

**The Disunited State of America**

Joaquin Santiago

Department of Social Studies, College Park High School

U.S Government

Teacher - John Kropf

December 15, 2023

### **Abstract**

There are four different theories on how the everyday citizen influences the government's decisions in the United States. Right now, there is a lot of evidence pointing towards the United States being close to one of the theories characterized by inequality of influence over what goes on inside the government. We will take a structural approach to analyze the systems of democracy and capitalism together in practice, to further prove this point. Capitalism's economic inequality has led to inequality in political power and influence in which the demands of the elite are answered over the demands of the people. This is shown even more when looking at the 2024 election and the possible future legacies under Trump or Biden. We are given the illusion of change and choice in what happens in our government, while the real choices and changes in government are controlled by those behind closed doors. There is a better method in which all people can have an equal say in what goes on in the government, but it requires effort from the people themselves to push for this change.

## The Disunited State of America

*“United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs.”* - Patrick Henry

When it comes to how the people rule in the United States of America, there are four theories relating to how the citizens influence government decisions. The first theory is one that we are all familiar with, called traditional democratic theory. This is the theory we have all been taught throughout our days in school and is the one that most people, if you were to ask them, would say we currently live under. In this theory, policymakers listen to what the people want and make policy accordingly. Another theory similar to traditional democratic theory but with a few minor differences is called pluralism theory. This theory argues that like the previous, the people have overall control in the government. However, this theory argues that there simply are not enough representatives in government to accurately represent the entire population. This theory argues that if you want your voice to be truly heard in the government you need to group yourself with others who agree with you. These political groups produce strength in numbers to ensure that the government knows what the majority of the population wants and responds accordingly. Another theory that builds on top of pluralism theory but explains its possible negatives is called hyperpluralism theory. Hyperpluralism agrees with everything in pluralism except it theorizes that there is a point in which pluralism no longer works. This theory argues that opposing groups can become too powerful to where neither can really affect the government's decisions. When each group is filled with a similar number of people who are equally radicalized in their beliefs the government cannot really do much. The government becomes “gridlocked” which is when a problem is too difficult to resolve because the government and people are too divided on the topic to solve it. The government is too afraid to

offend either side by picking one side to resolve the problem and in the end, nobody is happy.

The final theory, called elite theory argues that when you look at society in the United States the people are divided into two groups, the 99% and the 1%. This theory claims that the U.S. is divided into a socioeconomic hierarchy with the richest being at the top. The only people who are heard by the government in this theory are those with the most wealth.

Now when looking at these four theories, each one of them has aspects that could be argued with very well to prove it as a true theory. However, throughout this paper, there is a major recurring theme that has led me to believe and should prove to you as well, that elite class theory is the most accurate in terms of representing what influences the final say in government. This recurring theme is the effects of money in politics, which now seems to be the source of most problems in our government. Looking at the status quo of our government structurally proves this, with our economic system of capitalism incentivizing the maximization of profits by any means necessary. The government is in an infinite loop of money going to politicians to influence policy allowing the elite to influence policy even more through more money. At the end of the day no matter what people do to try to convince the government the final say goes to the elite. The majority of people do not choose what happens in our government, instead, that choice is given to those with the most money.

### **Democracy and Capitalism, The People vs. Profit**

*“I hope we shall crush in [its] birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength and bid defiance to the laws of our country.” - Thomas Jefferson*

When it comes to the United States of America, if you ask any citizen what type of government, we have the answer will almost always be a democracy, rule by the people being

what we have all been taught from a young age. The people rose up from under the tyrannical British government, establishing their own. A government infused with enlightenment thought with new ideas of equality (at least among white land-owning men at the time), and the many rights of citizens that the government could not deprive them of. Over time a lot has changed for the better as well, with slavery being abolished, and changes for equality amongst all no matter their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. So at least on paper, the people in the United States are able to practice many freedoms and rights.

But how much power does the average citizen of the United States actually have in what goes on in government? On paper, the United States is a democracy, and the people hold the power in the government. Do you believe the United States is the perfect model government just because that is what the government says? If you asked two people what they thought of themselves as a person, person one saying they are a perfect person and person two saying they are not perfect, who would you believe more in that situation? Would you believe the more conceited person not admitting to any flaws? Or would you believe the more open-to-self-critique person admitting their flaws? Would you rather have an honest enemy or a deceitful friend?

There have been many changes to our society that have affected the way we live since the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. One of those big changes to society was the advent of corporate capitalism. Take a giant corporation like Apple for example. In 2021 Apple's market cap was at a staggering 2.1 trillion dollars, higher than many countries' GDPs that year. Only 7 countries in the world including the United States have a higher GDP than Apple's market cap at the time (Wallach, 2021). It is hard to imagine that a CEO of a company like Apple, worth more than many countries, would have the same power in our country as the average citizen. A few million

dollars towards a few politicians' campaigns and a few government officials and you might have yourself a few tweaks in policy that will allow your corporation to make a few hundred more million dollars that year. Capitalism and democracy individually as political and economic systems are good systems for their respective purposes at least on paper. However, if you leave the two systems unchecked and unregulated (capitalism being an unequal system by nature, and democracy being based on equality) it will lead to a mess and blur between economic and political power. A system characterized by inequality cannot truly thrive with a system based on equality at least without rules and regulation to separate the two.

According to our textbook based on the curriculum intended for us to learn from for this semester, both capitalism and democracy reinforce one another, both being based on ideas of freedom. The textbook does admit flaws in the capitalist system talking about lack of equal opportunity with racial and gender discrimination in specific career areas. The textbook also talks about disparities between the rich and the poor and the favoring of industries by the government (Shea, 2023, p. 38). Along with that, it mentions the government's policies towards specific industries like food, drugs, and pollution. Other than that, there is only one other major mention of capitalism in the whole government textbook, talking about the types of economic systems. It talks about land, capital, labor, entrepreneurs, and other aspects of capitalism (Shea, 2023, p. 629). These mentions of capitalism throughout the book tend to distance it from affecting the government and explain it as solely an economic system. Because of the separation of government and economy into two different classes, the book does not really go into depth when it comes to capitalism. The book focuses more on the benefits of individual freedoms with wealth and property rather than that of giant corporations and their influence in government.

The textbook talks about capitalism from an institutional point of view, making points on the positives of capitalism on paper instead of the negatives of it in practice. Others have examined capitalism in a more structural and critical way, and questions where the wealth of public corporations truly comes from. A company's success is usually thought of as the success of shareholders rather than stakeholders. The mindset ignores raising the income of employees as a measure of success and implies employees are not truly part of the corporation. In capitalism, employees have little control over their livelihood with no major claim to the wealth they create and no influence over the governing body that controls them. In corporate capitalism, employees are treated more as subjects and less like citizens. This shows a sharp contrast in the livelihood of those working within a corporate construct with shareholders taking most of the rewards of employee efforts (Kelly, 2006). This structural look at capitalism is strikingly different from that of the textbook's institutional look at capitalism. While the textbook talked about capitalism working as a system of freedom, the structural analysis talked about life under corporate capitalism showing aspects of an aristocracy.

Now we see the problems with aspects of life inside of corporate capitalism, but what is a corporation anyway? A corporation is not another name for a business but a legal title for a business separating it as its own entity apart from its owners. The corporate structure was based on "joint-stock companies" which were mostly around during colonial times. These joint-stock companies took money from investors to sponsor their colonial looting expeditions and then returned some of their profits back to the investors. Corporate structure allows for corporate owners to profit from the corporations' business activities but take no blame for any wrongdoing of the corporation. Corporations act as legal protection for their owners. An example of which being when General Motors knew of a defect in their cars that ended up killing 124 people. They

decided it would be cheaper to pay the families of those who would die because of the defect than to fix the defect itself. No individual executives at General Motors were charged with any wrongdoing despite knowing of the defect. Owners of corporations can commit immoral acts to maximize profits ignoring laws and regulations. The owner can say that it was their corporation that committed these acts and not themselves leaving no single person to be punished for the corporation's crimes. Owners of corporations are essentially above the law when it comes to what happens as a result of their corporations and are able to do as they please and blame their corporate entity as a scapegoat (Grover & Peschek, 2006).

In order to correctly judge corporate capitalism and its effects on democracy in the nation we cannot look at the systems of democracy and capitalism as two different systems for different things and in an institutional way. We need to look at the two systems intertwined and see how they work with one another structurally. One academic researcher argues that the government states its policies are in the name of society itself while catering to the most influential groups instead of society as a whole. The book states that the same thing applies to the political system when it comes to the distribution of wealth. The rise of corporate society has led to the rise of the corporate state in which the interest of large corporate entities influences the government's decisions far more than those of the people. In the 19th century, this was seen when laborers tired of the abuses of the industrial elite rose up and in response, the government used force against them. The working-class citizens made up much more of society, however the smaller elite class was favored by the government (Parenti, 1996).

Even in the 20th century, the government favoring the elite over the average citizen continued. President Roosevelt, who was usually characterized for his acts to help the people over the elite, went along with policies allowing companies to raise profits and control the

market. With the start of World War 1, the government became more involved with industry. This increased conflict as strikes were punished with more force for being seen as interfering with the war. Later with the Great Depression of the 1930s reform plans came along like the New Deal. However, these policies focused more on the recovery of business rather than social reform. Some progress was made towards labor rights and social welfare, but it fell short for the most part. The government, rather than helping the people, tends to cater to the interests of the wealthy class and focuses more on maintaining the status quo (Parenti, 1996).

Now one might assume that these examples are from 100 years ago when political corruption was more rampant, and companies were less restricted than today where this is less common. And things are better today or at least they were until a Supreme Court decision was made in Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission allowing corporations to fund political candidates and campaign committees. Before this, it was a bipartisan agreement that keeping corporate money out of elections was the right thing. Citizen United allows corporate managers to spend large sums of money to politically influence without limit. Now politicians and political groups can demand sums of money from corporations. Companies will support politicians and political groups hoping that they will have their backs politically in return. Money's influence in politics has increased significantly since citizens united with midterm spending doubling from 2010 to 2014 and doubling again from 2014 to 2018 (Lund & Strine, 2022).

Another study examined how the small elite have gained influence in politics for their personal gain. Rich people can use their money to shape political agendas, turning policy in their favor which we have already mentioned. This is usually done through campaign donations which as stated in the last paragraph have been deregulated, allowing money to become a major player in politics. One method that elites used that was not touched on in the other readings was

regulatory capture. Regulatory agencies like those overseeing food and drugs, chemicals and pollution, and environmental protection can be overtaken or made to sympathize with those in industries supposed to be overseen by these regulatory agencies. They can influence regulatory policy and once they are satisfied, they can head right back into the industry after changing regulations to allow for more profit to be made. A former oil CEO can take the lead of the Environmental Protection Agency and change policy widening the allowance of pollution, lowering spending, and maximizing profits in the industry so they can return to their old job making more money. On top of this the rich manipulate tax policies and change policies on income inequality allowing the rich to get richer and the poor to stay poor (Baker, 2016).

With the growing power of corporations in politics motivated only to make money, democracy is crumbling. Corporations value everything off of its dollar price whether it is actively donating or supporting a cause online, they do it only because they see potential profit. The government's job is to fight for the people it is representing and address these issues for the people (Reich, 2009). However, if you depend on politicians and people in the government to fix this themselves then you will have just as much hope going to the CEOs of these corporations directly asking them to stop. If it were up to most of the people in government, they would just continue this as well. Policies that benefit wealthy CEOs also benefit those high-ranking in government who have the power to make the change. Citizens should not rely on the wealthy and powerful to make changes to help the poor and weak but instead advocate for change and new policies to prevent further corruption.

Capitalism and democracy interact with one another either really well or badly depending on the way you look at the two. Looking at things institutionally is more like looking at how things work on paper while looking at things structurally is more like looking at things in

practice. Looking at capitalism and democracy together in practice is a much better strategy to decide whether or not the two can thrive together. And as of now, based on the research of this paper it is clear that capitalism and democracy are not thriving with one another. Now this does not mean the two systems cannot absolutely thrive with one another, it is just a matter of changes to be made. The government will not act alone so it is up to the people to move towards these changes. It is up to the people to speak out and unblur the lines between capitalism and democracy. There is power in money but there also is power in voice and numbers. The 1% may have 50% of the world's wealth, but we have 99% of the world's voice.

### **The American Two-Party System, The Illusion of Choice and Change**

*“However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.” - George Washington*

When choosing who to vote for in a presidential election, most people vote for the candidate they believe will benefit the nation the most. People will vote for candidates who they feel are ideologically similar to themselves and promise changes to issues they believe are important. People voted for Biden in 2020 mostly because of his promises of improvements to society or to simply vote against Trump. People voted for Trump in 2016 because of his promises to “Make America Great Again”, by bringing more jobs in and improving the economic state of the United States. But how much did these presidents actually change? In the United States of America, the current economic and political status quo we live under is capitalism and democracy. The status quo is what every single person living in the United States

is conformed to at the end of the day. Fixing social issues only goes so far in affecting the lives of citizens in the United States. If the root of a problem is related to the status quo, it still remains unchanged. Looking toward the 2024 election how different would another four years of Trump actually be to that under Biden? Looking at two different candidates from two different political parties may make you think that the two are opposites in their policies and that one will make good changes and the other bad. But if you started asking these two candidates questions on the status quo, their opinions and ideology would most likely be close to the same. The only differences you usually find in politicians' ideology now would be their opinions on certain social issues. Candidates usually do not want to stray too far from what has been normalized and promise to change anything too drastically because of the risk of losing votes and campaign donations. With all of this in mind, it is hard to imagine that another four years of Trump or Biden would be any different in terms of daily life under the status quo.

According to most liberal and conservative media, however, both depict the opposing side as the unfavorable choice out of the two. Starting with a more liberal article from *The Washington Post* that argues that a Trump reelection in 2024 would lead to a complete democratic crackup in three different phases. The author argues that if Trump becomes our next president his first phase will be to appoint loyalists in positions in government like in the FBI and CIA, preventing further investigations on himself. The author also argues that he will politicize agencies like the CDC and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, for his own political gain. The author believes that Trump's second phase will be through the use of the military and foreign policy. Trump being a big supporter of the U.S. military is most likely to militarize the United States even further, probably increasing spending and holding many more parades and displays of military power. The author continues to argue that Trump may use the military authoritatively

to repress any protests against his presidency or any of his policies, leading to a fascist-like state in America. The author believes the third phase of a Trump presidency would be the political clashing between far-right groups and opposing sides. A Trump victory may lead to increased tensions between different ideological and racial groups leading to more political destabilization (Montgomery, 2022).

After seeing what liberal media had to say about a Trump victory, let us see what the conservative media has to say about a possible Biden victory starting with an article from *The Heritage Foundation*. The article discusses Biden's current problems in handling the economy, showing how it is leading to many swing states likely supporting Trump over Biden in the next election because of their economic concerns. The author states that another four years under Biden would mean another four years of inflation, low jobs, and low household income. He points to Bidennomics being the reason that American families lost an average of around \$7,400 and mortgage payments doubled on middle-class homes (Antoni, 2023). An article from *Breitbart* talks about polls showing that a majority of Americans think that Biden is simply too old to serve effectively as the president. Biden who is already showing the effects of old age may not be the best choice as our president for the next four years (Knudsen, 2023).

So now we know that according to liberal media, another four years under Trump would lead to a fascist American state and according to conservative media another four years under Biden would lead to another four years of inflation and an aging president. But take these opinions as you will because it is obvious both sides have a bias towards their own, making their opinions on the other most likely at least a little exaggerated. On top of this, neither side seems to mention anything about the effects on the status quo when it comes to both candidates. Moving along to something that should be a little less biased, at least in terms of bias toward certain

political parties, let us see what our government textbook says concerning elections and political parties. The book mentions mainly what political parties are and it does acknowledge the fact that although we have many different political parties only two dominate American politics, the Democratic and Republican parties. Besides this, the book only mentions some of the other parties and the differences between two-party and multi-party systems. The author tends to side with the two-party system stating the weaknesses of a multi-party system is too much division. And the book, like it did previously, had nothing to say about the status quo or anything related to capitalism in politics. The book however does have an interesting graphic depicting the American Political Spectrum. The political spectrum goes from left to right with liberal and conservative being at the opposite ends of the spectrum (Shea, 2023). Looking at this puts you under the impression that Democrats (liberals) and Republicans (conservatives) are on opposite sides politically. Therefore, electing a Democratic or Republican president should equal to opposite ends in policy.

However, there is another way to look at people and groups politically that is not using a single-line spectrum called the political compass. The political compass takes a different approach from the normal spectrum and instead of a single axis, it uses an x and y axis to depict not only left to right but also authoritarian to libertarian. On the political compass's website, you can take a test answering a series of around fifty questions on political topics that move you around the x and y-axis. This method gives a more accurate representation of where you are politically, versus that of the spectrum. After taking the test you can see where you stand politically and also compare yourself to current and historically influential people or politicians on the compass. Something interesting about the compass is that despite the spectrum showing conservatives and liberals as opposite ends, former President Trump (a conservative), and

President Biden (a liberal) seem to end up relatively close to one another in the upper right (Right, Authoritarian) quadrant. Rather than being on opposite ends of a spectrum, when you look at the two on a compass, they are very close to one another with Trump being just slightly more to the right and authoritarian (Brittenden, 2023). This completely debunks the idea of the political spectrum, as these two candidates which would have been on opposite ends of the spectrum, are right next to each other politically on the compass. And when it comes to the other three quadrants of the political compass, how are the people of the United States represented politically from these other quadrants if the two major party candidates lie around the upper right quadrant? How could we expect another presidency with Biden or Trump to be different if they both are shown to be relatively close together politically?

One study attempted to explain how two candidates from two separate parties usually deemed opposites by the media could wind up so close to one another on a political test. The article examined how the Democratic party has seen a major decline in support for liberal ideas and instead leans towards more conservative policy. The Democratic Party seems to have abandoned most of its support and advocacy for the working class and liberal economic ideas. Instead, the Democrats have trended more towards corporate interest from their donors, favoring the status quo (Graham, 2023). But if the Democratic party has lost its touch with liberal ideals why are people not voting for liberal third parties? But the two-party system today has turned into a duopoly because of a lack of competition from other parties. These other parties are not treated the same and often suffer from laws preventing equal campaign opportunity. The author argues that the two parties control laws to limit competition through ballot access, campaign funding, and representation in the media. Despite the support for outside views, these third political parties simply prevented from having a chance in elections (Sifry, 2003). Others have

suggested that the Democratic and Republican parties act as a single party and maintain control over others through gerrymandering and influence in campaign donations. The two parties act as though they are competing for different futures for the United States, yet they tend to promote the same policy that maintains the status quo (Knapp, 2022).

Now these parties may promote the same policy to maintain the status quo, however, they have their differences when it comes to their support for specific social issues. Each party's support and conflict over these social issues gives the illusion of difference between the two parties, while their underlying policy remains the same because of elite influence. Not only does it mask the true intentions behind the scenes, but it also divides the people as a whole. A study by the *Pew Research Center* discusses how the two-party system increases social divisions through battles over social issues. Political alignments from parties with certain ideologies, races, and religion causes profound division between the people. The Democratic and Republican parties increase tensions in society through the politicization of cultural, historical, and regional divides. This division leads to the hindering of Americans from moving together on common and collective problems (Dimock, Wike, 2020).

Even now when looking at Biden during his current term, you start to see a lot of signs of his more conservative policy in support of the status quo. Of course, we know Trump being a richer man himself, would most likely support a policy that benefitted himself and those like him. This is usually something common with most Republican policies, siding with the rich and corporations over the average working men and women. However, Biden being a liberal promised in the 2020 election to be harder on the rich and be more supportive when it came to working-class citizens and unions. A recent article showed implied quite the opposite, quoting Biden talking to a room of wealthy donors stating “No one’s standard of living will change...

Nothing would fundamentally change.” (Higgins, 2019). Another article from *Reuters* talks about Biden’s crushing of a railroad strike in which workers were simply asking for the option of sick days from work (Shepardson, Bose, 2022). Overall, this takes back to the topic of the first paper and the effects of money in politics, With Biden’s support more in policy towards those who contributed to his campaign donations than for the people who voted for him.

In the end, when it comes to the 2024 election it is hard to say that there would not be any difference at all between a second term of Biden or Trump considering their differences on social issues such as immigration, racism, abortion, and overall problems of inequality. When it comes to things like that, there will most certainly be a difference between their policy and those affected by those policies will most definitely feel it. However, when it comes to any changes regarding the status quo, it is safe to assume that it will probably be business as usual when it comes to it. The average citizen will most likely live a relatively similar day-to-day life whether under that of Trump or Biden. The Democratic and Republican parties are both equally influenced by money from those who want to maintain the current status quo. And without any real opportunity for third-party candidates in the election, it is hard to say we will see any change soon. The people cannot simply wait around for the government to make change, it is up to the people to make the change themselves.

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing capitalism and democracy structurally and looking toward our two possible outcomes in the 2024 election, it is obvious that there is a recurring theme when it comes to how the final say is made in government. Money is the reason behind almost all problems regarding politics, especially in a democracy. While ongoing battles happen over many smaller political topics publicly, the real battle over the status quo remains hidden. An illusion of

choice is given to the people in elections between two candidates, but no matter who wins the choice in policy goes to the highest bidder. So now we have concluded that we live under a system of government that we do not like and do not want, and while this is a sad conclusion it does give us the chance to answer another question. What type of government do we want? When looking back at the four theories there lies a true outlier amongst them. Traditional democratic theory would be the perfect government to live under. Equal say and influence in government is precisely what the founding fathers had intended for the citizens of the United States. This is the perfect world scenario that we were all taught from a young age in school. But that is just what it is, a perfect world scenario, and it is easier said than done. This is not an A-to-B scenario in which we can simply switch a couple of things around and have the government work this way. It will not be easy, and it will require a lot of time and effort. But maybe in referring to the only other theory that can truly compete against elite theory, pluralism, we can use numbers to make progress. Once again, the government will not fix itself, and it will rely on the people to help. The last time we truly had unity working towards a better future scared the elite class, and now they are working to divide us to prevent any more change from occurring. People need to set their smaller differences aside and embrace their similarities through their struggle as the 99%. A truly united state of America would be the first step, leading toward the perfect world scenario we all dream of for the future.

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