

False Choices: How the Two-Party System Protects the Status Quo

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Abstract

This paper argues that the political and economic status quo in the United States remains fundamentally unchanged regardless of which major party holds power and is maintained through an elite-driven system of control. While elections may bring superficial shifts in tone and social policy, both parties fail to challenge the deeper structures of corporate dominance, centralized authority, and systemic inequality. Through an analysis of the 2024 election between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, and using the Political Compass framework, this paper examines the limits of choice in the two-party system, the persistence of elite rule, and the illusion of political ideological polarization. It also explores how third-party alternatives are often suppressed, but have the potential to offer genuine ideological alternatives, and how reimagining the system through decentralization, direct action, and economic democracy could create a more participatory and just society.

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Every four years, millions of Americans cast their vote in what is framed as a crucial turning point in U.S. history. The 2024 presidential election was no exception. Fueled by a deeply polarized media and growing anxieties about inflation, climate change, immigration, and civil liberties, the election generated fierce partisan conflict, but the underlying structures of American governance remain remarkably intact. Regardless of which party wins, the political and economic landscape – its economic system, its foreign policy, and its relationship with corporate power – remain strikingly unchanged (Inskeep, 2021).

This continuity raises critical questions about the authenticity of American democracy. If both major parties ultimately protect the same economic hierarchies, power structures, corporate donors, and the preservation of power, then how much real choice do voters actually have? The answer, as some critics argue, is not much, resting instead “on a convoluted system of electors” (Tai, 2024). The Democratic and Republican parties may differ in social rhetoric, but both cluster near the authoritarian-right quadrant of the Political Compass. When it comes to economic policy, international relations, and the centralization of state authority, they are more alike than different (Acemoglu, Robinson, Torvik, 2020), sustaining neoliberal capitalism and imperialist foreign policy.

Breaking free from this manufactured binary requires more than swapping one candidate for another. As movements across the political spectrum grow frustrated with elite dominance and stagnant governance, there is a growing recognition that true change cannot come from within the confines of the existing system. The foundations of governance itself must be reimagined – who holds power, how decisions are made, and how communities can sustain themselves outside of corporate and state control.

The Political and Economic Status Quo

In theory, the United States is a democratic republic – government of, by, and for the people. In practice, however, power is concentrated in the hands of an elite few, reinforced by economic structures that prioritize capital accumulation over collective well-being and economic equality (Donald & Martens, 2018). For centuries, the U.S. has functioned as a managed oligarchy where the slogan “rule by the few” stemmed from Aristotle’s original description: “rule by the wealthy few” (Ocampo, 2025). At the time of the first presidential election in 1789, only a small percentage of the population (white land-owning men) were eligible to vote. Some Founding Fathers advocated maintaining this exclusivity, reflecting their desire to keep political power within a select socioeconomic class. This limited franchise was not merely a reflection of societal norms but a deliberate design to preserve a hierarchical structure reminiscent of feudal systems, where land ownership equated to power and influence. Such restrictions institutionalized a system where political agency was intrinsically linked to wealth and land ownership, ensuring that governance remained in the hands of the privileged, and argues that the American democratic system was, from its inception, structured to serve the interests of a wealthy elite. A legacy that continues to influence contemporary political dynamics.

At first glance, Democrats and Republicans appear to offer opposing visions for the country. In the 2024 presidential race, Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Trump presented voters with differing campaign promises. A reporter highlighted superficial distinctions between the two candidates, arguing that both “are committed to disastrous policies domestically and internationally” (Kimberley, 2024). Harris advocated for national protections for abortion rights and significant economic interventions to expand child tax credit and cap

prescription drug costs (Wiki, n.d.), while Trump focused on immigration policies and large-scale deportations, imposing substantial tariffs and advocating for tax cuts (Trump, n.d.). However, the most progressive-sounding measures from Harris “do not alter the balance of power or wealth in a meaningful way” (Kimberley, 2024).

Traditionally, Democrats promote expanded social programs and progressive taxation, while Republicans emphasize tax cuts, limited government, and individual responsibility. Yet, when mapped on the political compass – a grid measuring economic and social ideologies – both parties consistently fall within the authoritarian-right quadrant to some degree. “U.S. democracy is thus not only characterized by high levels of horizontal polarization between left and right, but also increasing vertical polarization rooted in socioeconomic divisions” (Brechenmacher, 2018). The two-party system compartmentalizes people into increasingly narrow identities and atomized social roles. The existing order prevents the development of broad class consciousness as voters do not have their interests fully represented, which might otherwise challenge elite power (Malachova, 2012).

The debate between Harris and Trump revealed a shared adherence to neoliberal and imperialist agendas while avoiding challenging systemic issues; neither candidate offered substantive alternatives to the existing political framework. “The United States’ decline under oligarchic rule is brutally exposed every four years, as the duopoly parties differ on fewer issues and agree that the people’s needs stay far away from the political agenda” (Kimberley, 2024).

Economic Inequality

The weakening of democratic institutions has allowed economic elites to exert disproportionate influence over policymaking, creating a political system that increasingly serves

their interests at the expense of the broader populace. The U.S. economy is often described as a “mixed market” system, but in reality, it is neoliberal capitalism deeply rooted in privatization, deregulation, and wealth concentration (Kuttner, 2019). Corporate profits continue to soar while working-class needs are neglected. A perfect example of such is the soaring wealth gap that transpired amidst the 2020 pandemic, where gaps in average wealth levels were about 60% higher than equivalent income gaps. Trump's push for corporate tax cuts and protectionist tariffs illustrates this prioritization of business elites. Some of the wealthiest cities in the U.S. are now almost seven times richer than the poorest regions; a disparity that has almost doubled since 1960 (Kemeny, 2025).

Government regulations tend to protect corporations more than people. At the core of this imbalance is the outsized political influence of billionaires and corporate interests, which has transformed American democracy into a commodity that can be bought and sold and shaped. “[J]ust 50 billionaire families... have already injected more than \$600 million collectively into the crucial 2024 elections” (Tashman & Rice, 2024), ensuring that political outcomes continue to serve elite interests.

The winners in this system are not the American public – they are the corporate elites who finance political campaigns, lobby legislation, and enjoy disproportionate access to lawmakers. The majority of congressional representatives heavily rely on Political Action Committees (PACs) and Super PACs, most of which are funded by corporate donors, trade associations, and industry-specific interest groups (Goel, 2023). This dynamic all but guarantees that legislation is written with the interests of the wealthiest in mind. Grassroots-funded campaigns, by contrast, remain rare and structurally disadvantaged. Without access to large

donors or corporate bundlers, populist or community-driven candidates face immense financial barriers just to compete.

Wealth inequality has intensified alongside this shift. In 2024, “America’s top 10% own the majority of wealth in the country, but the top 1% control nearly a third” (Pringle, 2024). This economic disparity is mirrored in political power: those with the most capital have the greatest say in shaping the rules that govern society. In such a system, electoral democracy becomes less about representation and more about resource consolidation.

The Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision in 2010, which declared that political spending is a form of protected speech, has accelerated this dynamic (Massoglia, 2023). The result is a political system where elections are essentially auctions, where candidates compete for donors or the highest bidder. Even policy debates that appear contentious often mask an underlying consensus to preserve elite privilege. For instance, Trump’s solicitation of \$1 billion from oil executives, promising them substantial tax savings upon his re-election (Lefebvre, 2024), exemplifies the transactional nature of modern politics.

Meanwhile, Harris’s campaign – advocating for social reforms – also operates within a system heavily influenced by wealthy donors who said that “[she] will continue to advance fair and predictable politics that support the rule of law, stability, and a sound business environment” (Saul, 2024), indicating further support for the status quo. Notably, her campaign has received substantial financial backing from pro-Israel lobbying groups such as J Street, which contributed over \$6 million during the 2024 election cycle (Shaw, 2024). Additionally, major technology companies, including Google and Microsoft, have been among her top corporate donors. The significant role that corporate and special interest groups play in shaping Democratic candidates limits the necessary and transformative changes within our system. While social issues remain

battlegrounds for public debate, a recent nationwide survey found, “majorities across partisan, ideological, and racial lines say that the political and economic system needs to see major change (Nationwide survey, 2024). Yet, as the political compass reveals, elections offer only a narrow corridor of choices, with both parties ultimately preserving the existing structure of inequality.

Political Polarization & Third Parties

The Political Compass tool, which maps political ideologies on a two-axis grid – economic (left to right) and authoritarian-libertarian (top to bottom) – reveals the extreme ideological polarization of America’s two-party system. Both major parties cluster near the economic right and authoritarian top of the graph, offering little genuine choice to voters seeking transformative change toward a more just world (Kleinfeld, 2023). Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the two major parties, as evidenced by only 11% of Americans expressing high confidence in them (Dresden & Parr, 2024), these parties continue to dominate the political landscape. Although political parties are essential for organizing politics and facilitating participation, the current two-party system often fails to represent the diverse interests of the electorate. This calls for a reform of political parties and our electoral system. It would make parties more representative and responsive to their constituents, stating, "The solution is more political parties...healthier parties... that are better connected to the supporters they claim to represent" (Dresden & Parr, 2024).

Third parties and alternative political movements offer genuinely divergent visions of governance, especially those situated in the lower-left quadrant of the Political Compass—an area notably absent from the platforms of either major U.S. party. The Green Party, for instance, advocates for ecological sustainability, universal healthcare, economic justice, and grassroots

democracy—values that reflect a left-libertarian political philosophy rooted in decentralization and local autonomy (Green Party, n.d.). Yet, such perspectives are consistently marginalized in mainstream discourse, leaving many voters to choose between two parties that converge on issues like corporate influence, foreign intervention, and centralized authority.

This structural exclusion fosters a climate of unhealthy polarization, in which political identity becomes less about genuine ideological disagreement and more about tribal loyalty. Oppositely, healthy polarization emerges from competing visions of justice and equality (Talisie, 2024); today's partisan divide encourages allegiance to party brands rather than independent political thought. Because the Democratic and Republican parties occupy overlapping territory in the authoritarian-right quadrant, many voters are pressured to adopt a “lesser of two evils” mindset rather than support a platform that truly aligns with their values. This dynamic not only reinforces the two-party system but also distorts democratic participation by narrowing the ideological spectrum of viable political expression.

Similarly, elements within the Libertarian Party – particularly its left-leaning caucuses – promote anti-interventionist foreign policy, strong civil liberties protections, and the dismantling of centralized corporate-state alliances. Although the broader Libertarian Party tends to favor capitalist markets, its internal divisions reveal a subset of activists committed to challenging both state and corporate dominance over individual and collective freedoms. These third-party movements reflect what real polarization would look like: meaningful disagreement about how society should be structured, how wealth and power should be distributed, and how democracy should be lived.

By contrast, today's partisan battles between Democrats and Republicans are largely symbolic, characterized by demographic allegiance and less about visions for justice, leaving the underlying economic structures untouched. In the Democratic Party, progressive lawmakers who challenge establishment policy on issues such as military funding, Israel-Palestine, or Medicare for All are often sidelined, denied leadership positions, or disciplined through media narratives and donor withdrawal (Lillis, 2023). Within the Republican (Trumpian Repub) Party, dissenters face primary challenges, party censure, or political exile, regardless of their legislative record. Our two-party system doesn't tolerate structural disagreement – only dramatic performances. The public is forced to choose between two strictly managed parties that differ on surface-level issues, but remain a mirror to each other economically and politically.

Thus, when voters are told their only meaningful options are between candidates like Harris and Trump, they are being presented with a false choice. Polarization in America is largely influenced by the ideological distance among citizens. People will naturally have polarized, differing beliefs about certain issues. However, many Americans hold major misbeliefs about the other party's preferences that lead them to think there is far less shared policy belief. Even the most divisive problems often reveal significant overlap in opinions among the general public. However, our elected leaders tend to be far apart ideologically, which leads to a disconnect between them and their constituents. This difference creates a cycle of increasing polarization, as leaders often voice opinions that do not align with the views of the people they represent. (Kleinfeld, 2023)

This disconnect is not simply a byproduct of political dysfunction – it's a strategic feature of the current system. Both parties benefit from exaggerating the moral depravity of the other,

portraying opponents not as people with different priorities, but as existential threats to the nation. This framing serves to rally their bases, distract from bipartisan economic consensus, and shut down meaningful debate about alternative policies. By encouraging voters to view elections as battles between good and evil, party elites entrench loyalty, suppress dissent within their ranks, and discourage exploration of third-party or non-electoral solutions. The result is a cycle in which fear, outrage, and moral panic replace substantive policy engagement, leaving the deeper structures of inequality and corporate dominance untouched.

Additionally, within a two-party system, voters may feel compelled to choose candidates whose perspectives do not fully reflect their own. “This perception gap is highest among progressive activists, followed closely by extreme conservatives: in other words, the people who are most involved in civic and political life hold the least accurate views of the other side’s beliefs” (Kleinfeld, 2023). True alternatives exist, but condemning the other side as the enemy has become normal. Systemic problems rooted in capitalism are the enemy: poverty, climate issues, and long-term debt. Having different ideas for solving these problems should not make anyone an enemy. By seeking to understand the root causes of political division, we can begin collaborating to reimagine a new system toward movements rooted in liberty, solidarity, and economic justice.

Reimagining the System

Breaking free from the manufactured binary of American electoral politics requires more than swapping one candidate for another. The status quo has failed us and remains carefully protected by those who benefit from it (Poole, 2019). It demands reimagining the foundations of governance itself: who holds power, how decisions are made, and how communities sustain

themselves outside of corporate and state control. What we need is a truly grassroots, democratic movement that builds power from below, not elite-crafted strategies from above. We need a new progressive party that must be fully independent of the Democratic Party, financially and organizationally (Rall, 2020). Mass movements must develop outside of existing corporate-controlled parties, rooted in the collective power of ordinary people rather than the strategic calculations of political elites. "An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that both parties are too corrupt to change anything" (Washington's Blog, 2016). Without total independence, attempts at reform inevitably get absorbed and neutralized by the very forces they aim to challenge.

For real transformation to occur, people must have a renewed class consciousness – an understanding that the economic struggles faced by millions are not individual shortcomings but systemic outcomes of a deliberately maintained hierarchy. Today, basic needs like housing, healthcare, and education have been commodified beyond the reach of millions rather than human rights (Eilbot, 2024). Class consciousness means understanding that the working majority shares common interests fundamentally opposed to those of the capitalist elite. Yet our current system thrives by keeping people divided through manufactured culture wars and identity fragmentation, preventing solidarity and collective resistance. From death threats against bureaucrats, public-health officials plotting to kidnap Michigan's governor, and the attack on the U.S. Capitol, acts of political violence in the United States have skyrocketed in the last five years (Kleinfeld, 2021). To overcome this fragmentation, democratic control must extend beyond the ballot box and into the economy itself. This looks like transforming workplaces into worker-owned cooperatives, where decisions about production, wages, and working conditions are made democratically. A true systemic reform would dismantle the concentrated power structures that

define American capitalism by transferring decision-making authority to neighborhoods, cities, and worker cooperatives. Such a transformation must be grounded in principles of economic democracy, participatory governance, and localized self-determination. In this model, wealth would no longer be extracted by elites at the top, but instead would circulate within communities, sustaining people rather than profit and embedding power where it belongs: with the people themselves.

Conclusion

We are living within an illusion of democratic choice. The American electorate is left to choose between a MAGA-dominated Republican party and a Democratic party increasingly reliant on corporate donors and political compromise. “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion but allow very lively debate within that spectrum” (Chomsky, 1998). Citizens are exhausted – disillusioned by a political system that “performs” democracy while preserving the interests of entrenched elites. The status quo, both political and economic, is upheld by those who treat governance as a means of wealth preservation and social control, rather than public service.

This reality reflects an oligarchic structure beneath the surface of the electoral theater. The economic elite, shielded by bipartisan consensus and media distraction, manipulate public institutions to maintain dominance. As they grow richer, perched atop the hierarchy they designed, the American people continue to demand basic human rights—healthcare, housing, education, and dignity, reflected by dystopian clarity of the film *They Live* (1988): “[They’re] outside the limit of our sight, feeding off us, perched on top of us, from birth to death, are our owners! Our owners! They have us. They control us! They are our masters!” The metaphor

captures a sentiment that grows stronger with each election cycle, that changes little beyond the surface.

Throughout this paper, it became clear that the system does not transform every four years but is reinforced. The two-party framework offers no structural departure from elite rule. If we are to move forward, we must cultivate a new level of systemic awareness. It recognizes not only who governs but also how and for whom governance truly functions. The conclusion is not a call to action, but a mirror: what kind of government do we truly live under, and what kind of society do we want to live in? Until those questions are confronted with honesty and clarity, the illusion will remain intact.

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