

**The Ruling Power of the Elite**

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### **Abstract**

The United States presents itself as a true democracy, but with a deeper examination of the political and economic system it can be seen that the democratic system is not upheld. American politicians, while establishing themselves in different parties, work to maintain a status-quo where the wealthy remain on top and the people struggle against the system. Through an examination of the four theories of American government it can be seen that the United States is not truly a democracy. This is showcased in the United States' maintenance of the status quo between administration, foreign policy, and government structure. Within the current government system America cannot achieve a representative democracy for its people.

## **The Ruling Power of the Elite**

In order to establish what kind of government rules over the United States it is important to examine the four theories of American government. These theories give insight into interpretations of the United States government besides only looking at the textbook definition of American democracy. On paper the United States appears to be a great democracy, with our rights to free speech and electoral system open to all citizens, but on closer inspection there are distinct inconsistencies in how the United States is pitched and the realities of its flaws. Through a harsher examination it can be seen that the United States is not a true democracy.

The first theory of American government is the traditional democratic theory, this is a very textbook interpretation of government. The country is run by elected representatives who create laws and policy to represent the American people, and the people have the ability to vote on these representatives and voice their opinions. This theory is what is taught to students as the reality of the American government, but when looked at through a critical lens this theory does not encompass the nuance of the system in practice and the points where it is exploited.

The second theory is the pluralist theory, one that states groups have control of the government. These groups work to maintain control of government policy in order to turn it in their favor. Individual voters may have some say in government but ultimately it is the groups that hold power over government. The next theory is hyperpluralism, a variation on pluralist theory that says there are far too many groups controlling government. These groups cause division in government, reducing the productivity of government and stalling out progress made in policy making because of the division amongst groups' ideals.

The final theory of American government is elite class theory, this theory states that the government is ruled by the wealthy or the upper class leaving the lower class with no real power.

This is the only way a democracy can exist is if a class system of political power is implemented. Capitalist ideals of the elite run the country more than any political party or democratic vote.

The United States prides itself on its implementations of democratic ideals and promotes the freedoms of the voter's ability to choose. The people do not truly get the freedoms and voting power they are taught they should have. The government is motivated by monetary gain, controlled by the corporate elite, not solely their dedication to the American people. The United States is running under the ideas seen in elite class theory with capitalist motivations dominating the political sphere, the true democratic ideal is lost for the American people.

### **Profits Parallel Power**

*“The profit motive, when it is the sole basis of an economic system, encourages a cutthroat competition and selfish ambition that inspires men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life.” -Martin Luther King Jr.*

As students are funneled through the American education system, they are influenced towards a sunny oversimplified view of the United States political and economic system. This push to present America as a great democracy leaves no room for a true examination of the system. This leaves students unprepared to enter a world where a capitalist economic system has corrupted the democratic political ideals intended for the country. Through my own experience in public education, I have found my social studies classes to focus on generalized history and textbook definitions of government. Year after year I have been told stories of Founding Fathers who so loathed the control of a king and wanted a place for all to live equally; but as I have gotten older I have seen how these men were so focused on wealth and social standing that their values were not upheld when it came to equality for all. The more details revealed to me the

more I could see through the praise for these men who spouted praise for equality while keeping other human beings as property.

In my years of education there has been a distinct lack of evaluation of our political system, instead focusing on a standardized view of the world, praising the United States for its great and equal democracy. Looking back on my education, these teachings are an ideal, a hope that the system could bring equality to a diverse group of people. They are not represented in today's political climate. The textbook definitions do not do justice to viewing the system as a whole; to truly have an overarching view of the American political system one has to consider both policy and economics together. When viewing the structure of the two systems together as a whole the interactions between them reveal the true workings of the American political sphere. The American government must be viewed structurally alongside the economic system, viewing the two as parts of a whole reveals a democratic political system cannot truly thrive within a capitalist economy.

When represented, the American political system is often separated from the capitalist economic system. This separation does not provide an adequate scope of the necessary interactions between the two systems. To fully look at the scope of the political system one has to take into account the effects of the economy on the system, only by taking into account the structure can the system be truly examined. Capitalism fights directly against democracy, by separating the two it prevents a full analysis of the United States' political climate. While democracy can be described as "a system of government based on the recognition that people are equal 'in dignity and rights.'" Capitalism can be described as "an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit." The two systems by definition oppose each other creating room for tension and conflict between the two.

Capitalism breeds inequality by putting control of trade and industry into the hands of private owners (Amico, 2020). When the select few richest controls the economy the system is no longer democratic in nature. A hierarchical system is created with an imbalance of power swayed in favor of those with the most capital. A truly democratic system cannot exist within an economic system that creates widespread inequality.

When asked most people in the middle class would say they are working to create a better life for themselves and their children through class mobility, but they are unable to find that mobility within today's America. When denied this change and mobility, the middle class begins to doubt the system itself, making it viable only for a select few. Many Americans feel trapped in an uncaring system, built for billionaires and corporations with little consideration for the general populous of the United States. A corporation can protect assets through bankruptcy over and over again, but it is illegal for an individual property owner to declare bankruptcy (Kornbluth, 2017). Within a system focused on protecting corporate business, individuals are not prioritized, unable to compete with billion-dollar companies. The inherent competition built into a capitalist economy creates a desire for businesses to skirt policy and regulation for their own corporate gain. Large scale corporations directly clash with government involvement through regulation, impositions of unions, and the power of the press (Henderson, 2020). The attempt of the government to regulate corporate business links the capitalist and democratic systems, making it difficult to examine one to a full extent without viewing the other.

The profits seen by large corporations give them power and a large political influence, opening the door for them to dictate actions in the political sphere. Businesses are able to fight back against regulations put in place by the federal government to find work-arounds to better maintain profits. In August of 1971 Lewis Powell, an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court,

delivered a memo titled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System” to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Washington and Lee University School Of Law, n.d.). In the memo Powell berates those who criticize the American economic system and views the push for regulation as an attack on the economic and democratic systems. Powell asserts that “political power is necessary” and “must be assiduously cultivated; and when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination” (Powell, 1971). Powell’s memo called for an organization and action on behalf of business for the purpose of ensuring corporations could manipulate Washington’s policies for their own benefit. As Hacker and Pierson note in the political study, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer — and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (2011), Powell hoped to restructure Washington so it could be;

Capable of advancing employers’ interests even under the most difficult political circumstances. They recognized that business had hardly begun to tap its potential for wielding political power. Not only were the financial resources at the disposal of business leaders unrivaled. The hierarchical structures of corporations made it possible for a handful of decision-makers to deploy those resources and combine them with the massive but underutilized capacities of their far-flung organizations.

The publishing of Powell’s memo further influenced corporations to warp regulations to their better interest. Corporations began to open public affairs offices located in Washington, with 100 in 1968 increasing to over 500 in 1971 as well as register lobbyists with 175 in 1971 rising to around 2,500 by 1982 (Hacker & Pierson, 2011). Hacker and Pierson (2011) further note the true impact of these increases, “employers learned how to work together to achieve shared political goals. As members of coalitions, firms could mobilize more proactively and on a much broader

front. Corporate leaders became advocates not just for the narrow interests of their firms but also for the shared interests of business as a whole.”

Powell’s memo served as a turning point for business in Washington, influencing corporations to take political power and control of regulations placed on them. With this found power businesses continue to manipulate regulation further muddling the capitalist economy with the democratic political system.

The political standing of corporations gives them a large influence over government operations., with corporate influence in Washington continuing to grow after the publication of Powell’s memo, corporations hold a significant influence over those seeking political office. Concern over corporate involvement in elections began its spike in 1896 when William McKinley beat his opponent, William Jennings Bryan, while spending ten times as much on campaigning. This continued again in 1904 as candidates complained insurance companies’ funding affected the outcome. As corporations have entered the realm of government a trail of accusations of corruption and feuds over their overwhelming investing power has followed. The sheer mass of corporate budgets presents an immense advantage to candidates backed by corporate funding. Legislation has continued to be amended in attempts to manage corporate backing of candidates with the 1907 Tillman Act, the first act created to prevent direct corporate political contributions, as corporations began to rise in the political sphere. Yet with the Supreme Court’s decision on *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* in 2010 corporations were given *corporate personhood*. Businesses hold the rights of an individual while still maintaining their status as a major corporation (Jimenez and Pulos, 2016). With corporations given the rights of the individual their voice is easily heard over the general populace. Corporations become protected and extremely under regulated, able to direct policy in their favor through political



funding. The lack of regulations on corporate political spending opens the door for mass political corruption and buyouts by corporations to ensure their benefits, leaving the American people to fight for their rights against bought out politicians. The ability of corporations to use their status to manipulate politics is undemocratic in nature, allowing business to overshadow individuals and undermines the rights outlined in the Constitution preventing the cohesion of capitalism and democracy. Corporation's involvement in politics brings about the need for one to look at both when truly viewing government structure.

Corporations use their ability to donate to candidates to influence the political sphere, by endorsing candidates who will create the best economic climate for their growth and profits. Corporations use this political power to prevent competitors from making headway in the system. Capitalism is a complex and intricate system subject to influence by the ideals of those working inside the system because of its unregulated and laissez-faire approach (Paul, 2020). Regulation becomes necessary to maintain a *fair* and democratic capitalist economy that the current system lacks. Politicians use corporate funds to increase their standings, sacrificing their values to appease companies with lesser regulations. Candidates must spend 30 to 50 percent of their time acquiring funds for their campaigns, leaving them with little time to focus on issues important to those they represent (Jimenez and Pulos, 2016). With their focus centered on working towards their corporate supporter's goals, they lose sight of those they really represent. The time required for a candidate to focus on ensuring they raise campaign funds takes away from citizens, leaving them with distracted politicians intent on appealing to corporations over the needs of the people. An institutional focused textbook details one of the roles of a president as the *chief economist*, in charge of tracking the nation's economy, and stepping in when needed. A country's leader cannot be truly devoted to serving the people if they are bought out by a

corporation, feeling they owe political favors to those who monetarily supported them. The United States president is also titled the *chief citizen*, as someone who represents the wants and needs of the people and “compet[ing] against private interests” (Shea, 2023). The president cannot represent the people when supporting the private interests of companies and lobbying for the regulations and political climate they desire.

The United States, while proclaiming to be a democracy, hardly resembles one today. An international poll shows 83 percent of Chinese participants felt America could be considered a democracy compared to only 49 percent of the Americans surveyed (Urie, 2023). Citizens of the United States are not convinced the system is behaving like a true democracy, feeling betrayed by the system prioritizing company interests over the nation's citizens. This mistrust in government is not representative of a democratic system where the people should feel represented and involved in their government. Companies reign over the political sphere, as regulations are changed in favor of increasing corporate profits without concern for the people of the nation. The reach of corporate companies into the business sphere intertwines the capitalist and democratic systems, without approaching an analysis looking at both systems as a whole. Looking at both systems together gives a comprehensive view, representative of the citizens of the United States. When the corporate sphere controls the political one a massive amount of wealth runs in a small circle of the elite, keeping those without wealth oppressed and without a voice to be heard over the coin of billionaires.

## **Blurring Party Lines**

*“Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past when the quo has lost its status.” -*

Laurence J. Peter

Whether aligned with the ideals of the Democrat or Republican parties the American voter has limited choice in who will win the race for president. Regardless of the personal values of the American electorate the United States electoral system funnels voters down one of two paths, the so called conservative or the so called liberal. When a majority of American voters identify themselves as independent, choosing not to identify within the two leading parties in the nation (The Pew Research Center). Voters' difference of opinion from the major American politicians leaves the American people to settle for someone who may not share many of their personal ideals. There is always the option of voting third party, to find a true representative of one's personal values, but third-party candidates are often under advertised and cannot compete with the budget and backing of major Democrat and Republican politicians. It leaves voters to choose between that election's major politicians from each side, with no real diversity of leading candidates. Yet every four years the American people are consumed with anxiety over the “other side” winning, regardless of the difference in political values between the American people and the politicians who represent them. There is genuine concern over the changes possible with a new president taking the reins and the detrimental societal effects that will have. These concerns may be unwarranted, as the two major parties are much closer in values than the American people are aware. Between elections there is only limited change in how the country is run, the status quo remains consistent, the country still runs under a strong capitalist economic system supporting political and wealthy elites, while maintaining systems that limit and control the lower class and minority groups. No matter the party holding the presidency the status quo

remains unchanged. As someone who will be a first-time voter in the upcoming 2024 election I am torn on where to place my vote. I align strongly with the ideals of third-party candidate, Cornel West, but I worry about how that vote may be “thrown away.” If I vote with my ideals, I am taking a vote away from the so-called liberal candidate, Joe Biden, and therefore allowing Donald Trump a better chance of taking the presidency. However, the point of the democratic voting system in theory should be to give the voters a way to express their true wish for president not to settle in order to uphold a system promoting a race between two major parties.

The American ideal promotes the people’s ability to align themselves with a party based on their ideals, but there are truly only two parties with any power to hold a political office. The American voter can choose from over 53 distinct parties that represent their views on their ballot. Yet it can be seen that even with the ability of the people to align themselves in niche parties that maintain their values the mainstream media and politicians promote only Democrat and Republican views. Republicans and Democrats are the focus of the American political sphere and make up a majority of those who hold office (Ballotpedia, n.d). If the American people have a wide range of diverse parties to encompass their views and ideals, two parties cannot fully encompass the American people’s views. As many as 49 percent of voters identify as an independent voter, the same number of voters as align with the Republican and Democrat parties combined (Allen, 2023). Voters are no longer finding alignment with the major parties' ability to represent them. With the intense mainstream focus on the two major parties, Americans are funneled down two paths: Democrats for those liberal minded and Republicans for those leaning more conservatively. While voters have the option to choose from a large variety of parties it is increasingly difficult to have a voice if not a member of the two major parties.

The American political system keeps those politicians who are not aligned with a major party from taking office. Currently there are only three independent aligning senators in congress (Ballotpedia, n.d). Historically third-party presidential candidates have faced severe backlash and exclusion because of their critical thinking towards mainstream ideals. The last third-party president was Abraham Lincoln in the 1800s because of his anti-slavery platform. Voters inclined to cast their vote for a third-party candidate often feel their vote is wasted with their candidate not being mainstream, and so lacking the ability to swing a popular vote. This can also be due to the structure of winner-take-all systems in certain states, where the candidate with the highest percentage of votes in a state receives the electoral votes (Nwazota, 2021). The way the system limits the American voter from alternative options pushes many voters towards mainstream candidates even if they do not agree with their platform completely as a way to oppose an alternate candidate. This funneling of voters towards mainstream party candidates discourages the diversity third parties and their candidates bring to the table, limiting the country's ability to change the ideals and values represented through the presidency. This benefits politicians' maintenance of a status quo, limiting the electorate's options to keep a flow of politicians ready to maintain the set status quo.

The mainstream parties have created a limited view through which Americans view liberalism and conservatism, when in reality there is a wide spectrum to either side of the Democrat and Republican party. These have become the parties to represent the modern liberal and conservative without allowing for outside viewpoints. The system has been built to accommodate American moderates, finding themselves comfortable in the system, not willing to challenge its flaws (Nwazota, 2021). This maintained comfort isolates critiques of the system's flaws, making them stand out as radicals, challenging a seemingly sound system. By isolating

those who speak out on the contrary to Democrat and Republican they become less appealing to those wanting to remain moderate, as extremists. It also focuses more attention on mainstream politicians with their flood of the media and avoidance of extreme views. The presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump lie very close on the political compass, a way of scaling political views. Trump and Biden both lie in the same quadrant of authoritarian capitalists (The Political Compass 2020). The candidates' proximity on the compass show how many differing views there are besides their own and put in perspective the closeness of their political leanings. The candidates may bicker over social issues but when it comes to aspects of policy, they begin to take stances where the status quo is maintained. These are the country's liberal and conservative representatives yet their values align very closely not touching on other far reaching liberal and conservative views. With such closely related political leanings it is hard to say their agendas are very different, simply the way they present them to the public.

A large portion of voters' choice of candidate comes from their opinion of the candidate's personality over the true differences in their policy. Voters look at how a candidate speaks and what they promote and platform to guide their vote. Voters must hedge their bets on a candidate's ability to follow through when they reach office, leaving candidates to run their platform in such a way simply to earn the presidency, not prioritize voters' wants. Voters see what candidates push for in speeches and debates when making their decision, most typically seeing that the Democratic candidate will be willing to take a liberal stance on issues of abortion and gun control where the Republican candidate will feel more conservatively looking for "pro-choice" and less gun control (Diffin, n.d.). This preconceived notion of candidates liberal or conservative values, leaves voters with very little choice left but to pick between the major Democrat and Republican which aligns the closest with their personal values. This can lead to a back-and-forth

exchange of Democrat and Republican leaders, but there is no drastic change in policy over their time in office. The true change is seen in what issues candidates focus their vocal efforts on. Voters are drawn to the candidate's voice on major social issues over the true impact of their economic policy.

When examining the current forerunners for the 2024 election the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, and the Republican candidate, Donald Trump's stance on issues and past presidential actions it can be seen they both work to uphold the status quo regardless of their political leanings. While each act in accordance to their respective parties, they are similarly aligned in how they remain steadfast in upholding the status quo. Trump may have a stronger anti position on immigration, but Biden wants to introduce harsher penalties to those employing undocumented workers. Both candidates are in support of the death penalty being used in criminal sentencing (Diffen, n.d.). When looking at each candidate's foreign policy they are very closely aligned. Biden outwardly proclaims the need for democracy and global cooperation, but his foreign policy reflects the interests of those upholding the status quo. In July of 2022 Biden met with the prince of Saudi Arabia, even with his condemnation of the actions of the Prince who ordered the killing of a journalist in 2018. This condemnation seems not to hold any true standing as Biden continued to allow the United States to aid Saudi Arabia in their war with Yemen. This goes against the liberal ideals associated with the democratic party, contradicting values in favor of maintaining relations with a country for economic gain. Many criticize Biden's actions as he has not followed through on promises in favor of keeping America's dominant economic position as it appears to be declining. This imitates the Trump administration's priorities on maintaining the United States' standing as a major competitive economic power (Wong, 2022). Even Biden himself has admitted he does not want to change the status quo for

the wealthy elite. In a conference with voters he stated “I’m confident these policies are working and that we’re on the right path and we need to stick with them” (Gaudiano, 2022). Biden was referring to the maintenance of Republican economic policy. When examined closely Biden and Trump's policy remains within the standards set by the economic and political status quo. While they present claims to big policy change aligned with their party’s values they are easily swept up in the influence of the political sphere’s need to maintain a heavily capitalist democracy.

While there are places where their political views fail to overlap, there remains the issue of the party’s back and forth on policy. Where one party makes strides towards something the other pushes them two steps back. When looking at the corporate income tax rate changes between administrations it can be seen Democrats look to raise taxes for corporate entities and the wealthy while Republicans look to do the opposite. During Trump’s presidency the corporate tax rate was lowered from 35 percent to just 21, which led Biden’s administration to work to raise it back up to 28 percent. Where Biden works to raise taxes in corporate and high-income private sectors Trump made a point to lessen it (Geier, 2023). With the major parties lobbying back and forth on economic policy no permanent progress can be made as each new administration works to undo the previous administration’s adjustments. Continuing to follow this back-and-forth change of policy between administrations does not lead to lasting and impactful policy long term, it only justifies petty partisan politics over the needs and wants of the people.

The United States system runs on the idea of individuals having a right to determine their own political alignment and vote in order to affect the outcome of the political climate. This fundamental principle of American democracy is undermined by the two-party majority that works such that it prevents voters from expressing their true ideals. Voters are funneled into two



major parties influenced by societal pressure and a want for their vote to “count.” This limitation of expression and lack of diverse representation creates a small group of political elites who dominate the political sphere. These elites portray themselves as harbingers of change, but in reality they fall back into the same routine as those before them, ensuring the United States is the top military and economic power, no matter their party label. If the political elite are so willing to drop their political values in favor of furthering the status quo, there is no true change whether a Republican or a Democrat takes the presidential seat. I remain staunch in my feelings that I should be able to vote for a candidate who represents me, yet I feel the pressure to cast my vote for Joe Biden’s second term to ensure Donald Trump does not return to office in 2024. The system as it stands forces voters down two paths, each one that will maintain the status quo, and without a societal push for change it will continue to function as it has for the foreseeable future.

### **Conclusion**

The United States government has led its people to believe that they have a say in their own government, while taking funding from business elites and maintaining policy swayed in favor of the capitalist elite. Capitalism can be seen intertwined with the workings of democracy throughout the political sphere, influencing how politics is carried out. Politicians are easily swept up in the draw of wealth and monetary gain passing policy in favor of the corporate elite over the people they are elected to serve. This distinct subversion of the democratic ideal shows a government not democratic in nature but one similar to that described in elite class theory, one ruled by the wealthy not the people of the republic. The government deserved by the American people is one that can truly represent the diverse population living in the nation. The people are deserving of a democracy that is representative of them, not one swayed by the influence of monetary gain or to appease interest groups. The American people live and abide by the current

system and are deserving of something supportive of their needs not biased towards the capitalist businesses behind major politicians. Democracy's ideals are torn apart by capitalism's need for growth and intense competition. Democracy cannot exist without corruption within a capitalist economic system, as politicians are easily swayed with monetary enticement. The government the United States needs may not be viable within a capitalist system and may require exploration to other economic systems. Otherwise, the government needs better regulations to ensure the wellbeing of its people over corruption of its leaders. As it stands the American government has let the people down, shaped for the wealthy, leaving the American people to continue to endure and hope for change.

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