

The 2024 Elections: The Cycle of Politics and the Facade of Change

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Abstract

This essay explores the topic of whether elections result in significant structural changes or merely rebrand an established political and economic status quo in this critical analysis of the 2024 United States presidential election. Despite the public's perception of a sharp gap between Democrats and Republicans, both parties support the same oligarchic political structures and capitalist economy, mainly supporting the interests of the elite through corporate influence from donations and lobbying. Although 2024 candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump have different policies, this essay argues that neither president addresses the status quo and brings about real change in that regard. However, the Trump administration's policies against vulnerable populations have brought about real, regressive social changes, emphasizing that while elections may not be able to alter deeply engrained political structures, presidential leadership can still have a big impact on marginalized communities. This essay concludes by exploring whether American voters are always forced to choose between the lesser of two evils in a flawed Democratic system, or if third party candidates provide a way to truly improve the system.

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With the results of the 2024 election now wrapped up, America is as politically polarized as ever. Donald Trump's return to power has created a great divide, instigating conflict and passionate reactions amongst the public. Democrats are arguing that Trump's being elected spells out the beginning of the end of democracy due to his authoritarian tendencies and little to no commitment to our constitutional rights, which culminates in an attack on civil liberties (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). At the same time, Republicans claim that our new president will save the United States and change it for the better by reversing the perceived damage done by Democratic reign to social policies and the economy. Both of the major parties agreed on one thing: they are expecting a major shift in our country's status quo during these next four years.

However, there is a line between voter opinion and objective fact. While the nature of the presidential campaign portrays elections as a fight between two extremely different parties that each have contrasting visions for how this country will be run, both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump would perpetuate the same status quo, one that has deep roots in our country and is not so simple to be changed by an elected president. Regardless of the party in power, the United States has traditionally operated under an oligarchic political system and a capitalist economic structure.

That being said, this does not imply that other things besides the status quo will not change. While larger political and economic structures may remain the same, policies implemented by administrations can have a significant effect on the lives of Americans, especially those who are minorities. Under Trump's presidency, women, immigrants, people of color, and transgender individuals are being targeted by his new policies and their human rights

are being threatened. These policies represent a drastic shift that could create lasting effects for years to come.

This essay will investigate if U.S. presidential elections truly change the country's economic and political course or if they mainly operate to essentially "rebrand" an established and unchanged status quo. Despite the fact that Democrats and Republicans convey different narratives of their party and administrations, both parties end up maintaining the same structural hierarchies. Nonetheless, the effects of this are very noticeable, particularly to the people who are most at risk of being singled out for the use of legislative and political scapegoating. Finally, this paper will investigate the possibility of whether the citizens of the United States will be able to break free of the status quo through a third party or if the people of America will be stuck deciding between the lesser of two evils forever.

The Two Parties and the Illusion of Choice

The status quo in the U.S. can be defined as an oligarchic political structure and a capitalist economic structure. This was proved by a 2014 study done by political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page. In their study, the scientists analyzed how much political influence different groups in the U.S. have. The percentages that are about to be presented signify the amount of each group's wants are represented in decisions made by Congress. In their findings, ordinary citizens have 5% of the influence. Interest groups, which are mass groups of organized citizens, have 24% influence. Business groups, such as trade groups or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, hold 43% of influence. This can be attributed to the amount of money they have that can be put towards political donations and lobbying for favorable policies. Finally, the top 10% of the wealthy hold 78% of influence (RepresentUs, 2025).

These statistics show a grim reality that ordinary people do not hold political power, and the preferences of citizens will never be truly represented in our country when the preferences of the elite are held in such a higher regard. Based on who has influence, the United States government is easily defined as an oligarchy, not a democracy. The economic system, however, is clearly capitalist, and the United States embraces that fact instead of trying to pass it off as something else, as our country does with democracy and oligarchy.

Now that the status quo is defined, one can see how both the Democratic and Republican Party uphold it. Election campaigns are now fully reliant on political donations. To maximize chances of winning, a candidate must get the attention of voters through publicity and dominating the media, and this is a very expensive feat. This has caused the presidential election to become a "pay to play" situation. To secure these funds, politicians accept donations from big corporations as they bring in the big money.

Of course, corporations have something to gain from supporting a presidential candidate as well. By supporting their campaign, they aim to gain some influence if the candidate they are supporting wins the election. It is a type of lobbying. The transaction going on here is a symbiotic relationship, one where both parties involved benefit from each other's cooperation. A study done by researchers Raquel Alexander and Susan Scholz found that corporations got a hefty 22,000% return on their lobbying investments (Blumberg, 2012). By accepting these donations, candidates are essentially in agreement with corporations and wealthy individuals that will provide them with influence over policies and laws so long as they receive money. Additionally, by accepting these donations, both the Democratic and Republican parties have now become completely reliant on corporate donations to run a successful campaign (Second Thought, 2020).

Republicans generally do not care about the fact that their candidates accept corporate donations, but the Democratic base does. Because of this, the Democratic Party finds sneakier ways to accept corporate donations while appeasing their followers. In short, they are playing with their followers. The Democratic Party pretends to promote structural change through progressive policies, and while those policies do cause lasting and important changes, they do not address structural change and the status quo. Instead, they uphold it by accepting donations from corporations, which, in turn, allows corporations to influence creating policies that are favorable to their given industries (Second Thought, 2020).

No revolutions are happening. In fact, the oligarchic form of government our country perpetuates is getting stronger as the years go on. Statistics from the Center for Responsive Politics show that spending on federal elections and lobbying had increased to over \$6.2 billion in the 2012 election, a stark contrast from the \$2.7 billion spent in the 1978 election (Prokop, 2014). While the United States remains insistent on the idea that our government is still a democracy and not an oligarchy, they are not trying to hide anything when it comes to our capitalist economic system. Both Harris and Trump openly support and uplift a capitalist status quo, with Harris declaring her stance as a capitalist in a speech she gave in Pittsburg (Bowman, 2024).

The Trump Administration: Change for the Worse

With all this evidence, one can see how neither of the two major parties promotes actual change to the status quo. The past three elections were branded as ones that would make or break the United States, but in reality, not much has changed regarding the actual structure of this country. However, with the results of this past election, Donald Trump became the president again, and many serious and devastating changes have occurred. The Trump administration

could change the United States' society and the lives of specific groups of people in it for the worse after this election, particularly the lives of immigrants, racial minorities, women, and transgender individuals.

The Trump administration has already issued a slew of executive orders in his first 100 days of presidency, 137 executive orders to be exact. This is the highest number of executive orders a president has signed in their first year of being in office since 1945 (Ballotpedia, 2025). This act signifies a new way for presidents to wield their power: brazenly. Trump is testing the bounds of how a president can use their power, which sets a precedent for any future people running for the position in office. An easy example of this would be Trump declaring he wants to try to pursue challenging the 22nd Amendment so that he could serve a third term in office (Lo Wang, 2025). Many of Trump's executive orders look to redo any work done by Democratic administrations when it comes to social, economic, and climate policies. Unfortunately, the president has aimed many of these executive orders at minority groups, one of them being immigrants.

Trump is cracking down on illegal immigrants in a harmful way through his executive orders. The administration issued an executive order titled "Protecting the American People against Invasion." In this order, Trump uses harmful rhetoric as well as stereotyping and dehumanizing illegal immigrants through his use of targeted language. The order claims that "illegal aliens" are invading this country, many of which are "threats" to our country and public safety due to their "vile and heinous acts against innocent Americans" (The White House, 2025). This use of language is not just harmful rhetoric; calling undocumented immigration an "invasion" could be strategically used as a means to justify extraordinary measures and dehumanizing methods. The use of fear-inducing language is intentional, as it positions

undocumented immigrants as violent threats when, in reality, most migrants come to the United States looking for safety or opportunities.

Another order seeking to suspend the entry of immigrants from the southern border disregards the United States asylum law, meaning it outright denies asylum claims even though seeking asylum is a right protected by this country's law and international law (Frelick, 2025). This order could have serious consequences for vulnerable populations who need protection from violence or persecution. Additionally, another order issued by the Trump administration declared that the United States would be detaining illegal immigrants "...to the maximum extent authorized by law" (The White House, 2025). These detention centers have deplorable living conditions as well. The walls of these centers are reportedly riddled with black mold, and the food provided is usually rotten. Additionally, medical neglect is a normal issue that occurs in these centers (ACLUNC, 2024).

Another executive order that could change how our country deals with undocumented immigrants for the worse is an order that broadens the powers of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, also known as ICE. The Trump administration is now allowing ICE to perform immigration raids in schools, hospitals, and churches, all areas that were once deemed "sensitive" (Yousif, 2025).

Besides undocumented immigrants, Trump has also targeted racial minorities and transgender individuals. The Trump administration has attacked Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies, also known as "DEI," through an executive order they have issued, claiming that these policies are racist and discriminatory to white people, specifically white men (The White House, 2025). As a result, several big companies have rolled back their DEI policies, signaling a huge

societal shift away from prioritizing values of diversity and equal opportunities when it comes to employment.

This will undoubtedly affect the lives of people of color in America, as well as women, as a new precedent has been set for companies in the future. Another bold move Trump has made is issuing a memo that lifts a ban on having segregated facilities in contracts with the federal government. This symbolizes that under his presidential rule, Trump aims to regress this country's policies back to times when racism was normalized and the social status quo. The segregated facilities include gender identity as well, targeting transgender people (Simmons-Duffin, 2025).

In addition to that executive order, the Trump administration has also issued several orders targeting transgender individuals. On the first day of his return to the office, he created an order saying that the government would only recognize "two unchangeable sexes," male and female, and claimed that allowing transgender people to legally change their gender is an attack on women and their safety, dignity, and well-being (The Associated Press, 2025).

This type of rhetoric aims to pit two populations against each other, as well as using transgender individuals as a scapegoat for the issue of violence against women. This order encourages the exact opposite of safety; it puts a target on the heads of transgender people by painting them as a threat and makes them more susceptible to violence and hate crimes by pushing this societal shift.

Another population that is being heavily targeted by the Trump administration is women. Apart from women being affected by the dismantling of DEI programs, women's rights are threatened under Trump's presidential reign. During Trump's first term as president, the constitutional protection of abortion rights was overturned as a result of judges he had appointed,

leaving the country in a state of distress as many states began to legalize abortion and prevent access to contraception methods. In response to this, the Biden administration signed executive orders that protected access to reproductive healthcare, such as abortions and contraception (Haider, 2025).

Now, under Trump's second term, the president has revoked Bidens' executive orders and is enforcing the Hyde Amendment, an amendment that stops the federal funding of elective abortions. This means that women under Medicaid or women who rely on any other forms of federal funding for healthcare do not have access to elective abortion (The White House, 2025). By doing this, the Trump administration is saying that abortion does not fall under healthcare. This will deeply affect the lives of American women who rely on federally funded healthcare, specifically young women, women of color, and women with low incomes. This Amendment could lead to higher rates of poverty, as women who cannot afford to pay for an abortion out of pocket also cannot afford to raise a child.

All of these policies set back the progress made in the United States over the years, creating lasting changes and affecting the lives of these vulnerable populations for the worse. At the core of these policies is hatred. The executive orders above have been justified through hateful rhetoric and rely heavily on inaccurate and harmful stereotyping, such as illegal immigrants are violent criminals and a threat to national security, people of color are oppressing white people and treated with more privilege, and transgender people are a threat to women. Apart from Trump's actions creating change when it comes to policies and law, the sentiments that are expressed in official orders also perpetuate, empower, and justify hatred in American culture and society, creating a lasting change that culminates in a shift to normalizing hate and prejudice.

Third Party Candidates: A Solution to the System?

The policies of the Trump administration and the direction of the Republican party led left-leaning people to vote Democrat in the past election, although that does not mean they liked the candidate, Kamala Harris. In a poll done by Fair Vote, it was found that 49% of Democrats felt that they voted for the lesser of two evils in the 2024 election. Similarly, 42% of Republicans also felt that they voted for the lesser of two evils (Mantell, 2024). These statistics show an alarming percentage of people who are unhappy with the two major party candidates but feel as if they had to choose one just for the sake of beating the other. This suggests that the current system is not working well for the American people.

That is the truth: the current system does not work. The Democrat and Republican Party plays a game of flip flop where once a Republican president comes in after a Democratic administration, they spend their first term undoing all the actions of the president before them and vice versa. This system makes it impossible for changes to be made and instead promotes a country that is increasingly divided by political party affiliation. While Democrats and Republicans bicker with each other over policies, the undemocratic, oligarchic structure of our politics and the capitalist structure of our economy remain unchanged. The rich get richer while watching citizens argue amongst each other, pulling the strings behind the puppet show of politics and reaping extreme benefits no matter which party is in office while the working class continues to struggle. The "team sports" mentality of politics that has spread throughout the general public is blinding them from pursuing actual change down to the structural level (Second Thought, 2020).

It is time for a change if the people of the United States want to break free from the status quo, and that means looking to an option many citizens have not considered or taken seriously: a

third-party candidate. In the results of the 2024 election, Jill Stein of the Green Party was the third runner-up. What sets a third party like the Green Party apart from the Democratic and Republican parties is their aim to change the status quo. First, Jill Stein and the Green Party refuse to participate in and perpetuate an oligarchic political structure. Both the Democratic and Republican parties accept corporate donations and lobbying. The Green Party, however, outright refuses any corporate donations and instead relies on funding from ordinary Americans through grassroots efforts.

Additionally, in the Green Party's ten key values, the intent to change the status quo is directly stated. Under point five, titled "Decentralization," the Green Party declares, "We seek a restructuring of social, political, and economic institutions away from a system controlled by and mostly benefiting the powerful few, to a democratic, less bureaucratic system" (The Green Party). By having this as a key value, changing the status quo is at the forefront of their plans if a Green Party candidate such as Jill Stein were ever to take office. In fact, in her plan for presidency, Stein brought up the need for an economic bill of rights. This bill of rights would promise universal access to healthcare and a right to employment, which are ideas that directly challenge the capitalist economic system (Debusmann & Cabral, 2024). Rather than doing lip service and focusing only on policies as the two major parties do, Stein aims to address the structural changes that need to happen.

Another party seeking change to the status quo is the Party for Socialism and Liberation, led by candidate Claudia De La Cruz in this past election. The Party for Socialism and Liberation seeks to overturn our capitalist economy through a revolution, as said on their website. Emphasizing worker-led movements and revolutionary politics, their campaigns are entirely grassroots-funded. They do not accept corporate funding or donations from capitalist interest

groups (Party for Socialism and Liberation, 2022). The hope is that by pursuing third-party candidates who are actively trying to change the status quo, the United States could take a meaningful structural shift. Unfortunately, hope is different from reality.

Third-Party Candidates: Reality Check

It is nearly impossible for a third-party candidate to ever win an election due to an amalgamation of structural, cultural, and perceptual obstacles. A great example of a third-party candidate unsuccessfully fighting the status quo is the 1992 presidential campaign of Ross Perot. Although Perot won about 19% of the popular vote and had a devout following, he failed to win even one electoral vote (Stone & Rapoport, 2005). Perot's relative success was largely due to his ability to self-finance his own campaign. Being a successful businessman, Perot was able to invest \$56 million of his own funds, which allowed him to bypass traditional fundraising methods and keep his independence from corporate and party donors (Los Angeles Times, 1992). Most third-party candidates do not have personal fortunes to the magnitude that Perot did, and this puts third parties at a severe disadvantage compared to Democratic and Republican party candidates who are backed by major corporate donors.

Additionally, the structure of the Electoral College discourages citizens from voting for third-party candidates and causes many to view a vote for a third party as a vote thrown away, further marginalizing third-party efforts. Another barrier third parties, like the Green Party or the Party for Socialism and Liberation, may face is that their ideologies could be deemed too radical by the general public. This is due to the current political climate that has been shaped by corporate pandering media and anti-leftist sentiments left behind from the Cold War era (Sifry, 2004).

Under the slim possibility that a third-party candidate was to win a presidential election, they would still be unable to create change to the status quo because they would be unable to pass legislation. There is no third-party representation in Congress, which renders a third-party president politically isolated and powerless to enact their agenda. This situation creates a paradox: the structural changes that are needed to break the two-party hold on this country cannot happen until a third party is able to gain power, but gaining power is virtually impossible without structural changes.

Conclusion

While the presidential elections are portrayed as crucial and pivotal moments of transformation for the United States, the status quo being the underlying capitalist economic and oligarchic political structures in this country remain untouched by each new administration. Despite the starkly contrasting policies and rhetorics proposed and used by Democratic and Republican candidates, both parties end up sustaining and catering to an oligarchic and capitalist system that benefits the wealthy, the elite, and corporate interests.

This unfortunate status quo leaves the general population of citizens with little to no influence on what goes on in our country, and vulnerable populations face the brunt of policy shifts, as shown by the Trump administration's recent executive orders. While these policies do create lasting harmful changes, they do not signify a change in the structure of this country. If Americans wish to see a real transformation that addresses the root of the problem, the two-party duopoly must be broken away from. However, the possibility of a third party in office, although appealing, is little to none. This leaves Americans trapped in the cycle of illusion, moving farther from meaningful political change and left to pick between the lesser of two evils forever.

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