

Capitalism Kills Democracy

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Abstract

The health and continued function of America's democracy is in danger as the structure of capitalism reinforces the status quo. The economic and political systems currently in place in the United States give more power and influence over elected officials to corporate lobbyists than the average voter. Congresspeople, Senators, and the President do not answer to their constituents as they should in a representative democracy, instead they answer to their biggest donors. Capitalism threatens democracy as economic hurdles prevent citizens from participating fully and equally. Americans have no definitive choice in the 2024 election as neither Biden, nor Trump, nor any third-party candidate will have the power to change the status quo. The wealth gap continues to grow under our capitalist society while stagnant wages, growing poverty, and racial division of wealth compound and reinforce the status quo. Extreme economic and political reforms are necessary to create true and lasting change. Capitalism is destroying our democracy and transforming the status quo is nearly impossible under our current system.

Capitalism Kills Democracy

America prides itself as being the most powerful democracy in the world. However, the American dream of economic opportunity for all, if each individual works hard enough, is dying under the weight of capitalism. Our country's founding fathers intended to break free from English rule in order to provide equal opportunity for political and economic independence. However, our capitalist structure prevents Americans from achieving this lofty goal. Thomas Jefferson said it best: "The issue today is the same as it has been throughout all history, whether man shall be allowed to govern himself or be ruled by a small elite." Unfortunately, capitalism and the wealth gap it has created interferes with the healthy function of a true representative democracy.

There are four basic theories used to describe our current American government. The traditional democratic theory is what we should have and what Americans say they aspire to uphold. Unfortunately, our current government does not respond to the interests of citizens like it should. Americans generally believe that we are functioning as a representative democracy and that our elected officials are acting in the best interests of their constituents. However, in actuality corporate lobbyists and their interests hold much more power than the voting public. Lack of accurate information in the press and the growing wealth gap prevents people from making decisions based on facts and impedes citizens from actively participating in democracy.

The pluralist theory proposes that people will organize themselves into groups that share a common cause and use this unity to impact public policy. This theory states that competition in the selection of government officials and formation of public policy prevents any one group from exerting their dominance. To function properly, the pluralist theory necessitates compromise. However, most politicians will not compromise as they are more worried about being reelected

than finding common ground. The Democratic and Republican Representatives in the House took three weeks to elect the current speaker, Mike Johnson. There are not many who will cross party lines to “get things done.”

The hyperpluralist theory proposes that groups of people can influence government if they are motivated by the same interest and bind together. This is not a solution that does not work as there are so many fractured groups that no consensus is ever reached. Also, our current system is, at the heart, a two-party system dominated by the Democrats and Republicans.

Unfortunately, the elite class theory is the one that most accurately reflects the government in America today. A small number of people and groups hold all the power. From Amazon and Meta to Big Pharma, corporate lobbyists hold more control over elected officials than their constituents. The top 1% continues to grow their wealth and influence. The marginalized and poor are left out and have no power to influence government’s actions or policies.

The Founding Fathers intended America to be ruled by the people and act as a representative democracy. Citizens should have the power to vote and by doing so influence the actions of our government. We should be giving the people the power to consent to the actions of their government. However, the economic structure of capitalism gives the wealthiest Americans and corporations and lobbyists control of the way our government functions.

Capitalism Obstructs Democracy

Although most citizens are taught about the institutions of American government, very few people understand democracy and capitalism as structures that interfere with one another. In *Magruder’s American Government*, the author outlines the aspects essential to having a functioning democracy explaining, “In a democracy, supreme political authority rests with the

people.” An effective democracy rests on the belief that every single person has an equal value and a responsibility to participate in the democratic process. A democracy needs to have a simultaneous faith in the majority and demand for minority rights. The people participating in establishing democracy need to be able to build and accept compromise. Another important aspect of democracy is that individual freedom needs to be guaranteed (Shea & Co, 2022). While these concepts are needed for a healthy democracy the problem with the institutional approach is that these concepts are not being executed.

Capitalism interferes with the healthy functions necessary to maintain democracy. While democracy is a political system and capitalism or free market enterprise is an economic system, *Magruder's American Government* claims, “...both are firmly based on the concept of individual freedom. America’s experience with both systems clearly suggests that the two reinforce one another in practice.” Despite the intention for capitalism to be based on individual freedom it has morphed into a system that advocates more for corporations than individuals. Capitalism has run rampant through our society and has turned individual freedom into corporate greed and bribery. Another flaw in the institutional approach to teaching government is the falsities in promised equality, “Because the United States is a democracy, Americans enjoy a long list of economic rights...These rights are important to individuals and society because they promote equality and ensure just and favorable conditions for all” (Shea & Co, 2022). While some laws have passed that guarantee individual freedoms, to say that Americans have individual economic rights is an overstep. The Equal Rights Amendment still has not been ratified, and the average woman still makes 77 cents for every dollar a man makes, even when they are doing the same job (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2023). An institutional approach at explaining democracy

and capitalism is deficient. Capitalism is preventing a healthy democracy in the United States from functioning.

The first aspect of a healthy democracy is empowered citizens and capitalism blocks that necessary participation. According to The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, “Citizens are empowered when their rights are protected, they are informed, and fellow citizens and policymakers proactively engage them in the democratic process” (University of Pennsylvania, 2023). However, because of capitalism the citizens of the United States of America are anything but empowered. The most basic responsibility that a citizen needs to uphold in order to be considered active and empowered is vote, but capitalism has created a polarity of wealth which is preventing half of Americans from executing that basic right. Although all citizens in a democracy should have the power to vote, that is in fact not the case. One expert explains, “Voting is a right that allows citizens to make their voices heard, but the reality is that as many as half of eligible voters in the US still don’t participate in the election process (Rodriguez, 2020). There are many barriers which are responsible for the lack of participation, such as lack of transportation to the polls and no ability to secure government issued identification. In a capitalist society, most people have to hold full time jobs to support their families and often people have to work two jobs just to survive. The system we have created under our capitalist umbrella forces people to work many hours to meet their families’ basic needs. This demand causes people to be unable to afford adequate housing or food for their families, let alone a car to take them to the polls. Many cannot afford to take time off work necessary to take public transportation to the polls and those living in rural areas do not have access to any public transportation. Even if people do somehow find a way to make it to the polls our laws require a valid government issued identification which costs \$30-35 and a half day off of work to sit at the

Department of Motor Vehicles. Also, capitalism is failing the United States because people of color are less likely to vote and less likely to be active participants in the democratic process. A survey conducted by Caltech and MIT regarding people who did not cast ballots in the 2008 election,

...suggested that people of color are more likely not to vote because they encounter more barriers to voting, compared to white citizens who tend not to vote by choice. Various laws and structural systems, from limited early voting windows to ID restrictions, disproportionately impact people of color and contribute to voter suppression across the country (Rodriguez, 2020).

Capitalism is inherently racist. Whether the disparity can be attributed to America's founding economy being based on slave trade and labor or the far right's tendency to create resentment among the white working class toward people of color, is irrelevant. There is a massive wage gap between white families and families of color created by capitalism which prevents all of the citizens in our nation from participating in our democracy completely.

Another aspect necessary for a healthy democracy is fair process; however, the structure of capitalism is preventing true fair process from taking place. Our "fair process" is impeded by lobbyists. Instead of one person, one vote our current capitalism system favors lobbyists and corporations over individual voters. Capitalism is preventing democratic fair process because

Democracy has become enfeebled largely because companies, in intensifying competition for global consumers and investors, have invested ever greater sums in lobbying, public relations, and even bribes and kickbacks, seeking laws that give them a competitive advantage over their rivals. The result is an arms race for political influence that is drowning out the voices of average citizens (Reich, 2009).

In order to have a functioning democracy people need to vote, but instead people's faith in the system is being eroded. The citizens of the United States of America know that their Senators and Congresspeople are being influenced by lobbyists who are motivated by corporate profit, and not listening to what their constituents need. Corporations are making the decisions instead of people. According to one global data and intelligence platform, "[i]n 2022, the top lobbying spender in the United States was the National Association of Realtors, with a total spending of 84.11 million U.S. dollars" (Statista, 2023). The National Association of Realtors are trying to put pressure on our Senators and Congresspeople to pass laws that make it easier to sell homes and therefore easier for them to make money. Our Congresspeople are being led by money and interests that are more concerned with money than people. The democracy Americans should have is supposed to be a representative government. Representatives are supposed to represent the people in their district. However, capitalism and the way Americans allow lobbyists to run unchecked shows that the democracy the nation currently has is not running the way the founders intended it to. Additionally running for office or even supporting a campaign is not accessible to the average person because,

It's really expensive to run a political campaign, and one way that lobbyists can get facetime to talk to politicians is to throw big fundraisers for them, and lobbyists themselves can actually donate to political campaigns. And most of the biggest spenders on lobbying represent business interests. This raises equity issues about what types of organizations can afford to hire lobbyists and ultimately whose voices influence policy (Farrar, 2022).

The wealthiest corporations get undue access to our Congress, not the average person. The people who are supposed to be representing the majority are only representing the select few. As

a democracy we have come so far away from what the founders intended. In the Gettysburg address President Lincoln said, "... that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth" but the capitalist system Americans have created is preventing the people from participating in the democratic process equally. The "people" are a missing component of the democratic equation because capitalism lends more power to corporations, profits, and their bottom lines. The government that Lincoln foresaw outliving us all is gone and has been replaced by a corrupt, money run, capitalist society.

Capitalism is preventing a democracy from functioning by blocking access to information and communication that are accurate, represented, and trusted. Fox News is churning out falsities to leverage ratings and make money. One example of the lies Fox News has been spewing happened after the 2020 presidential election of Joe Biden. Right wing political commentator Tucker Carlson and his fellow co-hosts of Fox News started to push the narrative that the Democrats altered ballots to ensure Biden's win. Even after Rupert Murdoch, the founder of Fox News, knew that these claims were false he did nothing to prevent the lies from spreading. According to National Public Radio, "In the heat of the moment, right after Election Day 2020, media magnate Rupert Murdoch knew that the hosts on his prized Fox News Channel were endorsing lies from then-President Donald Trump about election fraud. And he did nothing to intervene to stop it" (Folkenflik, 2023). Murdoch did not denounce the hosts on his show or point out the lies to the public because he wanted Fox News to make money. The annual revenue for Fox News in 2022 was \$14 billion (Zippia, 2023). The media is being controlled by capitalism. Tucker Carlson, and his lies, were bringing in views, which meant they were bringing in money. Rupert Murdoch and other news owners, hosts, and journalists who are part of the mainstream media, from all parties, have one common goal which is to make money. They do not care if the

information they are spreading is false. The capitalist society Americans have accepted in our lives is taking away the people's democratic right to accurate and trusted information.

Despite popular belief, capitalism is harming our democracy. Although most people are taught in school that capitalism and democracy exist and work together, this institutional approach simply does not describe the damage capitalism has done to our democracy. Capitalism prevents citizens from doing their duty and participating in the democratic process. The wealth gap created by the unlivable wages for the working people of America has created an inability to be active participants. Democracy has also taken a hold of the fair process in America. Government representatives cannot actively listen to and represent the people of the United States because of the overwhelming presence of lobbyists who are advocating for corporations. In a healthy democracy, an individual vote would count more than a corporation's greed. In reality, because of lobbyists' donations to politicians' campaigns, corporations push for laws that make them more money, which has overtaken the importance of the individual citizen's voice. Capitalism has also interfered with the United States democracy through the media. In order to maintain democracy, the citizens of the United States should have access to representative, truthful, and trusted information and communication. Lies are being spread through news sources that we are supposed to be able to trust, which is taking away the people's democratic rights. A functioning democracy does not need capitalism to thrive. We need to take the power away from corporations and away from money. We need to enact not only lobbyist reform but election campaign reform. The main reason that politicians are listening to lobbyists is because it costs so much to run for election or re-election. If reform limited the expense for campaigning politicians, they would be less influenced by donations from lobbying big name corporations. Although capitalism was originally not a corrupt system, it has morphed into a dangerous system that runs

completely against our founders original intentions. Capitalism no longer supports democracy but prevents it from operating in an effective way.

Plus ça Change, Plus C'est la Même Chose

In 1849, the French critic, journalist, and novelist, Alphonse Karr, termed the phrase “Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose” which roughly translates to “The more things change, the more things stay the same” (Newman, n.d.). It is an adage which has become common in the mainstream. In the United States, the economic and political policies of our elected leaders have remained the same no matter which of the two parties are in control of the Oval Office, Senate, or House. Our democracy is in danger as it is too unduly influenced by our capitalist economic structure. Whether our elected leaders are Democratic or Republican matters little as they are not answering to their constituents and instead are more heavily influenced by big business, corporate lobbyists. Those in power are not listening to the people. Abraham Lincoln’s vision of government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people” is far from capturing the reality of our current system. Capitalism reinforces and cements the status quo by placing power in the hands of the wealthiest and taking away the influence of the people. No matter who is elected as the American President in 2024, the status quo will remain the same politically and economically. There is not a choice. Both candidates hold similar beliefs and values, despite making claims to the contrary, and either one will maintain the status quo. Trump, Biden, and even a third-party candidate are quite similar on the political compass which gives the country no option to forge a new path. America’s political and economic status quo will not change no matter who is elected in 2024 as the existing state of affairs is reinforced by American capitalism.

While it looks as though it will be a rematch between Joe Biden and Donald Trump in 2024, both candidates hold similar views and will not be able to change America's entrenched political and economic systems. The political compass clearly demonstrates that both Biden and Trump are placed on the authoritarian right quadrant which gives voters really no definitively different choices in the coming 2024 presidential election. The political compass is a tool used by many to determine where a person stands politically, on a social and economic scale. The political compass was founded in 2001 when the creators realized that the traditional scale of left and right was too narrow a scale to accurately give a position on where countries stood. The compass is split on two axes and four quadrants. The vertical axis being the social scale and the horizontal axis being the economic scale creates the four quadrants: Authoritarian right, authoritarian left, libertarian right, and libertarian left. Biden and Trump, although pitted against one another as vastly different candidates, land in the same authoritarian right quadrant. The political rematch of the 2020 election puts the American people right back where they started four years ago. The political compass analysis of the 2020 election depicts the political and economic beliefs of each candidate by explaining both Biden and Trump are more similar than the American public wants to believe. According to one expert: "For the bulk of Biden's career, he's been an unswerving upholder of the status quo. Despite recent attempts to reinvent himself to accommodate the ascendant progressive wing of the party, Biden remains at heart an unimaginative conservative who, among much else, was a driving force for the catastrophic invasion of Iraq" (The Political Compass, 2023). Some criticize Biden as being too old to uphold the duties of the presidency. Regardless, Biden's economic and political stances have remained the same throughout his career. According to the United Nations the status quo is, "a Latin phrase meaning the existing state of affairs, particularly with regards to social or political issues"

(United Nations...n.d.). The maintenance of how our country runs will stay the same, as when Biden was elected in 2020 over Trump, nothing changed. The same is true for Donald Trump. The way most of America views capitalism as being as patriotic as apple pie helps Trump gain votes, but even if he is elected, not much will change. Even though Trump is facing four different criminal charges that have been brought forward in the past five months, he still is widely popular (Staff, 2023). However, popular does not mean qualified and does not mean that he will be able to “Make America Great Again” as he promises. One commenter hit the nail on the head when he remarked that, “Trump has barely mentioned a single policy of any kind as he blows fuses in every fact check machine” (The Political Compass, 2023). Trump worships at the altar of capitalism and as such will continue to focus on corporate and individual tax cuts which will preserve power for those in the highest economic class. Biden’s economic policies are no different than Trump’s support of capitalism as one of the key pillars of Bidenomics is to promote competition between businesses to lower costs for consumers (Bidenomics Is...2023). Capitalism has a choke hold on the American economy regardless of which man wins the Electoral College majority.

Whether the choice is Trump or Biden, voters are dissatisfied with both choices. Based on a recent poll, “Voters are evenly divided over whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the candidates they have to choose from next year, 50% land on each side.” The American people have started to realize neither candidate is fit to or capable of changing policies that would impact average citizens' daily lives. Both Biden and Trump are fighting to keep the same status quo which people recognize and are frustrated with. A recent survey showed that “Both candidates, though, fall far short on being someone Americans would be proud to have as president: Just 33% say they feel that way about Biden, 38% about Trump” (Agiesta, 2023).

Americans have been pretending they have a choice while voting for unsatisfactory men who, red or blue, have the same priorities. According to a recent USA TODAY/Suffolk University Poll, “67% of Americans think the country is facing either bigger problems than usual or is in the most troubled state they've ever seen” (Hughes, 2023). Citizens are finally reaching a point where they are questioning whether or not the state of our current political and economic systems are functioning in the way that serves American citizens. People are starting to question whether or not their vote even has an impact. Capitalism functions such that corporations and their lobbyists have more influence over elected officials’ actions than the average voter or entire blocks of constituents. Whether people vote for a Democrat or Republican, the policies stay the same.

Indeed, the status quo in the U.S. needs to be fully explored in order to understand how the 2024 election will not be able to transform or improve our current circumstances. The American economy is in crisis as the income inequality created and maintained by capitalism continues to create a divide between the top 1% and the average American. Until Americans stop chasing the all-mighty dollar, the status quo will stay unchanged. For example, “A look beyond the statistical snapshots candidates commonly use to long-term trends and global comparisons reveals that America’s economic problem is not that there’s something wrong with the status quo; it’s the status quo itself that’s wrong” (Poole, 2019). The status quo is the problem. A fact which is compounded by the hard truth that no matter who is elected, our political and economic state is fixed in stone. A research index reveals,

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. Since 1970, the United States has experienced six party changes in the

White House, five party changes in control of the Senate, and four in the House of Representatives. It has also experienced seven recessions (and recoveries). Yet on critical indicators of economic, social, and democratic health, our index shows little improvement and, in many cases, substantial deterioration over this period” (Poole, 2019).

The top 1% continue to acquire wealth while the bottom 50% have seen no growth in their economic share, a startling consequence of capitalism. Other critical factors that prove America’s current circumstances will not be changed no matter who is elected to office is the constant poverty rate which hovers at around 13% “...even in the face of what has been called the longest period of economic growth in recent American history.” No matter who has been in the Oval Office, poverty remains unchanged and its impacts are felt the most strongly by those who are most vulnerable. For example, “A higher percentage of children in the United States live in poverty (nearly 21%) than the population as a whole...The United States also has among the world’s highest rates of elder poverty.” Politicians say they want to lift people out of poverty but voters do not believe Trump’s message of *Make American Great and Glorious Again* or Biden’s message of *Finish the Job*. Another piece of evidence that demonstrates how the status quo is failing most Americans can be found by looking at how wages have been stagnant for the majority of Americans. The systemic economic crisis shows that “For production and nonsupervisory workers in the private sector, average hourly earnings today are essentially the same as they were in 1970 when inflation is factored in.” The American Dream is now out of reach as working hard and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, places people squarely in the exact same position or worse off considering that healthcare costs and undergraduate tuition costs have skyrocketed. To make matters worse, racial inequality has continued to grow since the

1970s. Statistics emphasize that “Whereas in the 1970s the median net worth of White households was around 1,500% higher than the median net worth of Black households, by 2016 White household median net worth was 4,000% higher than that of Black households, because Black net worth is actually shrinking” (Poole, 2019). The systemic racism entrenched in our society continues to place power in the hands of the richest among us and strip power from the poor and marginalized.

Although the people are starting to become displeased with the status quo, capitalism is reinforcing and preventing America from changing the current state and function of our government. Elections are being affected by who has money, because money is power in our current economic and political system: “Capitalist elections are orchestrated at every level – zero exceptions – by the U.S. ruling class, that is, the tiny multi-billionaire, cum trillionaire class that owns and controls society’s key economic, financial and political institutions” (Mackler, 2020). The top one percent of society have been unduly influencing the decisions of our government for decades. Because Americans live in a capitalist society, capitalism has taken over our democracy. No election can be deemed fair, just, or representative of all the people if the election is being paid for by the wealthiest among us who hold selfish motives.

The election game is rigged at every turning point from near zero access of working-class parties to the ballot or to the corporate media, not to mention to the multiple billions required for serious participation. The sheer notion that the capitalist Democratic Party has a ‘progressive’ wing is utter nonsense (Mackler, 2020).

If a candidate wants to run for President, they have to spend billions of dollars to even be considered a serious candidate. The way current elections are funded precludes the average citizen from running. In order to run for office a candidate has to obtain sponsorships and

donations. Who has these unlimited funds? Big corporations that have deep pockets that they can use to serve their own interests and make more money. Whether passing a bill, vetoing a bill, or changing a policy, if a corporation is funding a candidate, they expect their interests to be advanced in return. If the candidate does not abide by their wishes, their campaign funds suddenly disappear. The vicious cycle of paying for the presidency continues under the structure of capitalism. The President, Congresspeople, Representatives, Senators, or Supreme Court Justices do not make the decisions; the people paying for their campaigns do.

Whether American citizens cast their ballots for the Democratic or Republican candidate or even the third party's front runner in the 2024 presidential election, the structure of capitalism prevents change from transforming the status quo. The political compass clearly shows the top two candidates, Biden and Trump, both occupy the authoritarian right quadrant and that their views are too similar to give voters a real choice. American voters are questioning whether their votes make any difference. The majority of Americans are dissatisfied with both candidates. The status quo in the U.S. is reinforced by capitalism. The top 1% continue to acquire more wealth and the wealth gap means the poor and marginalized hold little power. Also, our current laws allow lobbyists from wealthy corporations to hold more sway over elected officials than the average voter. Stagnant wages, growing poverty, and racial division of wealth are just some problems that are reinforced by the status quo. The American dilemma is that the status quo is so indelible that the outcome of the presidential election and the actions of the American voters can do nothing to change it. Alphonse Karr may have been a Frenchman who lived over 160 years ago, but looking at the American elections next year, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Conclusion

Democracy and capitalism conflict. Most Americans believe that supporting both democracy and capitalism is patriotic; however, the two systems collide. Democracy needs to guarantee individual freedoms and requires people participate. People have to compromise for democracy to function. Capitalism interferes with the healthy functions of democracy. Capitalism blocks people from being empowered citizens and participating in the democratic process. The wealth gap prevents people from being able to exercise the most basic right of voting. The racial wealth gap between white families and families of color that is created by capitalism intensifies the problem. Lobbyists, funded by corporate greed, influence America's elected officials and silences the votes and voices of the average American. People's faith in the systems has eroded. The democracy Americans should have is supposed to be a representative government, but instead the structure of capitalism has made elected officials chase profits over the best interest of the people. Capitalism is preventing democracy from functioning by blocking access to accurate, trusted information. The mainstream media is more concerned with making money than providing the American people with accurate and trusted information. The political and economic status quo are reinforced by American capitalism.

No matter who is elected to the Oval Office in 2024, Trump, Biden, or a third-party candidate, nothing will change. Our choices in the ballot box are not true choices since Biden and Trump are in the same authoritarian right quadrant of the political compass. Neither Trump nor Biden will be able to change America's entrenched political and economic systems. Voters are dissatisfied with their choices, but more alarming is that there is no choice at all when all candidates hold the same priorities and are incapable of changing the disfunction in America today. Critical indicators of economic, social, and democratic health show that despite which

party controls the White House, Senate, or House of Representatives, circumstances do not change. The wealth gap, constant poverty rate, stagnant wages, and racial wage disparity mean that the poor and marginalized continue to lose power to the richest Americans. Elections are manipulated by big corporations with deep pockets.

In order to create change, American citizens need to start by passing lobbying reform laws. When special interests pay top dollar to hire and compensate lobbyists, democracy is at risk. Passing reform laws that require lobbyists disclose their actions and follow a set of ethical rules is necessary. Americans need to release our grip on capitalism in order to establish and maintain a more representative government. Addressing poverty, racial wealth equality, and the wealth gap are imperative if we have any hope to protect the most marginalized and vulnerable among us. The government America wants is one that does not let money dictate our societal values and gives equal opportunity for all to participate in democracy.

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