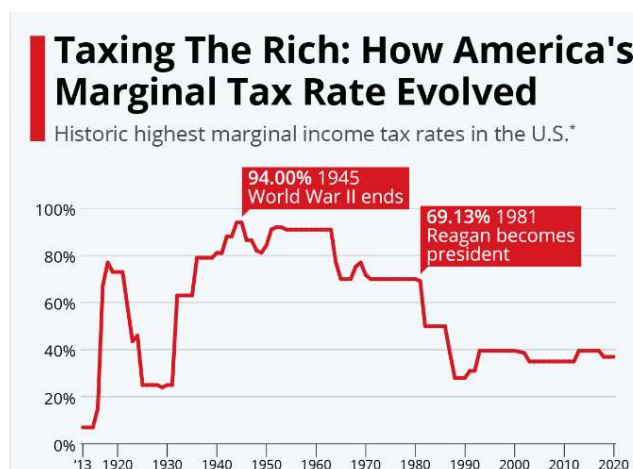


Figure 2

From “Taxing the Rich: How America’s Marginal Tax Rate Evolved.” (McCarthy & Richter, 2021)

the divide. This divide will perpetually hold the wealthy in power as long as the status quo remains.

Although the chances of change in the status quo are a distant dream, all hope for democracy is not lost. While the presidential candidates work toward many of the same goals in the big picture, their domestic policies on smaller issues often vary greatly and are where the American people get to have their voice. The candidates of the Republican and Democratic parties will constantly work to uphold the status quo, but that doesn’t mean that it is without change. For example, Trump’s election has doomed the Department of Education and compromised the safety and rights of many transgender people, to name a few, which likely would not have happened under Harris, but there will be an overall continuity in the status quo of America. These changes are not insignificant, but they do little to alter the economic and political structure of our country, which has been so deeply rooted in capitalistic and elitist ideologies and policies.

However much he likes to boast about it, the status quo will not change enough under Trump’s presidency to constitute a significant change. His campaign to Make America Great Again holds true, but due to the rigid status quo and an unwillingness in the elite class of America, it will only be great for the people with power and money. As the policies of the Republicans and Democrats grow more and more similar, they begin to blend into the same capitalist-run party that focuses on the wealthy people of America and for the most part has ignored the voters in the past years. The mixing of the two parties leaves the American people

without a true say in their lives since the two main parties run under very similar ideologies and only vary in small ways. As long as the system of capitalism still rules this country, the status quo will be immovable by Donald Trump or Kamala Harris, for the ties between wealth and the government's power are too deeply embedded to be unearthed. This leaves the overall status quo of America to be greatly unchanged by Donald Trump's presidency.

Conclusion

When examining the systems of capitalism and their influence on American "democracy", it is clear that our democracy is not functioning properly. The amount of power that the wealthy have over the government makes America closer to a plutocracy. The influence that business owners and large corporations have on the government through lobbying and bribes cannot be ignored when examining the government that runs our nation. The elections also have very little effect on the status quo that makes up America because both of the main parties' candidates work towards maintaining the same status quo as it benefits them greatly. The system works to maintain the status quo by prioritizing money and profits over the lives and well-being of the American people and thus only really helps the very wealthy.

A true representative democracy is the government that we should strive for, but it cannot truly come about with the system of capitalism in place. The two systems hold such opposite values that democracy and capitalism in their current forms cannot coexist. We would need to completely reevaluate the value of the system of capitalism in our society to be able to reach the goal of a true and equal democracy.

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