

The 2024 Presidential Election: Continuity or Change

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Abstract

This paper examines whether the 2024 presidential election and Donald Trump's return will meaningfully alter the political and economic status quo of the United States. Although Democrats and Republicans frame themselves as opposites and elections as a choice between two different futures this paper will demonstrate how close their ideologies really are and how elections preserve the existing status quo. Drawing on critical scholarship, economic inequality research, and the framework of the Political Compass this paper argues that America functions less as a democracy but as an oligarchic capitalist system where elite interest causes policy outcomes rather than the American citizens. Evidence of Ben Norton, Chris Hedges, Rebecca Riddell, Gilens and Page, and other scholars reveals that the concentrated wealth, corporate influence, and structural restraints that prevent alternate ideologies and third-party candidates limit the capacity for electoral change. Ultimately the findings show that elections regardless of the outcome do not produce substantial structural transformation to the status quo. Instead, the economic and political status quo remain mostly unchanged regardless of which party is in control, and this structure is maintained not by voter influence but deeper structural forces that shape American politics

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Presidential elections are often framed as a battle that can lead to two different futures for the nation. This is the case for the 2024 presidential election with Donald Trump's return to office. With Trump's victory, Republicans argued this will lead to a brighter future and a stronger nation. While Democrats argue that his reelection proves democracy is dead. Although both parties have different policies and solutions on conflicts towards certain people the overall political and economic status quo of the United States remains nearly the same between the change of which party is in control.

Politically the United States is commonly defined as a democracy, where the nation is ruled by the many. Yet when examined closely at how our political system operates, it can resemble and work more as an oligarchy, where the nation is ruled by the few. It can be seen in our nation as policy decisions are often made by political elites or large corporate donors rather than ordinary citizens. Research shows that between the preferences of ordinary citizens and economic elites the average citizen has almost no impact upon public policy (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 575). Their findings suggest that our nation's political structure/status quo favors the small economic elite rather than the average citizen. The ideals of this society when it comes to decisions and policymaking for our country more closely resemble an oligarchy than democracy.

The economic side of the status quo is rooted in capitalism. While Democrats favor a more equal and regulated market, and Republicans favor less regulations and a competitive market, both parties have ideals and pass policies that favor and promote a strong capitalist nation. The political and economic status quo show the foundation of American politics and whether or not a change in parties causes a change in the status quo.

This paper argues that although Democrats and Republicans are presented to the people with opposing views for the nation's future, but in reality, much more similar than we think. Both reinforce similar economic and political structures to maintain the status quo, and because of this regardless of who wins the election the core status quo changes very little, no matter which party is in office.

Why American Elections Do Not Change the System

A common argument with critical and radical analyses of American politics is that elections rarely change the status quo and common structure of power. While campaigns of candidates claim they will provide transformations to the nation, in reality the bias towards corporations and the wealthy stays the same, regardless of which party wins. One analyst argues that the American political system functions more like an oligarchy and less of a democracy. Where political institutions always favor the wealthy elites and overlook policies to favor corporate entities regardless of which party is in power. They also describe how Trump and Republicans openly favor wealthy elites but also show how Democrats like Obama and Biden do the same but are just not as open about it (Geopolitical Economy Report, 2025). The analyst describes the favor for wealthy and corporate elites and how it stays the same regardless of who is in power. In this system elections serve as symbolic exercise rather than a means of substantial change for the status quo. When voters replace one administration with another, they think that it will lead to change, but when we look at deeper policies and actions within politics continue to favor the wealthy and the status quo continues to operate with little interruption.

Many authors also describe American politics as operating within a “two party chokehold” that strictly limits the range of possible change. A former journalist in an interview state that Democrats and Republicans represent different factions of the same corporate order.

They both maintain a system designed to absorb the public's frustration and preserve elite control (Al Jazeera English, 2025). From the journalists' argument, elections are only a means to give an illusion to citizens, to feel they are participating without giving any real influence on political decisions. Similarly, a political economist argues that capitalism channels political conflict into short election cycles, which prevents conversations about deeper structural problems such as the domination of corporations and concentration of wealth (Wolff, 2024). What the journalist and economist describe is that while both parties depend on wealthy donors the electoral outcomes do not shift the status quo, as the foundation of our political system is meant to benefit those wealthy donors.

Other perspectives point to the same problem with the corporate control over our government due to the donations from wealthy elites and the favors elected officials do to pay them back. An author of a recent analysis on economic inequality shows how the top fraction of Americans controls public policy through lobbying, contributions, and ties into federal institutions (Riddell, 2025). Because elected officials heavily rely on corporate donations, they feel obligated to repay the favor and form policies that favor their donors. A political analyst also described how many elected officials fill their administration with billionaires, many of which have funded them (Geopolitical Economy Report, 2025). Both the authors and analysts' arguments show how elected officials favor the wealthy few. This bias towards the wealthy allows the elites to have an unfair advantage to get jobs and policies passed for them that ordinary citizens have no way to do or stop.

Authors also argue how the framework of American politics discourage genuine transformation. The electoral college and how elections work prevent other parties from coming to power, without the large corporate investments the main two parties get. A political scientist

argues that elections fail to produce change due to political parties acting more like coalitions of major investors rather than serving as ideological organizations for the people (Ferguson, 2020). As stated, the main parties work for the investors, and the minor parties can't get any traction from our election system. This causes a political system that favors the large donors and not the people, and the system prevents true change from occurring and maintains corporate control over politics.

Overall, this evidence shows the control that these elites have over politics prevents change from happening. With both parties being so similar in the two-party system it greatly limits change within our current political system. The wealthy control over the government further prevents change since government officials depend on funding and donations the wealthy will continue to control the government regardless of who is in office, keeping the capitalist oligarchy structure in American politics.

The Political Compass as a Framework for Analyzing the Status Quo

Having established that elections rarely alter the status quo, the Political Compass can provide a framework that explains why Democrats and Republicans remain ideologically close despite their presented differences. The political compass shows an understanding of American politics that goes beyond the simple left-right spectrum used in the media. Its model introduces two axes: a social vertical axis of authoritarian versus libertarian and an economic horizontal axis of left versus right. By comparing these it reveals how political officials differ in their economic preferences and their views on state power and individual freedom. According to the political compass candidates of both major parties consistently fall into the authoritarian-right quadrant. The quadrant is characterized as having a strong centralized executive authority and pro-market economic policies (The Political Compass, 2025). This mapping of ideals not only challenges the

common belief Democrats are “left” and the Republicans “right,” but also shows that Democrats and Republicans true ideals are much closer than we think. Even though Democrats and Republicans emphasize different cultural conflicts and portray two different “sides” of politics, the Political Compass shows these differences amount to surface level variations within the status quo rather than structural disagreements.

The political compass also illustrates how many entire political ideologies are excluded from American politics due to the restrictive two-party system. The Political Compass notes that the U.S. debate takes place within a restricted authoritarian-right space, this causes little representation for the other ideologies (The Political Compass, 2025). Due to the two-party system this leads to American politics having restricted ideals compared to other multi-party democracies. Third parties such as the Green Party fall in the libertarian-left quadrant, advocating for demilitarization, ecological justice, and worker centered economic structures (The Green Party of the United States, 2024). Oftentimes this party is left out of political discussion due to the two-party system, and we do not really see other political ideologies than the dominant Democrat and Republican authoritarian right.

The restricted range shown by the Political Compass also explains why American elections rarely cause significant structural change. Voters are encouraged to vote and support their side of either the Republicans or Democrats and how either side will lead to a change for America's future. Although in reality the Political Compass shows how the two parties' ideals and decisions cluster together. The insight also aligns with the findings of a team of political researchers, whose study demonstrated that the preferences of Americans have near zero statistical impact on federal policymaking, while economic elites exert dominant influence (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 575). Taken together, these findings show the narrow ideological range

of the two major parties and that even when voters think they are choosing a fundamentally different path or governmental structure, they really are not. The structural orientation of American politics ensures that both parties maintain the same underlying political and economic status quo.

Overall, the Political compass demonstrates how the American two-party system causes a narrow ideological political system dominated by authoritarian political tendencies and capitalist economics. By showing how close the Democrats and Republicans are the compass reveals that the portrayed polarization of U.S. politics does not reflect the genuine ideological structure. As a result, the political and economic status quo persists regardless of who wins the elections, reinforcing the argument of elections, being the appearance of choice and keeping the foundational system stable.

Traditional Party Narratives and The Illusion of Opposition

The Democratic / Liberal Perspective

Democrats traditionally present themselves as the defenders of equality, democracy, and social justice. In the 2024 election cycle, Democratic messages emphasized protecting democratic norms and restoring national unity. A 2024 article argues that electing Democrats is necessary to preserve democracy and safeguard the nation's future (Koechlin, 2024). The phrasing of the message as well as the message itself positions Democrats as the moral alternative future to Republican instability, suggesting that the party offers a fundamentally different political future for America.

However, when examining their policy making makes the distance between Democrats and Republicans much narrower. Democratic leadership often supports the same structural policies as Republicans, especially when it comes to national security, policing, and economic

actions. Two political journalists covering the 2024 election state that although Harris promotes a more joyful, inclusive America, her proposed policies remain similar to traditional bipartisan traditions, including support for NATO expansion, increased military spending, and enforcement of federal law (Weissert and Price, 2024). Harris supporting increased military support shows how similar these parties are. Democrats often argue that Republicans are going too far with military spending, but here democrats are advocating for the same policies. This shows that even Democrat “reforms” operate within the capitalistic and oligarchic status quo.

This pattern is not just today, a political scholar that modern presidents preserve the status quo by turning politics into a symbolic performance. Presidents campaign as a transformative figure but create policies through bureaucratic continuity which reinforces existing elites (Miroff, 2003). Democratic presidents such as Clinton, Obama, and Biden all fit this pattern, maintaining continuity in policy making despite their campaigns being promises of bold change.

Recent Democratic officials reinforce these dynamics. For example, Biden maintained key components of Trump-era border enforcement and preserved tax structures benefiting large corporations. Even though Democrats say Trump and Republicans are anti-democratic they frequently defend and keep policies that reinforce the status quo. Despite their liberal cultural rhetoric, the Democratic party operates as a center-right capitalist institution, being a lot closer to Republicans and keeping the structure and framework of the status quo.

Taken together, the Democratic Party’s rhetorical and policy choices demonstrate that it operates within the same oligarchic capitalist structure as the Republican Party, making the appearance of ideological conflict far from reality.

The Republican / Conservative Perspective

Republicans display themselves as disruptors aiming to restore traditional values and defend economic freedom. Conservative writers argue that Trump's appeal stems from his promise to confront federal institutions that have resisted democratic accountability (Lawrence, 2025). This message shows that Republicans aim for transformation on federal bureaucracy and control.

However, like Democrats, Republicans uphold and operate within the existing framework in American politics. Military spending grew under Trump, corporate influence expanded through his deregulation, and surveillance authority continued without substantial reform from Trump and the Republican Party. In a related analysis, the author argues that Trump's effort to challenge the bureaucratic and intelligence institutions faced resistance that no president could overcome (Lawrence, 2025). This reinforces the idea that Republican anti-establishment rhetoric does not translate into true structural change.

In a historical analysis of American political parties, a political historian provides grounding for this pattern. The historian demonstrates that since the 1790s American political parties rebrand themselves as insurgent forces, but structurally remain tied to the same institutional, economic, and constitutional constraints (Silbey, 2002). Trump fits this historical pattern where despite his populist messaging his administration is ultimately governed through established elite networks, traditional economic policy, continuity in national security policies.

Overall, the Democratic and Republican perspectives reveal the illusions that their ideological conflict covers and the true shared structures. Both parties present themselves as radically different, but each governs with the same oligarchic and capitalist framework. The way they display themselves diverges sharply, yet the policy outcomes continuously reinforce elite

control, centralized executive authority, and corporate control. This makes the opposition between the two parties far more performative than true, where either party ultimately leads to an uphold of the traditional framework and proves that elections do not really alter the economic or political status quo of the United States.

Third Party Politics and the Limits of Electoral Choice

Having shown the similarities with policy making and the narrow ideals between Democrats and Republicans it can be seen why the political and economic status quo rarely changes. The way we could change the status quo is through third party candidates. Third party candidates are often overlooked in the U.S. due to the major control of the two-party system, yet their platforms and political struggles reveal much more about the structure of American politics than their vote totals suggest. These parties expose what the narrow ideology of the two-party system lacks ideological diversity, institutional openness, and the possibility of a change to the status quo.

A political analyst argues that third parties play two essential roles in a democracy. They widen the range and number of political ideals available and expose how limited mainstream politics is (Sifry, 2003). While the Democrats and Republicans are close together in the authoritarian-right quadrant of the Political Compass, third parties often have ideals that place them far away from that zone and that are different from the common ideologies displayed by Democrats and Republicans. For example, the Green Party falls in the libertarian-left quadrant, endorsing demilitarization, universal healthcare, and worker centered economic structures (The Green Party of the United States, 2024). The Green Party, being a third party, shows political possibilities that the normal two-party system does not represent. This supports the analyst's argument as it gives the people an alternative to the common ideologies portrayed by the

Democrats and Republicans. This can help people feel they are not forced into a confined political space by having to vote for parties with such similar ideals.

However, the analyst also emphasizes why these third parties are not marginalized, and it is because their ideas lack public support. This is from the traditional American political system putting up structural barriers that prevent these third parties from gaining meaningful traction to break the status quo. The analyst states some of these barriers such as ballot access laws requiring third party candidates to gain much more signatures than the signatures required by the two major parties. The campaign finance structure heavily favors the major parties that are backed by wealthy donors (Sifry, 2003). Additional research by a legal scholar supports the analysts' claims by demonstrating how state ballot access intentionally creates burdens for political outsiders, such as third-party candidates (Mannix, 2005).

These structural challenges that burden third party candidates relate to the argument that elections rarely produce significant change. All of these burdens are placed as a means to prevent alternative ideologies in politics and keep the status quo. Alternative ideologies are excluded from debates, voting, and media coverage to keep the public to a binary choice between Democrats and Republicans. This also helps explain why the Democrats and Republicans are so close on the Political Compass as the system filters out any ideologies that would challenge the capitalist and oligarchic status quo. The analyst notes, the result of the system today is manufactured choice where voters believe they are selecting between two different futures, when in reality they are confined to the two parties with the same dominant ideology (Sifry, 2003). What the analyst states supports the past statement and how this manufactured choice causes people to naturally fall within the dominant ideologies of the status quo.

Overall, the presence and attempted exclusion of third parties reveal how restrictive the American political system is. When third party platforms demonstrate alternate ideologies that could disrupt the status quo the modern structure of U.S. elections prevents these alternate ideologies from gaining any traction from the public. Their exclusion enforces the continuity of this paper where regardless of whether Democrats or Republicans win the political and economic framework remains the same. Third party politics not only highlight what is missing from modern elections but also reveal the true intentions behind the current structure of American politics that prevents elections from producing a genuine transformation.

Critical Interpretations - Structural Power, Inequality, and the Limits of Electoral Democracy

Having examined how the Political Compass and third-party exclusion reveal the true narrow ideological boundaries of American politics, it becomes important to consider a broader set of critical interpretations and why these boundaries exist. Critical scholars argue that the United States maintains the appearance of democracy while being shaped by concentrated wealth and elite influence within their political structure. These interpretations reinforce the argument developed, in how elections do not significantly alter the status quo because of how the American political structure retrains and prevents meaningful transformations.

An influential argument comes from a former political journalist, where the journalist describes the United States as an inverted totalitarian system, where corporate power dominates the political institutions and maintains the illusion of electoral choice for the people (Al Jazeera English, 2025). This breakdown works very well to describe the American system, as inverted totalitarianism operates through managed democracy, where citizens vote and political rhetoric appears changed but in reality, still remains the same with corporate and elite control. This

argument aligns with the findings of a team of political researchers, who concluded that the average citizen's influence over federal policy making is near zero compared to corporate control (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 575). These analyses suggest that the structural power of wealth determines the future of American policy and not voter preference.

Economic inequality also plays a central role in sustaining the status quo. An author of a recent analysis on economic inequality argues that escalating wealth concentration has allowed a small portion of Americans, the wealthy elites, to exert outsized influence over the government, and thus influence over policy making (Riddell, 2025). This creates a feedback loop where the elites shape policy outcomes and fortify the economic status quo that keeps their dominant power. A political journalist explains that the rise of billionaires has reshaped the political agenda, which now prioritizes capital over democracy, making redistributive reforms extremely difficult (Noah, 2025). These assessments show why Democrats and Republicans maintain policies that protect the interests of donors and corporations, even when their public rhetoric would suggest otherwise.

Other scholars emphasize the role of capitalism itself as a stabilizing mechanism for the status quo. A political economist argues that capitalist systems aim to channel political conflict into symbolic competition, preventing discussions about the structure of corporate dominance and causes of inequality (Wolff, 2024). According to the economist, the current capitalist structure requires a restricted political sphere where economic arrangements are unquestioned, and cultural issues take the stage. Our political system follows this structure, where the divide of Democrats and Republicans argue over cultural conflicts while there is a consensus on military budget and corporate tax. Elections become contests of symbolism rather than structure due to the connecting economic policies of the two major parties.

Overall, these critical perspectives strengthen the argument that the current structure of America's political system is not accidental but structurally produced to be the status quo. Whether examining corporate influence, concentrated wealth, or the constraints of capitalism, these scholars came to the same conclusion that the American Political system remains the same through systems designed to preserve elite dominance and limit ideological diversity. While elections may alter cultural messaging the deeper political and economic structure remains unchanged. These insights provide a further understanding why even in moments of extreme polarization the status quo always persists.

Conclusion

Now that Donald Trump has returned to presidency Americans are asking whether the nation will go through a transformation or will the underlying political and economic remain mostly unchanged. Trump and his supporters promise sweeping reforms by restoring national sovereignty and creating a stronger economy. His critics warn that his leadership will lead to the erosion of democratic norms and endanger constitutional protections. Yet the evidence presented throughout this paper suggests neither of these theories will fully come true.

The critical interpretations reveal a consistent theme, where the structural forces of corporate power, concentrated wealth, and the self-reinforcing nature of capitalism shape American politics much more than the electoral outcomes do. Whether there is a Democrat or Republican in the White House the underlying structure of the system remains the same. The Political Compass shows the narrow ideological space that the modern political system operates, where third party exclusions show how any alternative ideology is pushed out, and critical scholars explain how the structure is maintained through elite influence and intentional design.

Taking together these critiques show that elections and electoral change do not cause any real structural change. Instead, the political and economic status quo is maintained not by voters but by structural design. As a result, each election becomes less about a choice between different futures and more as an illusion of choice between two parties that preserve the oligarchic and capitalist's status quo. Thus, even with Trump winning the 2024 election the underlying political and economic structure will continue operating as it has previously, reinforcing the idea that elections rarely disrupt the foundational status quo of American Politics.

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