

Chasing Shadows of Democracy

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Abstract

Starting as early as 1776 when the country was officially established as a nation, it is reminded to every citizen that being in America carries the bright promises that lie in the Bill of Rights & Constitution, promising freedoms from discrimination, unreasonable search and seizure, along with the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, religion, association, mobility, and vote. In the 1900s when the country's economy fully shifted into capitalism, an idea in which trade and industry are largely controlled by private owners for their profit, the American government and economy arguably harmoniously aligned with the values of free will and independence for the people. However, with the unprecedented control and impact that money and corporations have on politics and the course of society, for decades many critics have rightfully been prompted with the question regarding the basis of democracy, and whether present-day America can even qualify as one. With the 2024 election coming up, people tend to disregard why is it that for decades, our presidential elections have only really been pushing for Democratic vs Republican agendas even if public opinions massively and in recent years increasingly do not align. I do not think that it would surprise many to say that these two topics are heavily related to the questioned basis of democracy, and Americans have to learn to separate their ideals from our current ordeal to honestly answer the two ultimate questions: what government do we currently have, and government do we want?

Chasing Shadows of Democracy

When people analyze the American government system, the different approaches and interpretations of our conditions can be summarized into four theories: the traditional democratic theory, pluralism, hyperpluralism, and elite class theory. The traditional democratic theory is a government system in which the power lies in the voices of the people equally. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a government system in which the power lies in competing interest groups. This idea may escalate and lead to hyperpluralism, a system in which too many competing groups may lead to a severe divide and fragmentation that prohibits the proper function of a government. However, most importantly, the last of the four theories is the elite class theory; a system in which the power lies in the wealthy top 1% of America. Despite the reputation that the United States has spread to the rest of the world, now renowned for being the spitting image of freedom, liberty, and democracy, an increasing amount of evidence undoubtedly argues otherwise. Citizens are reasonably worried that their voices are being silenced because time and time again people are being faced with injustices regarding race and socioeconomic class that are disregarded or may take years for them even to be addressed because it is not of interest, and most importantly, of profit, to the people who are in control of our country. To examine the different arguments regarding this topic, questions like whether capitalism can coexist with democracy & the continuities or changes with the upcoming 2024 election will be answered. If we were to look around today, there is a reason why no one in power encourages curiosity regarding the topics of capitalism, “democracy”, and political parties because citizens would realize that they have been lied to. America is not the democratic country that it triumphantly preaches itself to be, instead, it is more accurately described as governing under the elite class theory.

Of the People, By the People, But for Whom?

“Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from this earth.”

- Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address (Nov. 19, 1863)

Centuries ago, even before the establishment of the United States as a nation, democracy and its ideals reflected on American soil as early as the New England Colonies that first settled there. Even though this country is still functioning on the slightly tweaked constitutional and legislative foundation the American forefathers established in 1776 after being liberated from the British colonial power, there are two main approaches that people take when it comes to answering the question of whether America’s democracy and current capitalist economy can coexist: the structural approach and the institutional approach.

When critics approach the current condition of the United States through the institutional approach, the system of capitalism that supposedly characterizes the economy is viewed as completely separate from the system of democracy that is proclaimed to define our government. According to *Magruder’s American Government* which explains the systems of administration in our country, democracy is a governmental structure in which “supreme political authority rests with the people”, while capitalism is “an economic system in which individuals are free to own the means of production and maximize profits”. Yet, why is it that in a country that theoretically establishes a system of democracy and capitalism that symbiotically coexist, the word “capitalism” only appears a couple of times? Though the institutional approach that (Shea, 2023) takes views these two ideas completely separate, with democracy’s heavy emphasis on equality, representation, and popular sovereignty, “the kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom

because it separates economic power from political power and in this way enables the one to offset the other” (Friedman, 2003).

In understanding that the economy is not explicitly part of the government but is instead a system that is intertwined and plays a role in the shaping of democracy, this approach primarily argues that democracy and capitalism are two systems that can coexist, and even further, thrive. If we were to look at the rest of the world and examine their type of government in relation to their economy, “countries at the top of the GDP per capita rankings are, in fact, democracies” (Bailey, 2007). Being an idea that foundationally dates back to as early as the 18th century, the free market is another characteristic that is referred to when it comes to the belief that capitalism and democracies effectively exist side-by-side. It was said that “the great advantage of the market [...] is that it permits wide diversity [given that] it is, in political terms, a system of proportional representation.” (Friedman, 2003). By promoting the ideal diverse market with accessible participation for many, it is only natural for there to be the intent of fostering a flourishing economy for the country. It was observed that “market economies tend to generate not only broad improvements in living standards but also growing middle classes that the poor can hope to enter” (Galston, 2019). This is important because this said growing middle class “would agitate for personal liberty and political power [and the] tipping point seemed to occur when per capita income reached somewhere between \$6,000 and \$8,000.” (Bailey, 2007). However, on the surface level, even though the idea of enormous income in the country is idealized, to claim through the institutional approach that the democratic government has upheld its core values, to put it bluntly, is delusional and ineffective in comparison to the more accurate structural approach. “Although Protective Democracy is very concerned with equality in political rights, such as voting, and in equal protection under the law, Protective democrats are less

concerned about the existence or potential threat of material inequality in society, and in fact they assume that such inequality will exist.” (Hudson, 2006). This brings up a critical question that the structural approach to this country may ask: how will our democracy find a way to coexist with capitalism without having disparities that may ultimately compromise the democratic principles that Americans were promised, and are these disparities worth disregarding?

In hopes of dissecting and understanding the U.S. government on a deeper level in our nation, the structural approach pays special attention to the effects of capitalism and democracy on our forever-changing social, political, and economic relationships as opposed to being approached as simply the regulations of power in a governmental system. With the large market system America has been functioning through, “Throughout the twentieth century, between 50 percent and 76 percent of all privately held corporate stock has been owned by the top 1 percent of stockholders, who are surely members of the upper class” (Domhoff, 2006). There is a large gap between the rich and the poor and with the market showing no changes in its principles, this economic gap has unfairly remained and arguably increased for decades as well. Even with this said rising middle class, the economic inequities that keep many families trapped in loops of inescapable poverty cannot be dismissed in huge contrast to the “high-handed CEOs [that] can, by fiat, off several thousand workers from the payroll, thereby jacking up the company's stock price and enriching themselves with tens of millions in stock gains, while the workers and their families are allowed no redress for their grievances” (Hightower, 2006). With money becoming something in American society that directly correlates to power, a common sentiment has started to arise regarding the characteristics that define the supposed harmonious coexistence of capitalism and democracy. “‘Survival of the fittest’ and inequalities in purchasing power are

what capitalist efficiency is all about. Individual profit comes first, and firms become efficient to be rich. To put it in its starkest form, capitalism is perfectly compatible with slavery. Democracy is not.” (Street, 2006). The dismissal of this contradiction comes at the expense of the working class, and with rising tensions regarding this topic, the increasing dissatisfaction has become more evident in the 21st century through a survey where “79 percent of Democrats in the groups, 67 percent of Republicans, and 74 percent of ticket splitters say the economic and human impacts of these corporate behaviors are serious enough to warrant purposeful government intervention.” (Hightower, 2006). There is a lot of speculation as to whether or not America can be considered a democracy and what would be the ideal form of government that promises the coexistence of liberty and equality for all if capitalism is not seemingly compatible. Since the system of democracy and capitalism often made “decisions [...] in the name of the entire society [...] [in which some] portion of the populace, frequently a majority, loses out” (Parenti, 1996), “pluralists say it no longer makes sense to think in terms of a dominant class whose general interest in profits transcends the fate of any one corporation or business sector” (Domhoff, 2006).

The injustices and imbalance that government officials have purposely turned a blind eye to have made it so that the structural approach’s more agreeable conclusion is that the United States is not a democracy given that capitalism would be too great of a contradiction. Other perspectives have argued that instead, the United States is an oligarchy. An oligarchy is defined as a system of government where “a small ruling class dominates the political system to the exclusion of all others.” (Cassidy, 2014). While some people have come to realize to some degree the absurdity of saying the vote of a lower-class citizen weighs the same as someone who owns multimillionaire corporations, many people tend to underestimate how big the power gap is and how important this power is when it comes to controlling the American government. The

exact turning point at which the United States officially shifted into an oligarchy is unknown, but now “it is well established that organized groups regularly lobby and fraternize with public officials; move through revolving doors between public and private employment; provide self-serving information to officials; draft legislation; and spend a great deal of money on election campaigns” (Gilens & Page, 2014). In a democratic country that for centuries promoted itself as a government of the people, by the people, for the people, the lack of control American citizens have despite making up the majority of the population is a reason for concern.

While the institutional approach may say that as mentioned earlier, the growing middle class “would agitate for personal liberty and political power” (Bailey, 2007), it is pointless that when the majority of opinions are voiced, they are downplayed by the elite class that also have control of the court. If it were to be pinpointed, it can be argued that the introduction of corporate power as an influence in politics was introduced when “[Supreme Court Justice Lewis] Powell [...] detailed a plan for corporate America to assert power: a national, corporate-funded propaganda campaign; forceful political intervention by intermediary groups like the Chamber; and an organized effort to influence politics through an “activist” judiciary”. With the wealthy and corporate powers that practically control the flow of money now having the ability to control who goes into office, the democratic idea that power lies in the people has essentially been robbed. It was noted that “campaign spending by influence groups often exceeds the spending of the candidates [...] [and] our current Supreme Court allows spending to be anonymous, depriving Americans of basic information to do their job as citizens at election-time.” (Whitehouse, 2022). This unrestricted spending on election campaigns makes it so that candidates who potentially enter office are most of the time wealthy people who have lots of money that they can use to promote themselves, or people who have corporate support and can get themselves money

usually in exchange for something greater. It drowns out many honest candidates who simply cannot compete, and when people who are purely interested in revenue and social status are put into office, what is there to guarantee to the people that their voices and needs are heard and accounted for when changes should be brought to the country? “In the first presidential contest after the *Citizens United* decision, 84 percent of Americans agreed that corporate political spending drowns out the voices of average Americans, and 83 percent believed that corporations and corporate CEOs have too much political power and influence.” (Kennedy, 2017).

Corporations and the elite class have continually escaped accountability for their greed and power-motivated behavior, and people who are understandably frustrated would deem this as a corruption of the American government. In addition to the concern of human rights, Capitalism in America has also brought to light concerns for the environment.

“We are on a terrifying, reckless descent towards upheaval of basic planetary operating systems, as the fossil fuel industry in Congress blocks our pathway to safety, to wring the last dollars out of its polluting product.” (Whitehouse, 2022). There is a familiar quality of inequality that can be reflected in almost all of the issues that are prominently yielded by our economic system alongside our democracy that rightfully prompts careful reconsideration of what government modern-day America can be classified as.

Today even with the instability and strife that has stemmed from the conflicting government and economic powers in America, people have still mindlessly been consuming the deceitful lies that members of the top 1% have been feeding them whether that be through election campaigns or just prominent corporate influence. As opposed to the institutional approach that views them as separate and individual topics, the structural approach that analyzes the institutions of America as a political system alongside its economic system of capitalism

yields a more precise perspective that characterizes the authentic nature of the United States. Even though the coexistence of capitalism and democracy is often taught in schools to be harmonious with the institutional approach, with the rapidly decreasing amount of freedom, power, and equality that this country has been losing within the majority, people must begin scrutinizing those in positions of authority and the underlying intent behind every government decision because it is only then that people will think for themselves and realize that we do not live in a democratic society. If it has not been made clear already through the analysis of the structural approach, this democratic republic's government has increasingly become dominated by the elite class. It is not uninged to say that if there is no intervention or changes made, the sustainability of our democracy which has been losing against the relentless forces of capitalism is unforeseeable in our future if it has not already been lost.

Is This Déjà Vu?

After Biden was elected in 2020, a collective sigh of relief swept through the country assuming that his installment as President meant peace, harmony, and long-awaited change. However, why are there still huge disparities in the political and economic status quo? Even with many complaints and protests, “White men represent 30% of the population but 62% of officeholders, dominating both chambers of Congress, 42 state legislatures and statewide roles across the nation” (Villarreal, 2021). This is also not even mentioning the fact that “the United States is dominated by an overwhelmingly white upper class: 88.5 percent of the top 10 percent of Americans are white and that decile owns over 77 percent of all the wealth.” (Bruenig, 2019). With the 2020 electoral showdown of Joe Biden vs. Donald Trump rapidly approaching once again in 2024, Americans must prepare themselves to sift through and judge campaign promises and partisan narratives to find those that most closely align with their own values. In recent

years, there have been a rising number of critics who have been rightfully doubting the two major parties, for they have realized that even though the two clashing Republican and Democratic parties have seemingly promoted two starkly contrasting candidates that will undeniably propose different government policies, people have begun asking themselves an important question: how much will the political and economic status quo even change in the long run regardless of the victor? As people are navigating through the misleading rhetoric and supposedly contrasting visions for America's future that are expected to come about this presidential race, it is imperative that the people vigilantly pay attention to government decisions and consider alternative perspectives outside of the mainstream media discourse that wishes to keep American citizens unaware of the complex and multi-faceted forces that continue to influence the American economy and government.

Every four years, the United States starts its presidential elections that as in recent cases, narrowed down between the candidates to two people who have received the most campaign funding and represent each of the Republican and Democratic parties. The funding of said candidates gets downplayed in the mainstream media and in the textbooks taught to future generations at school because even though "no one really knows how much money is spent on political campaigns in the United States" and "neither corporations nor labor unions can contribute directly to any candidate, and the 'fat cats' who can make large donations and find it in their best interest to do so" (Shea, 2023) come from and most likely acts to profit their corporation in this loophole. The Republican vs. Democrats election broadcasted nationwide forces the false narrative that the Republican and Democratic candidates present two completely different futures for America. Looking at the political compass, a measuring scale that places individuals in a spectrum encompassing left/right & authoritarian/liberal dimensions, it seems

ironic that Donald Trump and Joe Biden are not that far from each other. Both lie on the right authoritarian quadrant, except Biden is slightly lower in the quadrant and more to the left.

“Republican philosophy leans more towards individual freedoms, rights and responsibilities. In contrast, Democrats attach greater importance to equality and social/community responsibility.” (Democrat vs. Republican, n.d.). With this generalization of the two parties in mind, we know that historically given Trump & Biden’s campaign and respective terms, they have rather contrasting policies when it comes to topics like taxation of the wealthy class. However, even with all of these differences in policies that undeniably exist, if either Trump or Biden were to be elected as president in 2024, it would be reasonable to believe that the status quo that exists in the American economy and politics as it is now will not be different.

If we were to look at the Republican perspective, people have remained critical of Biden throughout his 2020-2024 term, and have even speculated that his lack of action could be attributed to factors like old age given that as he neared the end of his term, “there is a consensus among Republicans and independents, as 92.3 percent and 64 percent, respectively, believe Biden is too old to effectively serve a second term in the White House. While most Democrats, 59 percent, disagree with that, 29.3 percent agree that Biden is too old to “effectively” serve in the White House for another four years.” (Knudsen, 2023). In addition to being united against their hate for Biden, appallingly, despite all of Trump’s criminal counts and impeachments, “When asked if Trump’s legal troubles would affect their views of him, two-thirds of his supporters said it would not make a difference. Fundraising goes up with each new legal tangle. A full 80 percent of likely Republican voters said Trump should be able to serve even if

convicted” since many of them also truly believe that “he is, he will make clear, the victim of a Democratic plot to weaponize ‘justice,’” (Buren, 2023).

While the diehard Republicans are undoubtedly in support of Donald Trump in this upcoming 2024 election, if we were to look at the Democratic standpoint, there seems to be a mutual understanding of desperation. “We are all perfectly clear that Biden and what he stands for are repugnant. There is not a single good reason to vote for him – except that not to do so will help Trump win a second term as President.” (Brown, 2020). Even with the democrats being triumphant with Biden’s victory against Trump in 2020, amidst their skepticism of whether he will carry out the changes he promised to the country, they believe that “Trump is anything but an American nationalist. He is appealing to only one part of America while fomenting hatred toward other parts. Many of his supporters exhibit an extreme form of political sectarianism, in which Americans of other political persuasions are regarded as enemies every bit as much as foreign adversaries are.” (Pillar, 2023). The United States was arguably as divided and as tense as it could have ever been during Trump term, so when Biden delivered his inaugural address, democrats thought that “the speech, and the atmospherics surrounding it, was a clear success because it offered credible hope — how much of that have we had lately? — that a new president has a plan for getting free from a very deep rut.” (Harris, 2021). Thoroughly believing that having Trump for another term would reap devastating effects for the country, many democrats are fighting for people to vote and “settle” on Joe Biden for a second term. Some argue that if Trump were to be re-elected, “internationally, the United States would present a fractured, inconsistent, and ineffective face to the rest of the world, with no one speaking on behalf of all Americans. Domestically, it would bring the United States a couple of steps closer to a Hobbesian state of nature in which the nasty and brutish aspects would flow from government no

longer being populated with officials working in the interests of the entire nation, but only with partisan warriors.” (Pillar, 2023).

While these are very extreme possibilities and understandable fears, the act of “settling” and voting for Joe Biden is what contributes to the flushing out of third-party candidates that may endorse values that more closely align with what the people want. With the mainstream media only channeling the wants of corporate businesses, alternative sources are vital for individuals because “with the world’s climate poisoned and all life threatened by industrialized profiteering, capitalized war-making, white supremacist authoritarianism, and surging neocolonial fascism, the major news organizations refuse to cover West and his communitarian vision” (Griffen, 2023). Cornel West advocates for ideals that are arguably more alike to the voters, and while democrats are furiously stating that his presence in the election does nothing but take away votes from the democratic party and therefore benefit Trump, “the best way for the Democrats to avoid losing votes to a progressive is to preempt their issues for combatting global warming, reducing income inequality, dismantling the national security state, and ending militarism” (Harris, 2023). On the political compass, Cornel West lies in the libertarian left quadrant where an increasing number of individuals including the youth find themselves aligned. This poses the question: why are people settling for Biden when there are candidates that better fit their values? “If Joe Biden cannot persuade voters that he deserves their votes, no one should blame Cornel West” (Griffen, 2023) because at the end of the day, there are no wasted votes other than those cast to people you do not believe in. Despite what many democrats may argue about third-party runners, their presence may actually be more beneficial than people think because “removing a progressive challenge from the left is tantamount to encouraging the Democrats to shift further to the right with the assurance that their progressive-leaning captured

constituencies, such as ethnic minorities and labor, have nowhere else to go” (Harris, 2023).

With West’s presidential act starting as an act of desperation, it says a lot about the current state of politics in America.

More critical sources would say that “without changing the distribution of power, elections are the fake buttons of politics— they provide the illusion of political control without its fact.” (Urie, 2018). People assuming that the Democratic Party is any different from the Republican Party is what allows the status quo to remain unchanged throughout decades of different presidential elections. “The Democratic party is not a vehicle for class struggle, after all. Like the Republican party, it is designed to preserve the privileges of an elite. Its biggest donors, like the Republican’s, are drawn from Wall Street, Silicon Valley, the arms industries.” (Cook, 2021). Both Biden and Trump act and have to cater to wealthy individuals and corporations, and the lack of change because of it is quite evident. When Biden was speaking with his campaign investors, he specifically told them that “their taxes might have to be raised a little to achieve some of his legislative goals--though he assured the members of the 1 percent in attendance at the Upper East Side Carlyle Hotel that under his plan, the increase wouldn't even be noticeable.” (Higgins, 2019). This comes to show that the problem is not as simple as the Republican vs. Democratic presidential candidates running against each other. “Trump is not the enemy. That target is far too small and limited. The class he belongs to is our enemy, as is the system of privilege he has spent the past four years upholding and his successor will defend just as assiduously.” (Cook, 2021). When people blindly hate the other side and create more division amongst themselves, they fail to see the bigger picture in which the system and imbalances of power are the problem. With the way things are headed, “nothing taking place on Election Day will alleviate the suffering of the American people. Unless we do something more than vote, the

government as we have come to know it—corrupt, bloated and controlled by big-money corporations, lobbyists and special interest groups—will remain unchanged. And “we the people”—overtaxed, overpoliced, overburdened by big government, underrepresented by those who should speak for us and blissfully ignorant of the prison walls closing in on us—will continue to trudge along a path of misery.” (Whitehead, 2020).

If Biden were to be re-elected and the Republicans manage to remove him, in both cases the country would continue as usual unless he is replaced with someone who truly challenges the power and wealth disparities between the people and the top 1%. Time and time again, our presidential candidates have just proved to be individuals who work to reinforce the same status quo that puts wealthy white individuals and corporations at the top. Even in the 2024 election, "We're essentially being guilted into voting for Joe Biden and for whomever the Democratic Party chooses when, throughout the primary season, young people were overwhelmingly ignored." (Cabral, 2020). Regardless of whether it is Joe Biden or Donald Trump, as long as the Democratic and Republican party promotes someone who believes in right authoritarian policies, things like “overcriminalization [...], poverty [...], endless wars that enrich the military-industrial complex [...], government corruption [...], [and more] will continue” (Whitehead, 2020). People need to look beyond the mainstream media and stop the notion of just “settling” on a presidential candidate because unless something is threatening the votes of the main Republican and Democratic parties, nothing will motivate people in power to shift their focus into creating more left-liberal policies that the majority have been demanding. There is an increasing number of people who are becoming aware of this cyclical political and economic loop between elected presidents and the status quo that America has been falling into for a long time now. While it is understandable given that the misled and brainwashed American citizens are the victims, the

people can only take so much, and the American future that may come as a result of the collective's continued ignorance may not be so forgiving.

Conclusion

While our harsh realities point to the United States more accurately operating like the elite class theory, not all hope is lost. To undo the decades of deceit the elites have been feeding American citizens, people must acknowledge the hypocrisies and ask themselves vital questions. Can capitalism coexist with democracy? Will this or any upcoming election at this rate change anything in this country? While politics and systems of government are hard topics to navigate without any "right" or "wrong" answer, the most important question seems to be something that the majority of American citizens have long since forgotten: what government is it that we want? If the power is supposed to lie within the voices of the people, why is it so hard to change things around here? While the ultimate goal for most in this country is achieving a government that upholds the traditional democratic theory, it is clear that unless we come to a more regulated form of capitalism or abandon it completely, this system will forever be corrupted and controlled by greed. This strong call for supply and demand has completely taken control of our presidential elections and candidates, channeling people who will completely disregard public demands all to funnel and keep the wealth amongst the top 1% that have been running this country behind the scenes. Millions of people around the world would die to live in America, the supposed land of the free, and unfortunately, many of them die just by trying to get here. However, living in this far-from-perfect utopia the rest of the world idolizes does not mean we can simply forget those who die because of the exploitative nature this country hides from the public; we ironically carry a hefty responsibility of accountability just by being citizens of it. It is time to stop pointing fingers at each other because with the increasing amount of evidence surfacing, it is clear that

our biggest enemy and our focus is not and should not be on the next Trump vs. Biden or the next Republican vs. Democrat showdown, but instead, on the dark and exploitative system of Capitalism that seems to keep America and its people chained from a true traditional democracy.

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