

The Elites and Their Democracy

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Abstract

We are taught to understand that America is a prime example of a democracy, and we are also taught that American capitalism is the best economic system to live under. They are both based off of the freedom of choice, so ideally people can exercise a life where they truly can make choices, and see those choices have an influence in their society. However, these systems are not in place to benefit the typical American. It's only beneficial for a select few, in fact. When we move past what textbooks and the mainstream media say and look at the historical context of these systems in practice, it may even surprise typical Americans in how contradictory they are. Capitalism just works to keep the wealthy even wealthier, which it accomplishes by influencing democracy to favor the wealthy capitalists. The fact of the matter is that typical Americans do not understand how they are almost being duped by the elite in almost every aspect of life. They want people to keep this textbook view of America, of how glorious it looks to be so that they do not look past it and wonder why we always get so caught up in war, or why we always get the same types of presidents from the same two parties, or why things just do not get much better for the American people.

The Elites and Their Democracy

We are always told that we are a beacon of light in the world, a beacon of democracy. We fight for democracy and freedom, spreading all that is good about our government worldwide. What exactly do we mean by democracy, though, in the context of American politics? Are we all represented fairly in our government, like a true democracy should be? There are four main ways to analyze our government and four theories about how it and our democracy are run.

The most popular theory is the traditional democratic theory. This theory dictates that everyone participates fairly in the development of our government, giving a sort of textbook approach to how a democracy should be run. Though we hold on to this belief, it is hard to say whether we practice it to the extent that everyone gets to participate.

Pluralism is another theory of how our government is structured. Pluralism is when the government tries to advocate for many groups with certain interests. This can be seen to an extent in our government with groups such as corporations being supported by the government. However, with pluralism, there can often be too many groups to advocate for, causing hyperpluralism, another theory of our government. With hyperpluralism, the government loses its effectiveness while supporting too many groups. It's almost impossible to please everyone, and there are always instances of this being evident in our society.

The last theory describing our government is the elite class theory, dictating that the elite class runs our country's government. They are wealthy and can utilize money to get their way. They could get bailed out when they make a bad decision, they can control elections, and even have an influence on us going to war. This elite class theory is the most applicable to our government today, which can be analyzed by looking at how Western capitalism plays into our government, as well as how our two-party system helps facilitate this type of rule.

The Pursuit of Wealthiness

Typically, when asked about what sort of government they live under, American people may feel inclined to say that the United States government is a democracy, or at the very least, a federal republic. Similarly, when asked about the economic system that runs in the country, they would say capitalism. They would likely think that it is common sense to assume that American society is a democratic capitalist society since that is what they hear everywhere; their textbooks, the news, the media, and perhaps even their friends, would all say so. Everything points to that one idea, with no room for any second thought. It is crazy to think otherwise, to think that we do not live in such a society where we can make whatever decisions we feel are necessary to better the people, economically or politically.

This is the mindset that many Americans have developed, either through consuming mainstream media or even reading textbooks with the same, almost two-dimensional view. We are taught that capitalism flourishes in this democratic society and that it is the only way we should go about with. The idea is emphasized again and again, through this media, that anything that is not capitalism or does not align with capitalist beliefs, should be put down. For example, consider an employer wanting to fire an employee for having a tattoo. In a capitalist society, the employer would have to make a careful decision, because firing would result in losing a potentially valuable worker and could hurt the business. On the contrary, in a socialist society, the employer would have to vote to get the worker fired, which may not be as effective, but would also lead to fewer consequences on the employer's part, potentially leading to a socialist society that encourages decision making off of a whim (Somin, 2022). Many people like this believe that capitalism is truly the only way to go, that any other way just is not fitting for a society in the United States.

People like this may even go as far as to defend capitalism in some of its most questionable aspects, particularly when it gets tangled up with Congress. Lobbyists are very prevalent in Congress, and have a very big influence on Congress, as is the nature of capitalism allowing for such behavior between corporations and government officials. Special interest groups are also very prevalent in Congress, which some may argue is good since there are so many of them that they are bound to represent some aspects of most Americans' day-to-day lives. "Lobbying is simply people banding together to advance their interests, whether they're farmers or environmentalists or bankers" (Hamilton, 2006). It's easy to make a defense for lobbyists with an engrained mindset that capitalism is the way to go since they are arguably the embodiment of a capitalist fantasy; they become rich, and they do what they can to stay rich. Taking a closer look at lobbying, however, can show frightening results. "Sixty-one lobbyists now walk the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., for every one person we citizens have elected to represent our interests there" (Lappe, 2007). This shows just how much influence lobbyists have in our society, and how much more influence private institutions have than the public. If there is so many more lobbyists like this, then they are sure to assume too much power and base the government off of their own materialistic desires.

Alas, it is in the very nature of America to prioritize and reward material gain. It can be traced as far back as John Locke when he mentioned the "Pursuit of Happiness", which was later used in the Declaration of Independence. The phrase sounds innocent enough, as if it's encouraging freedom or for people to live however they want. Although that may be true to an extent, "to pursue happiness in such a land was quite rightly to pursue prosperity, to pursue pleasure, to pursue wealth" (Speth, 2011). This implies that the more material gain one achieves, the happier and better one will feel. With capitalism taken at face value, this makes enough

sense, very good sense even, and perhaps it is important to live in a society that prioritizes making a profit like this.

Although this idea sounds good in theory, when it's taken into practice, in the context of historic patterns, it does not seem to go quite according to how many would expect. When we look at the people with the highest level of satisfaction, they do not typically come from the richest countries. They come from countries where they can trust their government, have protected human rights, and do not have to deal with corruption. America is a particularly wealthy country, so if we were looking at it superficially, America should be among the happiest. Especially right after the Second World War, when America was victorious, wages and incomes increased dramatically. And yet, happiness and well-being among citizens declined by a lot (Speth, 2011). A conclusion can begin to be drawn here. Perhaps we are not receiving the happiness we were promised after making this pursuit. Perhaps the pursuit of "happiness" does not apply to the average American, but rather to those who achieve the most "happiness", or those who make the most profit.

We can see this gripping of old American ideals and expectations, where some want to see them true to the end, in other areas as well. Traditionally, America was supposed to be a near-perfect country, divinely appointed by God Himself. If you opposed America, you were not on God's side. In the eyes of America, we were free of sin, a perfect example of good in the world. This expectation can still be seen in some mainstream media even today, where they want their audience to believe that they really are the best. When this idea is put into practice, however, it becomes hard to maintain the position that America is as divine as it claims to be, especially when the American invasion of Iraq did not go well (Chernus, 2007). But we are the good guys, and we are supposed to win. The big faces of American power, especially the

president, want the citizens to believe and maintain this faith. Realistically, though, it just does not make sense anymore, especially seeing all the other things that America has gotten itself into over the years.

This tainted idea that the United States is the best country on Earth can be dangerous, even to us. When we have leaders like Bush who believe we were chosen by God, they believe that they act out of a noble cause. But when we think that we are the best and most noble, we can be blinded by our faults. “The ‘greatest nation on earth’ mantra tends to lead us to get the facts wrong”. For example, most Americans believe that the United States spends at least 15 percent of its federal budget on foreign aid, but in reality, they spend less than 1 percent, making us one of the smaller contributors (Jensen, 2004). We talk big, say that we will do a lot, and leave citizens in the United States with high expectations. At the very least, if it comes to money, the US does not want to spend it on things that might make it look good but rather save it all for the military.

Indeed, America dumps hundreds of billions of dollars into its military budget. America’s commitment to war and military affairs is clear and can be seen quite literally around the world. Typically, people assume that we get so involved because we are a beacon of democracy, that we are trying to turn other nations to the good side of democracy and capitalism. When we look at the ongoing war in Ukraine, however, it appears more as if the West is avoiding peace negotiations. Especially America, they are just dumping money into the weapons industry, so that corporations like Lockheed Martin or General Dynamics make a killing from the war (Hermeto, 2022). War makes corporations a substantial amount of money, and the government wants to facilitate this, so naturally they make sure to get involved.

Perhaps it is in America's roots to be so involved, to have such colonialist ambitions from the very start, from the Revolution even. How can this be, though, when we tried to break apart from colonialism at that time? The fact of the matter is that, at the time, many people wanted to stay a part of the British Empire, and "those who had a different idea were a quite small group of white, male property owners with a vision. And how comfortable they were using violence to achieve it" (Joyce, 2024). This vision can be seen as a form of colonialism, which has been demonstrated in America's history, from the Philippines to Cuba, even to America's efforts to spread its influence during the Cold War. And this violence in question is undeniable, with America's intense military efforts, which can still be seen to this day with the conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East that America is getting deeply involved with.

Even then, it is only a small minority that profit to a large extent from all of this war, those being the capitalists that own those large corporations like Lockheed Martin. Their only possible weakness is that they are the minority. The majority could potentially vote someone into power who can revert the consequences of capitalism or spread ideas that contradict capitalism. If the capitalists do not want this to happen, they must create a sort of "political bloc". "Their bloc should rule the society—be the hegemonic power—by controlling mass media, winning elections, producing parliamentary majorities, and disseminating an ideology in schools and beyond that justifies capitalism" (Wolff, 2020). This explains the massive power that the capitalists on top have. They control the system. They choose the leaders and choose what information we can take in, even through schools. It's for this reason that, when prompted, most Americans can only really say that capitalism is the best system to live under since they are not allowed to know of any potential alternative. They are taught to believe that it does not influence our government so that they do not think there are a few people deciding everything for us.

We can see how capitalism affects our government when we look at what they do during election season. “‘Just 50 billionaire families,’ the new ATF report details, ‘have already injected more than \$600 million collectively into the crucial 2024 elections...’”. Seeing this little amount of people have such a large influence on the election can be frightening, and shows how democracy is more of something that is for sale. Naturally, they would put their support into someone friendly to the corporations, which is why we always hear about either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris in this election, but rarely any other candidate. And if the president keeps on being so friendly with these corporations and billionaires, then the corporations and billionaires will keep on being friendly with these kinds of candidates. “Plutocracy can flourish in that environment. Democracy most definitely cannot” (Pizzigati, 2024).

American “democracy” and American capitalism are two topics that should be talked about together. We are taught that they should be separate, but the reality couldn’t be farther from this teaching. Capitalism decides the outcome for the “democracy” half, while this democratic outcome based on capitalism facilitates these capitalist practices further. Ideally and hypothetically, both of these systems should work together, as they are both based off of free choice, which can lead to an ideal society. However, that is essentially the only piece of synergy between these two systems. “Democracy is based on the fact that all people are equal, and they all have equal rights. Whereas capitalism is based on the difference created between capitalists and labor, hence, the inequality” (Zidan, 2024). Having a system that truly requires equality and a system that capitalizes off of inequality just cannot effectively exist together.

In the way that we approach it, at least, democracy and capitalism go hand in hand in the context of America, only it does not favor the people, as true democracy should. The people are just taught that it works out fine and that there is nothing to worry about. This system of thinking

is far from being sustainable, and we need to look at what is happening, rather than what the textbook definition says is happening.

Trump and Harris's America

Leading up to the 2024 election, America was in a very torn state. The country was divided, trying to bar their opposing candidate from entering the Oval Office. For most Americans, the stakes appear to be extremely high. To Democrats, it is hoping for a progressive leader to take down the racist felon, or to Republicans, they are cheering for their champion to defeat the liberal who does not even know her own agenda. Both claims to be fighting for democracy, freedom, and the country's future, and both believe that they're fighting against the force that may end America's era of glory.

The question that many people ponder is whether the Democrats or the Republicans are correct. Who is going to follow up on their promises, fix the economy, or help working-class people get back up on their feet? Or rather, how can we trust that either one would make any change in the first place? For nearly one hundred years, we have been in a state where the United States has been a frequent participant in global conflicts, where the rich have dominated the economy, and the poor have no room to come back from their depression. How can we feel confident that Donald Trump or Kamala Harris would make any sort of change to this American norm?

Conservatives are not too sure how Harris supporters even have legitimate faith in Harris. They just see her enthusiastic personality and feel optimistic that they have someone who can dispose of Trump. "She's not Trump and she's the one person who can prevent him from becoming president again. To millions of Americans that's all that matters, and thus she's become an instant star..." (Hunter, 2024). She is the only viable Democrat in the race, so she is

the one that half of the country is rooting for. To conservatives, it almost seems like a blind following, like a cult of sorts.

It is confusing to Republicans about what Harris stands for. For at least three weeks after joining the campaign, “there were no policies on the website — even after changes were made to add Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz to the ticket (and the site)” (Pollak, 2024). When going that long without naming policies, one could only assume that Harris would just serve as an extension of Biden’s presidency, which, looking at his track record, can show more support for the wealthy and not as much help for working-class people. Additionally, when going that long without naming policies, especially as a candidate that nobody really voted to be in the race, it can seem strange to Republicans how Democrats are so enthusiastic about Harris’s campaign.

And if Harris is going to emulate Biden’s administration, then Republicans would have Bidenomics to worry about. They say that it’s a complete failure where people are economically in a bad state, “and the Biden administration’s own figures on inflation, jobs, and falling household incomes prove it. Yet instead of acknowledging reality, the administration makes excuses while its media sycophants try and fail to gaslight Americans” (Antoni, 2023). Republicans foresee four more years of a crippling economy if Harris keeps up with these ideas, which would be a fair assumption during the extended time in which she was unclear about what her policies would be. The question then would be what exactly did Biden do to get to this state, and would Harris be any similar?

The remarkable thing is that supposedly people were so displeased with Biden’s presidency that, despite nearly everything, with Biden’s greatest campaign efforts and Trump dealing with felony charges, Trump did not have to do nearly as much to put himself in the lead. Biden “has spent zillions of dollars on advertising, focusing specifically on the key states. And at

the same time, Trump was either preparing to go on trial or, since April 15, actually on trial in New York, facing a maximum of 136 years in prison. And Biden is still unable to catch Trump” (York, 2024). People have to be incredibly displeased with Biden’s administration for a felon like Trump to be winning over the Democrats. Even though Harris took the role of the Democrat candidate instead of Biden, Trump was still able to see his way to victory. The people are clearly trying to see a change in the status quo. They are leaving it up to Trump to make a change.

But can they trust Trump to make the right changes or any changes at all? Or will there even be any America to make changes to in the next four years? These are concerns that Democrats are having with the reelection of Trump. Looking at Trump’s track record, he has done terrible things, defending white supremacy, separating families, and lying the whole way through. “Trump is, perhaps, in some important ways, unusual, extreme and anomalous. But 44%—including most white voters—’approve’ of Trump” (Koechlin, 2024). With a man like this going into power, and with this many Americans approving of him, it can be argued that the status quo may change to mirror Trump’s cruel image, especially with so many people choosing a candidate with such behavior. Perhaps it may even be normalized and integrated into society. Surely, this would be a drastic change from progressive Biden’s four years, with him trying to be friendlier to incoming immigrants than Trump.

Both sides did, very often, express how dangerous it could be if the opposing candidate did get elected. Trump, who focused more on warnings during his campaign, constantly warned about how Biden and Harris would be detrimental to our future. “His campaign appearances have included a long list of other warnings that have veered into the apocalyptic, saying that if he’s not elected, ‘we’re not going to have a country anymore,’...”. Additionally, though Biden and Harris focus more on optimism and positivity, Biden “offered dire predictions about the

former president, suggesting he'd dismantle the nation's founding principles should he retake the White House" (Price, 2024). The curious thing is that both halves of the country warn against the election of their opposing candidates, but such a calamity does not seem all that likely, at least considering the fact that we have lived through a Trump presidency and a Biden presidency. Granted, we were not in the best spot during those years, but neither one really improved our living situation substantially.

With this in mind, people get very concerned about what will change with Trump now in office, and what could have been should Harris have won. Yes, their opinions differ like night and day, but practically, they are going to end up doing the same things. For example, although Harris presents herself as more in support of Palestine, and Trump warns that Harris would end up destroying Israel, "Harris and Trump both went out of their way to express devotion to Israel". Although Trump has the image of the guy who hates immigrants, Harris supports an immigration bill that ended up having more deportations while Biden was president. Also, "Harris went on to claim that Democrats are concerned about climate change while simultaneously pledging to continue oil production" (Kimberly, 2024). It is almost as if the differences between Trump and Harris are purely cosmetic. Harris presents herself as a progressive candidate to get young people and minorities excited, but she would not end up doing much different than Trump, even despite her warnings against him.

Indeed, even if Harris won the election, it still would not really look like she would do many progressive things. During the recent times that Democrats had in control, especially under Biden's past four years, "they failed to codify *Roe v. Wade*, failed to pass the labor-friendly PRO Act, and have been overwhelmingly in favor of increasing funding for police and the mass incarceration state" (Shibabaw, 2024). It really seemed like they could have done so much more,

but they just made empty promises all day, especially regarding *Roe v. Wade*. They blame Trump for it, but he has been out of office for the past four years. One would think that Biden and Harris would have given that more care.

The fact of the matter is that both the Republican and Democrat parties have the same motivations, and their policies are so similar that it's almost as if one cannot exist without the other. "...it's the pro-corporate program of the Democrats that has left the space for the right-wing to grow in the first place, dating back to Obama bailing out Wall Street while working families lost their homes in the wake of the 2008 recession" (Hubbard, 2024). Their behavior, being sponsored by the mega-wealthy, is enabling each other, and that is all they care about. For the working-class people, there would be very little difference in whether Trump or Harris won. They are not going to get bailed out, the rich will get bailed out. It would take someone beyond just a Democrat or a Republican to care and do something about the working class, like Jill Stein or Cornel West. One look at the political compass would support this argument about the current state of our political parties. The political compass has two axis that have an economic scale and a social scale, dictating how a person believes the economy and society should be run. Trump and Harris, though they are shown to be polar opposites, sit in the same quadrant, quadrant one, meaning that they are both capitalist and believe more in a central authority. Take this in contrast to Jill Stein and Cornel West. They are both third-party candidates and they lie in the third quadrant, meaning that they do not believe that authority should be so concentrated into one entity and that they have more socialist tendencies (The Political Compass, n.d.). Typically, someone in the third quadrant would advocate more towards the working class, in contrary to those in the first, who more naturally favor the wealthy.

But naturally, in a country where the status quo is determined by the wealthy, they would not want to risk having a president who would change that. Cornel West is a prime example of this. West had an association with the People's Party and Green Party, and he wanted to make it a focus to make living affordable to Americans and to put an end to the corporate control of the Republican and Democrat Parties. However, corporate media quickly attacked him saying that he should not be running. Third-party candidates always get the blame from Democrats when they lose, saying that they took vital votes. On top of that, they change debate rules to bar third-party candidates from participating in them and make sure that their campaigns do not work. All the while, Democrats and Republicans are doing all they can to keep profiting for themselves in ways that seem too right-wing for Democrats (McCarly, 2023). Should third-party candidates like West be elected, the status quo would certainly shift from the right-wing era that it is in right now, but it's the mainstream party's goal to make sure that does not happen, that the status quo does not change regardless if it is a Democrat or Republican taking office.

And with all of this competition between two, frankly identical, sides of the same coin, there is not much room for growth with Western Capitalism. At the rate it is going right now, China is going to be the world's leading empire while Western capitalism declines. "Nothing prepared the populations of Western capitalism for this changed reality or its effects. Especially the sections of those populations already forced to absorb the costly burdens of Western capitalism's decline feel betrayed, abandoned, and angry. Elections are merely one way for some of them to express those feelings" (Wolff, 2024). We were not prepared for this reality, especially with politicians still embracing the glory we have achieved in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is when blame becomes a massive factor. During election season, instead of searching for solutions to our issues, we go around blaming everyone for the issues, especially

between Trump, Biden, and Harris. The media is often one to be blamed, and though they are rightfully blamed, there is not anything done about it, with calls to action that do not do anything. “Donald Trump himself will tell you that the media are lying, and the political establishment is run by swamp monsters, and then say that the solution is to support Republicans and trust right-wing media”. (Johnstone, 2024). No real advice or solution is being proposed, it is always just one group calling to not trust all of the media, just their own.

This goes back to the typical behavior between Trump and Harris, between Republicans and Democrats. Their campaigns these days almost always consist of warnings not to trust the other side, since they are corrupt. They think that they are the only people who have the legitimate ability to save America, but when it comes to the actual practice of it, they do not do anything different. We need to give light to actual people and groups who strive to make a change, to change the status quo, and to break apart this cycle of power between two groups who do the same things. As long as the president keeps supporting the wealthy and the large corporations, they will, in turn, keep supporting the president. “It’s becoming increasingly necessary to not just stand against the status quo but against the fraudulent political factions which pretend to oppose it” (Johnstone, 2024).

Conclusion

The influence that the elite class has on our government and society is something that cannot be ignored. With enough money, they can rule how they want to rule. With the way it is now, we cannot truly call ourselves a democracy. Our government is certainly more like a plutocracy, and it operates in a way to ensure that that is how it will stay. The wealthy put lots of money into electing mainstream leaders so that these leaders can make policies to keep helping the wealthy. With this in mind, it is safe to say that this will stay the same with Trump’s

upcoming presidency. However, a good democracy that runs fairly and represents everybody is a good idea and is something that we should be able to accomplish. If we fight the status quo as it is right now to start introducing third-party candidates that advocate for working-class people, rather than wealthy people, we can accomplish a democracy that can be far more representative and healthier for the majority of the American people. And if we adjust our economic system to not facilitate the growing gap between wealthy and working-class people, this true democracy will be far closer in sight.

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