

The Reality of the American Government

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Abstract

Since its founding in 1776, the United States has been defined as a democracy, promising freedoms as laid out in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. However, the intertwining of democratic governance with the principles of capitalism has created immense disparities in political influence, raising questions of whether the United States is, as a matter of fact, a government “by and for the people.” Capitalism’s divisions have created a system under which the elite manipulate a big part of the power available to them to pursue their interests at the expense of the general public. Four theories attempt to explain the complexity of governance in the United States. Still, the evidence increasingly points toward one theory reflecting today’s political power. When examining the current state of the U.S. government, one can see that, though the nation still identifies itself as a democracy, the economic elite and inequality mainly define its operations. This paper will analyze the features of the current United States government with references to the failures witnessed in the light of democratic principles. Additionally, it will argue for the need to move towards a more participatory and equitable structure that prioritizes the voices of all citizens, not just those with wealth and power. It will question political systems, historical contexts, and ongoing governance theories to challenge the existing status quo and explore possible ways of instituting a truly democratic state that would serve the interests of the many, instead of the few.

The Reality of the American Government

There are four theories related to the American government, each representing different perspectives concerning the way power and influence can operate. The first is the traditional democratic theory, which suggests that policymakers listen to the majority's desires and make decisions accordingly. The pluralist theory builds on this, arguing that people need to form groups in order to amplify their voices and affect public policy. On the contrary, the hyperpluralism theory reminds us that not all competition leads to better outcomes, and having too many conflicting groups may cause political gridlock, which prevents the government from making effective decisions. Finally, there is the elite class theory, which says that the United States is run by a wealthy minority, where the richest 1% hold the most influence, while the majority struggle to voice their concerns. Americans often believe we function as a representative democracy, but evidence points to a government that operates more closely under the elite class theory. Corporate lobbyists and their interests hold much more sway over the voting public, undermining the principles of the traditional democracy theory. Not only has the gap in wealth increased, but also the strong influence of wealth in politics and ignorance among the public has contributed to the lack of any serious participation of a vast majority of Americans in democracy. This paper will thoroughly examine four theories and will demonstrate that while the Founding Fathers did dream about a government ruled by the people, the realities of capitalism have made a concentration of wealth such that today, largely, the elite class controls the masses and significantly disables their voices regarding governmental behavior or policymaking. We, the people, should have the power to vote and influence the actions of our government.

Democracy in Name Only

The United States has been called a democracy for decades. If anyone living in the country were asked what kind of government we have, what would his or her answer be? That's right, a democracy. But is this the truth? Democracy by definition is a form of government that ensures all citizens have equal political power and representation. The Constitution grants the people many rights, including freedom of assembly, religion, and petition, but why are these rights often violated? Tear gas is thrown at peaceful protestors, and in Minnesota, wearing "political badges, political buttons, or other political insignia" on Election Day is prohibited (Morrison, 2018). Are constitutional rights really being protected and served? The First Amendment guarantees free speech and expression, but this freedom is greatly diminished when voices, most particularly from marginalized communities, are silenced or punished for speaking out against injustice. From silencing protests to dictating what people can and cannot wear to the voting booth, a question remains: If those in power can restrict our freedoms, does true freedom really exist? Not only do our rights get violated, but there are significant economic inequalities that challenge this definition of a democracy.

Every day even in nations considered some of the wealthiest on earth, one can see poor and homeless people. The United States is known to be one of the richest nations in the world. However, it is clear that the country is controlled by its rich. The likes of Elon Musk with nearly \$200 billion wealth in the same levels as Jeff Bezos show that the U.S. economy is skewed to benefit the wealthy, with prices continuing to rise in everything from gas to groceries to college tuition. Gradually, as such, the richest individuals politically manipulate their much wealthier stature with the purchase of political campaigns, professional lobbyists, and access to

policymakers. Hence, the government is more responsive to their needs compared to the average person. This unequal distribution of power is derived from policies that have been in place for a long time, already favoring the wealthy and powerful. Most of these policies are even rooted in racism, such as the Electoral College. These factors lead many Americans to question whether the United States can genuinely be called a democracy or if it is more like a plutocracy or oligarchy. How can we be called a democracy when so much inequality exists? We are told one thing through the education system, and it is that the United States is a democracy. It is oversimplified, and we are just told that it is a good system, and it is working well, but we cannot just believe everything that is written. This is why we should examine the system more critically using a structural approach. Let's see exactly how corrupt our so-called 'democracy' is.

People are quite aware of how very high the rates of unemployment and homeless people have soared across the states, but how bad is the problem, really? According to data released by the U.S. Census, as of January 2023, nearly 653,100 people were homeless. This is more than a 12.1% increase over the previous year (Soucy et al., 2024). Unemployment continues to plague the country, and according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are presently about 7.1 million people out of work. Most corporations will outsource their labor to countries where wages are lower, as little as \$0.20 an hour compared to the U.S. federal minimum of \$7.25. In the United States, jobs are being created in other countries causing high levels of unemployment. Apart from that, we seem to have a high minimum wage compared to other countries, but for a country as wealthy as the United States, why is the minimum wage so low? It is not the government's concern as the issue has not been addressed or resolved. The problems may be addressed perhaps, once, by a presidential candidate, but it is unlikely that it will be acted upon. These economic disparities create not only social issues but also political inequalities, especially for the

homeless. In addition to lacking these so-called basic needs, which are a right for every human being, the homeless are denied even the right to vote. In most situations, the lack of a permanent home address denies them the right to registration and subsequently voting in the democratic process. Furthermore, this is disempowering for people who become victims of this situation; they can hardly express themselves concerning the politics affecting their way of life. Economic issues like unemployment and homelessness reduce the ability of people to engage in politics, and they cannot advocate for changes that could improve their situations. It shows how far the country is from being equal and it is hard even calling the United States a democracy.

These economic disparities reveal a system where the issues of the unemployed and homeless are consistently overlooked. The legislative branch, which is supposed to represent the people, often fails those in need. While bills in Congress are said to be beneficial for “we, the people,” reality contradicts these claims. For example, former President Donald Trump, speaking about the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, said:

And I consider this very much a bill for the middle class and a bill for jobs. And jobs are produced through companies and corporations, and you see that happening. Corporations are literally going wild over this, I think even beyond my expectations, so far beyond my expectations. (*Remarks by President Trump at Signing of H.R. 1, Tax Cuts and Jobs Bill Act, and H.R. 1370, 2017*)

Despite this promise, the current economic status tells a different story. There are still around 7.1 million unemployed Americans, many of whom are struggling to find stable employment. Instead of benefiting those who need jobs most, these policies favor corporations, which further deepens economic inequality in the United States. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act did not benefit the middle class or anyone else except the wealthy. The top 1% of households

received an average tax cut of \$61,090, while households in the bottom 60% received less than \$500 on average (Ross, 2024). The act not only increased economic inequality, but also revealed political inequality. This disparity highlights an issue within the U.S. political system. Policies that claim to support the middle class often end up helping the wealthy more. This allows the individuals and corporations that are the wealthiest to donate huge sums of money to political campaigns, enabling them to make policies in their favor. It means that while the needs of the average American are ignored, the interests of the rich are taken care of, making it very hard to see the United States as a democracy.

Aside from the matters concerning economic disparity, let's focus on the amount of racism in this country. Racism is a huge issue within the United States. A democracy, ideally, is said to give equal political power and representation to all citizens. But racial minorities have been discriminated against throughout history, most obviously through slavery with African Americans and inequalities that persist to this day. One of those examples includes voter suppression, as states over the past 20 years have put barriers in front of the ballot box. To be more specific, many states have created strict laws that create obstacles to voting, including but not limited to voter ID laws, limited voting times, restricted voter registration, and purging of voter rolls. These efforts received a boost after the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As a result, many eligible voters, especially racial minorities, low-income individuals, young, and old voters find it difficult to cast their votes (Morris, 2024). The problem with these voter ID laws is that many people, especially youths and racial minorities, often lack a valid voter ID (Cherry, 2024). This form of electoral suppression emphasizes the systemic barriers that prevent racial minorities from fully participating in voting. Moreover, racial minorities generally have a limited presence in political

institutions, which are supposed to change policies affecting their communities. The suppression of such voters brings forth another problem within this so-called democracy. This continual discrimination shows that the United States is far from being an actual democracy since it is unable to provide equal political participation and representation for all its citizens.

Economic inequality also intersects with these racial disparities. White men earn more than both individuals of other racial groups and females in every occupation. According to the Government Accountability Office, white men earn significantly more than women of all ethnic groups, with the wage difference being most significant for women of color. In the year 2021, for example, white women were paid about 79 cents on the dollar of what white men were earning while Black women took home 63 cents, and Hispanic/Latina women only made 58 cents (Costa, 2022). Various things create this pay gap, including education and motherhood. While in the last few decades women's attainment of higher education outpaces men's, they continue to experience wage gaps, even between people with similar qualifications (Kochhar, 2023). Women often take on caregiving responsibilities, which can affect their career advancement and earning potential. These economic disparities also affect political representation. Some individuals may lack financial resources to contribute to political campaigns, and therefore it becomes very difficult for them to have an effect on politics. Also, unequal education makes it even tougher for them to represent themselves and plead for their cause or what they want. When certain groups are paid less and unfairly treated in the workforce despite equal or higher qualifications, it shows that the United States is unable to provide equal opportunity for all citizens, one of the principal tenets of democracy. This again highlights that the U.S. is far from being equal economically and in terms of political representation.

Of course, racial inequality is not limited to this. It extends into the criminal justice system, where African Americans face harsher treatment. They are targeted by police at much higher rates than white Americans, even for the same offenses. The brutal reality of police violence is well shown through numerous stories of African American men and women being shot by police for minor offenses or in situations where white individuals would not face the same consequences. The case for Sonya Massey, a Black woman, who faced a shot in the head for carrying a hot boiling pot of water. The case for Sonya Massey, a Black woman, highlights the system racism within the criminal justice system. After calling 911 to report a possible intruder, she was shot in the head by police officer Sean Grayson, who was later charged with murder. There is footage showing Massey removing a pot of steaming water from the stove, and she and an officer laugh over her pot of steaming water, before she jokingly says, "I rebuke you in the name of Jesus." The officer then draws his pistol saying, "You better f***ing not or I swear to God I'll f***ing shoot you in your f***ing face." She replies with, "OK, I'm sorry," and compliantly places the pot down as the officer still proceeds to shoot her (Matza, 2024). In a different case involving Fred Hopkins, a white male who killed two police officers and injured five others, he did not receive the same level of treatment as Massey. When he was arrested, he had not been shot, stabbed, choked, beaten, or sprayed with pepper spray (King, 2018). Such disparities in how people of different races are treated within criminal justice further detract from the idea of equal protection and challenge the United States' claim of being a true democracy.

Along with issues in criminal justice, exclusion can also be seen in the U.S.-Mexico border wall, one main component of Donald Trump's presidency. He wanted the "construction of a U.S.-Mexican border wall and...to reshape U.S. immigration and national security policy" (Ainsley, 2017). While claiming this, the wall targeted mainly those who were illegally

immigrating, specifically people from Latin America. Trump depicted these immigrants as criminals, drug dealers, and rapists, which validated the already existing stereotypes. For example, Trump said during his presidential campaign, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Phillips, 2017). This kind of language dehumanized immigrants, deepening divisions within the country. The implications of the border wall go beyond that physical aspect, it goes against democratic values like inclusion, liberty, and equality. By emphasizing exclusion, the wall serves to represent the dismissal of a very important notion: the idea that everyone, irrespective of their place of birth, should have the possibility to take part in society. The perception that America was founded upon the ideals of diversity and equality is lost with the belief that some groups are less worthy of basic rights and liberties. The policies surrounding the border wall lead away from those inclusive ideas that every democracy must depend on; therefore, they highlight a greater need for a better society.

Trump's discriminatory remarks have occurred past just the wall, as he has made comments about other people of color. In 2020, when the pandemic broke out, Donald Trump decided to call the disease the "Chinese virus" again and again. He did justify himself in an attempt to say that: "It's not racist at all. It comes from China, that's why." However, such language had much wider implications. It brought about the rising incidents of discrimination and hate crimes directed towards Asian Americans, especially Chinese, since most people would link the virus with the ethnic group. Thus, in 2015, the World Health Organization released guidelines on naming viruses to avoid any unnecessary negative effects. Trump ignored these guidelines and not only caused harm, but contradicted democratic values of equality and mutual

respect, as it fueled xenophobia and division. Trump's remarks did not stop there. During the presidential debate between Trump and Harris, he falsely claimed that Haitian immigrants in Ohio were eating people's pets. Trump said, "They're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there, and this is what's happening in our country, and it's a shame" (Arkin & Ingram, 2024). This statement, which was fact-checked by the police and found false, further spread racist stereotypes about immigrants. This event shows how misinformation can be used to fuel hatred towards immigrants without any factual basis, further dividing the nation rather than uniting it under a shared set of values, as there is lack of inclusivity and respect.

Additionally, Donald Trump has made racist remarks about people's names several times. In 2022, he referred to Elaine Chao, the former US Secretary of Transportation and Labor, saying "Does Coco Chow have anything to do with Joe Biden's Classified Documents being sent and stored in Chinatown? Her husband, the Old Broken Crow, is VERY close to Biden, the Democrats, and, of course, China." She calls him out for the racial disrespect, saying, "When I was young, some people deliberately misspelled or mispronounced my name. Asian Americans have worked hard to change that experience for the next generation. He doesn't seem to understand that which says a whole lot more about him than it will ever say about Asian Americans" (Phillips, 2017). By making fun of names that reflect someone's ethnic heritage, not only is he disrespecting the individual but the entire community and shows a dismissive attitude toward these different cultures. In a society that supposedly values inclusion and equality, actions from our former president are especially harmful, as they also normalize this kind of disrespectful behavior toward others. In another instance, Donald Trump attacked Glenn Youngkin on social media, who was a potential Republican challenger for the 2024 election,

writing “Young Kin... Now that’s an interesting take. Sounds Chinese, doesn’t it?” (Mueller, 2022). Larry Hogan, former governor of Maryland, said Trump’s comment was false and Youngkin was not Asian, and the comment was seen as racist and filled with Asian hate.

Hogan’s responded to Trump by saying:

It was definitely distasteful and inappropriate, not only because I don’t think my friend Glenn Youngkin deserved to be attacked like that, but it was also — I mean, it’s Asian hate against a white governor and making fun of Asians...He didn’t even have his nationalities, right, because Young Kin would be Korean, as opposed to Chinese...But it’s just more of the same from Donald Trump, insults and attacks. And that’s one of the reasons why the party is in such bad shape. (Mueller, 2022)

Such comments from a national leader normalize racist behavior within our country, countering the democratic principles of inclusion and equality. Trump’s words and actions promote division rather than unity. His words spread stereotypes and misinformation which is harmful to any functioning democracy, as it creates an atmosphere of exclusion, weakening the ideals of justice and fairness in the country.

The U.S.-Mexico border wall is only one representation of exclusion within the United States’ political system, but it reflects something much deeper. Beyond the physical aspect, systemic barriers like the Electoral College also reveal a lack of equal representation. Both the wall and the Electoral College show how certain groups are left out of full participation in the democratic process. The Electoral College has racist origins dating back to the Three-Fifths Compromise which was created in 1787. This compromise would count enslaved people as three-fifths of a person toward a state’s population. These individuals were prohibited from voting, and the compromise allowed the Southern states to have more electoral votes, skewing

the election unfairly (Lau, 2021). This systemic inequality still continues today. The Electoral College gives disproportionate political power to the smaller states. For example, California has 66.3 times the population of Wyoming, but only 18 times the electoral vote. However, giving smaller states more power could be seen as a way to balance representation. If larger states were given electoral votes strictly based on population, they would completely dominate the election, gaining the most electoral votes. While this approach would be more "equal" in terms of population representation, it would also make the system "less equal" because it gives the smaller states barely any influence. As for now, these improperly weighed elections give residents of smaller states more influence per vote (Dayen, 2024). Again, how can this country be called a democracy, if equal political power and equal representation are the main principles of democracy?

In their book, *Wrong Winner: The Coming Debacle in the Electoral College*, political scientists Abbott and Levine made a prediction about the Electoral College: they said it would soon pick the "wrong winner," a candidate who had not received the majority of the popular vote. Their prediction came true twice. The authors argued that the system had inherent flaws and took the position that it was only a matter of time before it would cease to represent the will of the majority. This was actualized in the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush. While Gore received more than half a million votes more than Bush, he lost the presidency due to Bush receiving more electoral votes (Cohen, 2019). It happened again in the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton: Clinton got almost three million votes more, yet Trump won due to him carrying more electoral votes (Wolfe-Rocca, 2020). These two elections clearly portray how the Electoral College system can supersede the majority, allowing a president to take office without getting the popular vote.

A 2020 survey done by the Pew Research Center showed that 58% of adults support a method where the presidential candidate receiving the most votes nationwide gets the presidency (Lau, 2021). There is one solution already in place to resolve this, which is the National Popular Vote (NPV). It ensures whoever wins the national popular vote automatically receives the electoral vote. This would remove future possibilities of the "wrong winner" being chosen and restore equity to presidential elections. Without any change to this system, it is theoretically possible that a candidate could be elected president with as little as 23% of the popular vote, though practically speaking, it would not likely occur. This figure comes from how the Electoral College is structured, with the "winner-take-all" majority rule in most states. A candidate could win just enough states to secure 270 electoral votes while losing large portions of the popular vote in other states (Cohen, 2019). The system gives smaller states disproportionate power due to each state receiving a minimum of two electoral votes regardless of population size. Under certain circumstances with these factors, a candidate could win the presidency with significantly less than a majority of the popular vote. The Electoral College is unfair as it allows a candidate to win the presidency without the support of the majority, and its disproportionate weight to votes from smaller states. This unequal representation contradicts the idea of democracy, where every vote should have the same political influence. Without reforms like the NPV, the U.S. cannot be called a democracy. The imbalance of wealth and political structures creates barriers to equal representation, central to democratic ideals.

The Electoral College is just one example of how the political system is flawed and favors a select few. This skewed representation in elections is tied directly to the issue of economic inequality and political power. The United States functions more like a plutocracy, wherein a relatively small number of the wealthiest individuals, commonly identified as the one

1%, wield far greater power and influence than the rest of the country. While most Americans believe that the economic and political systems create “a level playing field in which the poor and disadvantaged can rise to the top,” the reality is different. The idea of equal opportunity is just an illusion. Rather than competing on a fair playing field, “[the disadvantaged] have to run uphill to score goals... [while] the affluent elites run downhill as the playing field is tilted in their favor.” This analogy illustrates how the system is skewed toward the wealthy, and those who are not well off, face systemic barriers. A study done by Edward Luce makes this clear, showing that “an eighth-grade child from a lower-income bracket who achieves math[s] results in the top quarter is less likely to graduate than a kid in the upper-income bracket who scored in the bottom quarter” (Mahbubani, 2022). This data reinforces the fact that the system is not designed to provide everyone with equal chances to succeed. Instead, the wealthiest individuals are essentially guaranteed success, as wealth translates into power and influence.

Research done in 2014 by Gilens and Page shows that wealthy people and big businesses have a lot more power over government decisions than regular citizens. Their study found that when rich individuals or groups support certain policies, those policies are more likely to be passed. Meanwhile, the opinions of an average American have very little effect on what laws get made. This research indicates that financial resources significantly affect political dynamics, causing the United States to exhibit characteristics of both an oligarchy, characterized by the dominance of a limited number of individuals, and a plutocracy, in which monetary wealth determines political outcomes (Gilens & Page, 2014). In recent decades, the disparity in economic wealth has intensified, consistently favoring the affluent while marginalizing the larger segment of the populace. In the book, *Winners Take All*, Anand Giridharadas writes, “the average pretax income of the top tenth of Americans has doubled since 1980, that of the top 1

percent has more than tripled, and that of the top 0.001 percent has risen more than sevenfold—even as the average pretax income of the bottom half of Americans has stayed almost precisely the same." Such a distribution of wealth patently benefits the wealthy, as the political system, dramatically influenced by financial power, functions for their good. However, it puts the other 99% of the population at a fair disadvantage. In Mahbubani's book, he discusses Marvin Zonis, an economist from the University of Chicago, who describes a "crisis of legitimacy" in the American system because "the level of confidence that American people have in their key institutions has been declining." This increasing lack of trust is directly linked to the realization that "*money* [emphasized added] has become the key to American political life." Mahbubani expands on Zonis' point, emphasizing that "if money dictates outcomes in politics, it means that a society has become a 'plutocracy'" (Mahbubani, 2022). It is clear that the U.S. government's democracy is not actually working the way it is defined. While the idea of equal opportunity is promoted within our democracy, the reality is that money controls politics, making the system more of a plutocracy than a democracy. The government's decisions always favor the rich, showing that it does not abide by the principle of fairness and equality for all.

The United States, often called a democracy, has many indications of it operating more like a plutocracy. The country boasts freedom and equal opportunity, but there are clear economic and political inequalities. The wealthiest individuals and corporations wield inordinate influence over government decisions compared to ordinary citizens, as shown by policies like the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which largely benefited the rich. Racism is also institutionalized in our system, from voter laws to unequal treatment in the workforce and the criminal justice system. A structural approach is more effective than the institutional approach when it comes to answering the question, "What kind of government do we have?" as it focuses on deeper, underlying issues.

The institutional approach simply looks over the government, but only at its surface level; it will not address the issues of inequality and power imbalance. This perspective shows that the economy and political system work together in favor of the rich and powerful, reinforcing the idea that the United States is more of a plutocracy, rather than a democracy.

The American Two-Party System

Every presidential election in the United States has always been portrayed as a battle between two very different visions for the future of the country, yet systemic barriers often limit the potential for any change to be affected. From laws on campaign finance that raise corporate voices, to institutional checks on presidential power, stability and elite interests are promoted more by the political and economic system, rather than transformation. The 2024 election underlines these challenges, with Donald Trump's second term and his Project 2025 agenda, raising questions about whether meaningful reform is possible within this system. The 2024 presidential election was no exception in the pattern of framing elections as battles between two opposing futures. Democrats spoke of how a second term for Trump would mean the end of democracy, while Republicans insisted that it would "Make America Great Again." Yet, history shows that the system seems impervious to change, regardless of the party in power. Polarization in American politics has deep historical roots, shaped by strategies like the Southern Strategy of the 1960s, which realigned the Republican Party with Southern white voters, and the rise of Reaganomics in the 1980s, which solidified conservative economic policies (Baugh, 2024; Kenton, 2024). These shifts contributed to the growing ideological divide where parties prioritize opposing each other over addressing systemic issues. This dynamic also reflects a broader erosion of public trust in institutions, as voters increasingly feel alienated from a system that fails

to address their concerns. It is hard to imagine that the next four years of Trump will be any different.

American elections are often described as opportunities for change, but they frequently reinforce the same systems. One of the most significant barriers to effective change in politics is campaign finance. The Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United v. FEC*, in 2010 allowed corporations and unions to spend unlimited funds on political campaigns, which have had huge implications for the influence they have on elections and policy (Duignan, 2024). This ruling gave origin among Super PACs which operate independently to raise and spend unlimited funds, and to "dark money" contributions—anonymous donations funneled through nonprofits exploiting legal loopholes (Scott, 2024; Ghosh, 2022). These developments have created a system dominated by the “iron triangle” formed by lawmakers, lobbyists, and bureaucrats, sidelining the public’s interests in favor of elite priorities. For instance, tax cuts or deregulation policies often reflect the priorities of the donors rather than those of average voters. This results in poorer people becoming poorer, hence signifying more economic inequality. It goes on to illustrate C. Wright Mills’ concept of the “power elite,” where corporate leaders, military officials, and politicians develop a common understanding for maintaining dominance in society. This elite dominance becomes clearly visible when major policies such as healthcare reform or corporate tax cuts serve the interests of the wealthy, rather than the interests of common everyday citizens (Mills, 1959). This system perpetuates the status quo by making it nearly impossible for movements or candidates without deep financial backing to compete effectively. Campaign finance rules thus privilege corporate and elite interests, leaving the broader public with limited power to drive substantial political change.

Presidents often find their ability to enact change constrained by the same forces. Barack Obama, for instance, pledged sweeping healthcare reform but had to compromise significantly to pass the Affordable Care Act due to opposition from corporate-backed lawmakers. Donald Trump, despite his promise to “drain the swamp,” filled his administration with lobbyists and business executives, continuing the influence of big money in politics. Rather than facing external opposition, Trump worked closely with these figures leveraging their expertise and connections to push his agenda (Widmer, 2017). This partnership between Trump and corporate elites highlights the tension between campaign promises of outsider reform and the interests that shape policy outcomes. This pattern reflects structural functionalism in political systems, emphasizing how established networks maintain social stability but also restrain rapid reforms. This reliance on entrenched systems reveals that even when leaders claim to challenge the establishment, they must often play by its rules to maintain power or achieve results. The very structure of the system ensures continuity, limiting radical shifts regardless of presidential intentions.

The Political Compass is a tool that helps us understand political ideologies beyond the typical left-right spectrum by considering the economic and social dimensions. The grid places candidates on two axes: the economic axis (left to right) and the social axis (authoritarian to libertarian). Being authoritarian right, like both Trump and Harris, places a candidate at the intersection of support for a strong, centralized government and economic policies that favor free-market capitalism. For candidates like Trump and Harris, this means endorsing policies such as increased surveillance, a strong military presence, and limited challenges to corporate power and capitalism. For instance, during his presidency, Trump expanded the use of surveillance technologies through programs such as facial recognition at U.S. airports and increased

government monitoring under the guise of national security (Gorski, 2020). Similarly, Harris, as California's attorney general, faced criticism for supporting law enforcement programs that leveraged surveillance tools, such as license plate readers and data-sharing platforms (Harris on Surveillance, 2024). The fiscal policy aligned with the ideologies of right-wing advocates, who would push for corporate tax cuts, deregulation, and a market-driven economy. Trump's 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act exemplifies this, reducing corporate tax rates significantly to spur business growth. Harris has been accused of favoring deregulatory measures in particular sectors, such as those requiring limited opposition to big Silicon Valley corporations, despite growing calls for stricter regulation of tech giants during her time in the Senate (Tau & Heddles, 2024).

Project 2025 aims to dismantle federal agencies and limit reproductive rights, representing a significant conservative overhaul of federal programs. This blueprint includes efforts to dismantle environmental protections, defund public media like PBS, and enforce stricter abortion regulations. For instance, it plans to restrict medication abortions and prosecute individuals assisting with abortion access, exacerbating public health disparities in states with strict bans. Additionally, it supports the growing trend of banning books addressing race, gender, or LGBTQ+ topics, and aligning education policies with conservative values (Quinn & Rosen, 2024). These measures reflect an authoritarian-right ideology, where government authority enforces traditional norms and suppresses differing perspectives. As these initiatives have been introduced, the Democratic Party has countered them by enacting policies like the Inflation Reduction Act, which emphasizes renewable energy investments and healthcare subsidies (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024). Vice President Harris has also emphasized social equity programs, such as those meant to protect women and marginalized groups, from the impacts of conservative policies (Quinn et al., 2024).

While Trump and Harris may seem to offer starkly different visions, the Political Compass helps reveal underlying similarities in their ideologies, specifically in their economic conservatism and authoritarian social policies. Trump's presidency, however, would likely go further in enacting significant societal changes through Project 2025. On the other hand, third-party candidates like those from the Libertarian and Green parties fall outside this narrow range of this two-party system. Libertarians emphasize personal freedoms, reducing government intervention in both economic and social spheres, while the Green Party focuses on environmental justice and wealth redistribution (California Secretary of State, n.d.). These ideas challenge the major parties, but the system, including ballot access laws and media bias, often makes it difficult for them to gain traction.

The Democratic Party has always been viewed as the party that progresses toward issues like climate change, healthcare, and social equity. They stressed that the second term of Trump would not only eliminate democracy but also leave these issues to grow significantly, without ever addressing them; these were warnings to the rest of the Democrats as Trump soon becomes president again. While these goals resonate with many voters, the party faces criticism for not delivering on its promises, often due to opposition in Congress or internal divisions. The Republican Party, led by Trump, focused on economic growth, deregulation, and traditional values. Trump's campaign was based on the idea that his second term would come with an even stronger economy, which would protect American culture. However, critics say that the party focuses too much on fighting cultural battles, such as banning books or restricting abortions, while neglecting deeper issues like economic inequality. Despite their differences, both parties are heavily influenced by wealthy donors and prioritize policies that protect corporate interests. This similarity reduces the likelihood of major changes, no matter who wins.

Third-party candidates give people an alternative to the two-party system with ideas that can address the root causes of inequalities and systemic problems. In 2024, Green Party candidates such as Jill Stein called for bold action on climate change and economic justice, such as universal basic income and stricter regulations on corporations. Libertarians loathed what they called intrusions into their individual lives, emphasizing individual freedoms, reduced taxes, and a vision of the U.S. non-interventionist foreign policy. Yet the U.S. electoral system perpetuates the idea that voting for a third-party candidate is a “waste” to his or her vote. This voting system fails to provide representation for others because if a candidate gains the greatest number of votes, he or she is declared a winner in the winner-takes-all system. Many voters face the majority parties’ dilemma of the “lesser of the two evils” to not “spoil” an election, a belief likely reinforced by such cases as the 2000 presidential election, where Ralph Nader’s candidacy was seen as helping Al Gore lose (Mann, 2001). Additionally, limited media coverage and ballot access laws have placed significant barriers for third-party candidates, dumping them further away from public faces and legitimacy (Sifry, 2003). These barriers discourage voters from supporting third-party platforms, even if they align with their views. Reforms like ranked-choice voting, which allows votes to transfer to a second-choice candidate if the first does not win, or proportional representation, could help combat this problem by ensuring every vote counts.

Many critics argue that the two-party system itself is the problem. Both Democrats and Republicans support policies that maintain the status quo, such as high military spending, corporate tax cuts, and surveillance programs. For instance, military spending consistently gathers bipartisan support, as shown by the Biden administration's proposed billions in aid for Ukraine, Taiwan, and Israel, which received approval across party lines despite concerns over the federal deficit. Similarly, both parties have backed corporate tax policies favorable to

businesses. While the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act was a Republican-led initiative, Democrats have sustained certain corporate tax benefits as part of broader compromises, balancing corporate interests with expansions of social programs like the Child Tax Credit. On surveillance programs, Democrats and Republicans have repeatedly aligned in renewing measures such as the Patriot Act and Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, justifying these as necessary for national security despite criticisms of their impact on civil liberties (Gould & O'Brien, 2023; Gleckman, 2023). While they argue over cultural issues, their economic policies often align, leaving little room for real change. Trump's second term is unlikely to break this pattern, as systemic challenges often prevent presidents from achieving their goals. For example, pre-existing laws and regulations create barriers to swift policy shifts; rolling back significant legislation often requires substantial time, political will, and public support. Additionally, the separation of powers characterizes the U.S. government; the executive, legislative, and judicial branches all share responsibility for governing the citizenry, thus making sweeping changes more difficult to achieve. Presidents rely on Congress to pass legislation, but political gridlocks often result in stagnation, especially when the president's party does not control the House and the Senate. This makes it almost impossible to initiate any change, and as a result, progress can slow down or stop altogether. Even executive actions mostly face judicial review, just as it was seen during Trump's first term, where courts banned immigration policies. Apart from this, critics also argue that Trump's prioritization of deregulation and tax cuts in his first term contributed mostly to rather rich individuals and corporations, further entrenching economic inequalities rather than addressing institutional challenges that bear down on the average American. This dynamic highlights how entrenched structures of institutions limit the opportunity for real change.

The 2024 presidential election, like many before it, was framed as a choice between two very different futures for America. Yet history and current realities show that the system often prevents dramatic change, regardless of who wins. Both Democrat and Republican leaders cannot escape a political and economic system that favors stability over transformation. As Trump heads into his second term, Americans will be on the lookout to see if his promises usher in righteous reform or if the country remains stuck in the same patterns. This raises important questions about whether the U.S. political system can actually give the masses meaningful changes. The two-party system, being dependent on rich donors and corporate lobbyists, tends to form itself to keep the status quo in place instead of addressing solutions to major issues such as inequality and climate change. Many Americans feel that their choices in elections lead to real progress, but in reality, all the choices that he or she makes during elections do not really bring any progress. The 2024 election reminds us that real change requires more than electing the “right” candidate, it demands us to look deeper at the structures that shape American politics. The question now is whether the system will be able to evolve to serve the needs of its people, or whether the same patterns will keep repeating.

Conclusion

America is not the democracy it claims to be - it is a corrupted government, a plutocracy, wherein the rich elite control the administration of government favoring themselves over the majority. Despite all the democratic principles instilled in our minds, the United States consistently fails to live up to its ideals of equality and representation. This inequality is perpetuated through the elite class and the capitalist system, which has maintained a status quo, leaving the working and middle classes—99% of the population— with little to no meaningful representation in government. However, America is not a lost cause. The desire for change cuts

across the political divide, as Americans strive for a system that truly reflects democratic values. Recognizing that the United States has never truly been a democracy—often prioritizing the interests of the wealthy over the majority—is the first step to that resolution. No matter which political affiliations one might have, there is always one thing that would unify us all: a government that represents us and listens to our voices while it works for the people, not the wealthy few. We will be able to change this, but only if we understand it and become united. It is up to Americans to break down these systems of inequality, such as corporate influence in politics, gerrymandering, and voter suppression while demanding reforms like campaign finance transparency, fair redistricting process, and accessible voting for all. Until then, the journey toward becoming a true democracy remains a long and challenging one, but one worth pursuing.

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