

Money Over Merit

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Abstract

In a time where American politicians are becoming more and more right-wing and unpopular, it appears that our future with the two-party system looks bleak. However, as we look towards the future of what could become of the political system of the United States, we need to look at where we are coming from. As such, we must assess the true nature of our political system and determine the status of our democracy. Using both empirical and normative evidence, the following essay is split into two parts. First, we explore whether the use of an institutional approach or a critical approach is needed when addressing the state of American politics. Following the conclusion from this section, the second part addresses whether our presidential candidates signify continuity or change. These two sections both lead to one conclusion: America is currently not a democracy, but an oligarchal state whose actions are defined more by the richest few than the people who inhabit this vast land.

The Four Theories of American Democracy

Americans have been questioning their government more and more lately. A study from the PEW Research Center shows that public trust in the government has been steadily in the range of 20-29% since 2007, around the time of a major economic crisis (Public Trust... 2024). Another study shows that 61% of people believe the government is doing too much for the wealthy and 69% of people believe the government is doing too little for the middle and lower classes (Americans' Views... 2022).

As this is going on, people are beginning to question the true nature of their government. They are wondering, "Is my voice even being heard in the government, as democracy would entail? Is this even a democracy that we are living under?" Well, there are four common theories on what our government is. The first one is traditional democratic theory. This theory states that America truly is a democracy because the citizens have the right to vote for many different positions from Congresspeople from our district to the President of the United States, and hence we have a significant say in what goes on in our government. Another theory is the pluralist theory. This theory states that America's government does not act based on our individual say in government, rather it acts based on the interests of competing interest groups, each vying for some say in a political issue (e.g. the NRA or NAACP). The third theory, hyperpluralism, accepts the reality of pluralism but claims that because there are so many competing interest groups, the government is not able to actually deliver on solving the political issues they present. Finally, the elite-class theory claims that the American government is run by the richest in our country, as they are the ones who influence our politicians and their policies. By examining our political system through a critical perspective and comparing the differences between the two parties with seemingly opposite platforms, one can begin to truly see the nature of our

government as one run almost entirely by the richest few, proving the truthfulness of elite-class theory.

The Importance of the Critical Approach to Assessing America's Democracy

Before we can even answer the question, we must first address which approach we should take in answering this question. The first option is the institutional approach, where you could simply look at the institution of our government itself and how it operates, and simply answer the question from there. This approach may lead to a decent understanding of our democracy, as it can help us understand the means on which our democracy is intended to be based. Alternatively, we can take the critical approach where we look at the system critically by analyzing it within the structure in which it exists, that being capitalism, along with the other aspects of culture and society that are not explained in the institutional perspective. This is the approach we must take to understanding our government. Without it, everyone in America would be servile agents of the status quo and we would continue to suffer under a “democratic” system that nobody would have a complete understanding of.

The Institutional Approach and Its Flaws

While the institutional approach can lead to a basic understanding of what makes our government flawed, it lacks a lot of nuances that would help explain the modern problems we face because it only understands them in the context of a centuries-old system.

Take for example this argument from an institutionalist regarding campaign financing:

If the goal is to have positive campaigns, even more money would be needed, for the simple reason that positive ads are less memorable than negative ones and hence need to be repeated more frequently. Besides, a limit on spending would mean that candidates would have to depend more on the media to get their message across, and the press is

often more negative in its campaign coverage than the contestants themselves (Smith, 2006).

This claim is just plain false. Smith is trying to make the point that if more money is spent on a campaign, we will see more positive ads because they would require more repetition to be receptive to their audience. However, if negative ads are already more memorable than positive ads, could it not be reasonably assumed that more money would just go to a higher concentration of negative ads? This example shows how personal philosophy plays a major role in one's view on politics, clearly being from the perspective of an optimist. An optimist would extrapolate the status quo to assume that the future will be bright if we continue on the path we are going on, while a pessimist would extrapolate the status quo to assume that the future will be dark if we continue on our current path. This exemplifies the contrast between the institutional and the critical perspective; you can choose to believe in a positive present and future, but it must come from a place of acceptance for the institution, or you can choose to believe in a negative present and future, but it must come from a place of dissatisfaction with the institution.

Citizens United v. FEC

One of the most important pieces of evidence that proves why the critical approach is needed is the landmark Supreme Court case of *Citizens United v. FEC*. In this case, "The Court ruled to strike down a prohibition on corporate independent expenditures, which has since enabled corporations and other outside groups to engage in unlimited amounts of campaign spending" (Lyon, 2024). It also massively enabled PACs to contribute money to our elections and allowed for the creation of Super-PACs. A PAC is defined as, "a political committee that raises or spends more than \$1,000 to influence the outcome of a federal election in a calendar year" that "may accept a contribution of up to \$5,000 per year from any individual," while a

Super-PAC is defined within the same threshold of \$1,000 of money spent to influence the outcome of a federal election with the added contingency that “it may accept unlimited money from any non-foreign source” (PACs, Super-PACs... 2018).

This case marked a monumental change in the amount of funding going towards the elections and perhaps has set the most defining precedents for campaign funding to this day. For example, in the decade following this decision, “The 10 most generous donors and their spouses injected \$1.2 billion into federal elections,” and “Election-related spending from non-party independent groups ballooned to \$4.5 billion over the decade. It totaled just \$750 million over the two decades prior” (Evers-Hillstrom, 2020). Not only is this a ridiculous amount of money, but also 25% of it came from 10 people. We can also see the effects of this in our upcoming election. Although Harris has double the amount of candidate committee money, both Harris and Trump have raised \$335 million dollars from independent sources (2024 presidential race, 2024), showing that while one candidate is being supported more by the people, they are both deemed equally suited to help bolster corporate power in the government.

Since *Citizens United*, there has been zero legislation passed to limit campaign funding from super-PACs. In fact, only more laws have been passed that benefit these harmful super-PACs. For example, in the Supreme Court case *McCutcheon et al. v. FEC*, a 5-4 decision struck down limits on aggregate spending of an individual contributor, claiming it violated the First Amendment (*McCutcheon et al. v. FEC*, 2014), and in the case *Ted Cruz for Senate et al. v. FEC*, a three judge panel for a district court in the District of Columbia ruled that limiting the repayment of candidate loans is unconstitutional (*Ted Cruz for Senate et al. v. FEC*, 2021). An important part of the critical approach is to analyze trends and see how they factor into the flaws in our government, and from this trend we can determine that currently, America is on a trend

that does not favor the people, as democracy would entail; rather, we seem to be falling further down the rabbit hole that will only allow less people to have a say in what goes on in D.C.

So how does this affect our government? Well, it basically allows for a symbiotic relationship between capitalists and Congress. Take a look at this example:

Chief executive officers at the largest companies in the United States saw their compensation surge by 1,085% from 1978 to 2023, compared with only a 24% increase for typical worker pay, according to an annual report (Corbett, 2024).

This discrepancy could have been curbed by many means in the government, but why has it not? Both of our main political parties run on a pro-working-class platform, so why have they not been implementing policies that actually benefit the working class? Although singer-songwriter Jessie J naively argued in her song “Price Tag” that, “It’s not about the money, money, money,” it is indeed about the money, money, money. Since both of the parties get their money from corporations and the obscenely wealthy people who run them, the members of these parties naturally need to support their interests in order to maintain political power. As a result, these politicians will not support measures that actually support their largely working-class and middle-class constituents. This is not just speculation. In fact, a Princeton study showed that no matter how much the public supports a given idea to be passed into law, there is a flat 30% chance for that idea to be passed, even if not a single person wants that certain idea to be passed, whereas for the elite class, the more they want something to be passed, the more likely it is to be passed (Corruption is Legal in America, 2015). This is just another example of how the critical approach will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of what influences our government.

Our Two Parties and Democracy

The critical approach not only analyzes the influence of capitalism on our system, but it also analyzes the way our political system itself antagonizes democracy. Both of our modern political parties are directly responsible for suppression of democracy, although one does it more subtly than the other. Firstly, the Republican party has very blatantly participated in actions that attempt to diminish our attempts at democracy. On January 6, 2021, the incumbent president Donald Trump incited a riot at the Capital after heating up viewers by denying the result of the election, saying “We will never give up. We will never concede. It doesn't happen,” “If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore,” and, “We are going to the Capitol.” (Cabral, 2021). It was likely a very scary day for the Congresspeople who had to deal with the rioters, but more importantly, the response to this incident shows a clear lack of care for maintaining democracy on the Republican side. Despite the fact that our two major political parties only have power because of their history and continued financial support, the way in which we vote for these two parties is fair and should not be considered illegitimate because the results do not favor the side you support. Even after the January 6 incident, the Republican party continues to support Trump as their candidate for president. This shows how the Republican party could care less about whether their candidate cares about the democratic process, showing cracks in the wall that separates the American people from the knowledge of whether our political system truly cares whether it is democratic or not.

Anti-democracy values are not only promoted by the Republican party, however; the Democratic party indulges in their fair share of antics that go against the very nature of democracy. Although the Democrats run under a platform that says they are the pro-democracy party, they are secretly making moves that undermine the very nature of democracy. This is

evident through their various attempts to remove the Green Party and other third-party candidates off the ballot, as they deem these parties to be taking away votes from their own:

An employee of the Democratic National Committee filed a complaint Wednesday seeking to remove the Green Party's presidential candidate from the ballot in Wisconsin, arguing that the party is ineligible. It's the latest move by the DNC to block third-party candidates from the ballot. Democrats are also seeking to stop independent Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in several states. (Bauer, 2024)

The Democrats are somewhat understandably upset at the fact that third party candidates are taking away from their share of the votes, such as in 2000 when Green Party candidate Ralph Nader ran on a platform that attracted people who were more to the left than the Democratic party and won 97,000 votes in Florida, a state that needed 500 more votes from the Democratic party to win them the election. However, as a solution to this issue of third-party candidates "stealing" votes from their party, the Democrats have been repeatedly trying to take them off the ballots, such as in the above example of Wisconsin Democrats. This is a completely unacceptable way to approach this issue. The people are voting for these third-party candidates because they feel that they better represent their vision for America's future, so what do the Democrats do in response? Instead of responding to their claims and trying to win over these votes, they try to take them off the ballot. This shows how the majority of the American political system (that being the two major political parties) serve not the people, but their own selfish political interests, thus proving the importance of the critical approach to answering the question of our democracy.

So...What Are We?

The question of whether America is a democracy is not an easy one to answer. It becomes even more difficult when we consider the nature of democracy itself. Is it even possible to create a truly representative democracy where everyone's voice is represented? Even this question is difficult to answer. Mathematically, the answer is no. In different popular systems of voting such as ranked choice and first past the post, the majority of people are not having their voices heard (Why democracy... 2024). However, we can get close to achieving the ideal of democracy, and in its design, the United States does a pretty good job at nearing true representation from the people. The House of Representatives makes sure our local needs are being represented, the Senate assures that those from smaller states are more fairly represented in Washington DC, and the checks and balances between these two divisions of the legislative branch and between the other branches help to assure equal power over one another...but the institutional approach ends there. It does not even bother to look at the other factors that impact our political system and the modern context of it. Our economic system of capitalism weighs heavily on our politics, as is evident by Citizens United v. FEC, and both of our most prominent political parties are working to undermine democracy. These pieces of evidence are only permissible under the critical approach, and hence without it, we would miss an important part of the picture.

Trump and Biden: Continuity or Change?

Now that we know how to address questions about our government and possess a general understanding of how they operate, we can assess the effects of our two political parties and who they represent. Do they actually act based on the wants and needs of their constituents or are they just mules for the corporate overlords that rule our society? The Republican and Democratic

Parties present themselves as opposites of each other, but the two parties are much more similar than we think.

The Republican Party had well-meaning origins. As the divide between the Northern and Southern states of America grew larger and larger, the Republican party emerged with the aim to repair this state of division and protect the rights of (most) Americans. However, as time went on, this party has evolved into a representation of conservative values and limited government involvement in the economy. The Democratic Party was always quite the opposite of whatever was on the Republican agenda. When the Republican Party was first created, the Democrats existed to defend slavery in contrast to their opponents. Then, as the Republicans became the party of laissez-faire economics, the Democrats nominated candidates that advocated for more government intervention, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Since then, the Democrats have become known as the party of the “working people.”

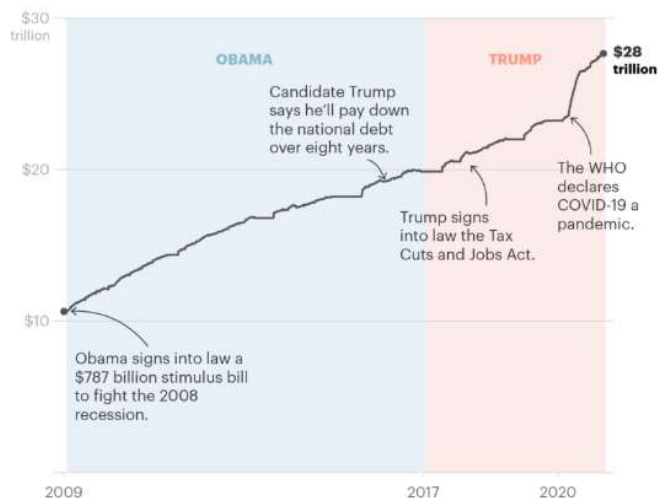
Somehow, throughout these two parties’ changing histories, they have both still managed to remain in power. How strange is that? In spite of the fact that these parties change their agendas from decade to decade, they continue to be our only two options in American politics. So, as these parties have continued to remain dominant in our political system, it is necessary that we continually judge these two parties so we can learn whether they can bring change or if they will maintain the status quo. Thus, in looking at the similarities and differences in Trump and Biden, we can see whether we are choosing between two truly different candidates or just different fonts of the same candidate.

The Economy

When our economy is doing well, it is often credited to the president; on the contrary, presidents are blamed when the economy is dipping. This has very much been the case with

Donald Trump and Joseph Biden, but did they truly impact the economy? Both parties will claim that their economic policies will be best for the American people, but they each have different strategies. Trump claims a similar economic platform to his conservative predecessors (e.g. Ronald Reagan) that favors corporations as the backbones of the American economy through trickle-down economics. The Republican party is very open about their association with mega-corporations, evident through Donald Trump's relationships with corporate overlords such as Elon Musk and the hundreds of millions in funding he receives from them. However, he did implement a few policies to help improve America's working class. His biggest claim to fame was the "Tax Cuts and Jobs Act," which intended to decrease taxes and increase employment (as the name would suggest). Although it did have some success in its limiting of "immediate expensing of business investments," the tax revenues in the years following the bill were, "significantly lower than what was projected without the TCJA." (Lincicome, 2020) The result of these tax cuts was catastrophic for the working people of America. Donald Trump's plans to reduce taxes followed a common trend of a reduction in government spending on public needs. During his administration, we saw reductions in funding for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act, housing and rental assistance programs, and non-defense discretionary programs. (Greenstein, 2024) Along with this decrease in spending on public programs, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act actively increased the US national debt, something that Trump promised to reduce in his campaign:

Daily total national debt from 2009 to present.



(Sloan, 2021) This is just one of the many ways in which Trump failed the working people of America. Instead of prioritizing policies that actually help disadvantaged Americans, he prioritizes promoting the ideal of a tax-free America, even if it is at the cost of social programs that play an important role in the vitality of America. Donald Trump's plans for his next term are also going to be horrible for everyday Americans. He plans to impose a 10% tariff on all imported goods, a plan that seems solid as tariffs are known for increasing domestic manufacturing jobs. However, there are many complications with tariffs. The Tax Foundation states:

Over the long run, tariffs shrink the size of the economy by reducing work and investment. That's because tariffs increase the relative prices of imported and protected goods, and after paying those higher prices, people have less income left to spend elsewhere. Effectively, this means tariffs reduce the after-tax value of income by reducing how much consumption people can afford. The reduction in the after-tax value of income reduces incentives to work, which reduces hours worked and, in turn, capital

investment. Fewer hours worked and a smaller capital stock resulted in a permanently lower level of output and income. (York, 2024)

This is perhaps Donald Trump's most disastrous proposal, and it happens to be at the forefront of his campaign. People tend to like the idea of tariffs because they represent a stronger American economy, but they refuse to acknowledge the many adverse effects of the policy. Thus, Donald Trump's presidency will actively worsen the US economy as seen through the failures of his past policies and the flaws of his future policies.

Biden was not much better than his Republican counterpart. The Democrats run as the party of the working class, but it seems they have gone entirely astray from that platform:

With each presidential cycle, Democrats keep moving further and further to the political right. Today's leading Democrats have an insatiable appetite for militarism, policing, and fossil fuels. They continually cut funding to the working class and the poor in order to fund the military and fossil-fuel expansion. And in doing so, they make allies with some of the most right-wing, fascistic leaders and authoritarian leaders in the world (Netanyahu of Israel; Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia), while inflicting crushing economic sanctions on small, socialist countries like Cuba, which happens to be providing the world with vaccines and socialized medicine. (McCarley, 2024

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/06/23/instead-of-trashing-cornel-west-heres-what-democrats-could-do-if-they-actually-cared-about-social-and-economic-justice/>)

This is a belief held by most of America, as people are finally beginning to see through the Democrats' lies. However, in spite of their corporate sympathies, they still appear to be implementing policies that are more helpful for the majority of the American people. Biden's biggest economic success was the "Build Back Better budget reconciliation bill." It provided a

large array of benefits that are still in effect today, such as free preschool, two years of free community college, expansion of Medicare and Medicaid, lowering of prescription drug costs, and investment in over one million affordable rental housing units along with 500,000 homes for low and middle-income homebuyers (Salam, 2021). Despite the slight reversal of Trump-era tax codes that accompanied this bill, it still required severe deficit spending; unlike Trump, however, this deficit spending actually went towards causes that largely helped the American people. This proves that the Democrats are clearly a better option for the economy and social programs. Although they aren't making a severe impact on our more than screwed up system, at least they aren't actively making it worse like the Republicans are.

Civil Rights Issues

One other aspect where the Democrats and Republicans differ to a sizeable degree is civil rights, particularly when it comes to abortion rights. Donald Trump's 3 appointments to the Supreme Court were vital to the historic *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case. This case determined that the Constitution "does not confer a right to abortion," overturning *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey* (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022). Along with this, if Donald Trump appoints more justices to the Supreme Court in his next term that replace the older justices as a part of the conservative majority, there could be a conservative supermajority for the foreseeable future, leading to a severe endangerment of civil rights for not just the women in our country, but other marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, evident by the passing of the *Don't Say Gay* Bill in Florida. Democrats have campaigned on exactly the opposite front - in Kamala Harris' campaign for president, she claimed that she would affirm the right to same-sex marriage and abortion. As a result, in voting for Democrats as elected officials, you do more to support marginalized individuals throughout the country.

The Bigger Picture

The previous evidence may lead to a conclusion that our vote makes a big difference in what happens in our lives and the lives of Americans throughout the country. It appears that we can play a major part in deciding the future of the United States of America. Yet while this evidence may inform us of which party in our current system is superior, it does not prove America to be a Democracy. Sure, a Democrat run Washington DC would result in an America with a more controlled version of capitalism; however, the fundamentals of our capitalistic society will remain the same, as the party's corporate sponsors dictate their maintenance of the status quo. While we have looked at how the Democrats can positively influence social and economic change, they still enforce a system that has clearly not been working. One thing also neglected is the fact that American foreign policy will remain oppressive under both a Trump and Harris administration, especially in light of conflicts with Ukraine and Russia and Israel and Gaza:

One of the two major-party candidates for the presidency of the United States has allowed an decades-long ethnic cleansing to morph into a genocide, a horror that could be stopped with one phone call; has escalated the drilling of oil and gas despite the existential threat of global warming; forced railroad workers to swallow a bad contract by breaking their strike; and spent his Senate career as an errand boy for banks. And that's the lesser evil! (Dolack, 2024)

The Democratic Party is certainly more protective of our civil rights and better for our (albeit corrupt) economy, but they will still continue to perpetrate unthinkable horrors on the rest of the world. This proves that our two-party system represents too narrow of a political spectrum. There are many other candidates who can affirm the importance of civil rights along with further

reform of capitalism and a decrease in abhorrent foreign policy, yet it is impossible for them to win in the way our two-party system is set up - one which supports money over merit.

How Can We Improve?

Democracy is not a perfect system. However, as Winston Churchill famously said in a 1947 speech, “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” (The Worst Form of Government, 2016) So how can we strive towards a more perfect form of democracy, even though there can be no perfect democracy?

In terms of the distant future, we must look to abolish the two-party system that only allows for the wealthiest and most prominent parties to hold the most powerful positions. Part of this responsibility lies within the media. If our major news organization actually covered third party candidates like Jill Stein or Cornel West or gave them spots in presidential debates, Americans would come much closer to being fully educated on the potential of the impact of their votes and the subsequent diminishing power of capitalism. Unfortunately, the media thrives on the milk of capitalism, so it is unlikely that they will actually commit such action to bolster the prominence of third parties. Along with this, according to a study conducted by the PEW Research Center, popularity of socialism had decreased by 6% from 2019 to 2022 (Modest Declines...2022), meaning that it would be highly unlikely for a truly socialist candidate to come to power within the next few years.

So, what can we do for the time being? One reason why our most recent election cannot be fully considered democratic because one of the candidates was not even nominated through popular vote. Most of the time, primaries are held within each party to determine which

candidate would represent them in the upcoming election - but with Joe Biden's horribly managed late resignation from the presidential race, almost all the leaders of the entire party immediately began to rally behind his Vice President, Kamala Harris, without giving the Democrats across America a say. This should not be the case in the next election, which is excellent news. According to the same aforementioned 2022 study, positive views of capitalism went down by 9% from 2019-2022. This means that in the 2028 presidential primaries, the Democrats are more likely to nominate a candidate that possesses more anti-capitalistic beliefs. Perhaps a candidate who runs a grassroots campaign with more outspoken left-leaning beliefs, such as Bernie Sanders (who earned a commendable second-place result in both the 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries), could earn this nomination, but it is up to us to vote! If more left-leaning Democrats can show up and show out in the next presidential primary, there is a high likelihood that the present symbiosis between capitalists and our government can at least be diminished.

More generally, for any of us at any time in our lives, we must make our voices heard! We must always remember that we have the power to change public opinion, even if it is to a small degree, so we must speak out and let the world know how we are feeling. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Silence becomes cowardice when the occasion demands speaking out on the whole truth and acting accordingly." (Gandhi, 1960)

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