

The 2024 Elections and the Status Quo

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Abstract

The 2024 U.S. presidential election was framed as a high-stakes battle between two very different futures; one led by President Joe Biden and the other by former President Donald Trump. But behind the intense media coverage, campaign drama, and urgent messaging, the election followed a familiar pattern: voters were asked to choose between two parties that both protect the same underlying system. This paper looks at how that system stayed intact, even during a supposedly critical moment in American politics. Using sources from across the political spectrum, the paper breaks down how both Democrats and Republicans serve elite interests while offering voters the illusion of change. It also shows how the media helps shape public opinion through fear and distraction, limiting the space for third-party candidates and radical ideas. Tools like the Political Compass, along with academic research by Gilens, Page, Chomsky, and others, help explain how real power stays hidden beneath the surface of elections. From corporate donors to ballot access laws, the system is built to keep itself in place, no matter who wins. The paper argues that while elections still matter, they do not offer the kind of transformative choices most voters hope for. Until more space is made for new voices, new ideas, and real accountability, American politics will keep offering the same results dressed in different language.

The 2024 Elections and the Status Quo

In the lead-up to the 2024 election, Americans were once again told that everything was on the line. President Joe Biden framed the race as a fight to preserve democracy, while Donald Trump painted it as a struggle to take the country back from liberal decay. News outlets echoed this urgency, turning each headline into a warning and each debate into a crisis. The stakes were described as existential. But beneath all the drama, the structure of American politics remained untouched. The same major donors funded both parties. The same corporations stood to win no matter the outcome. And voters, once again, were left choosing between two options that promised change but delivered something far more familiar.

The more we examine the system that surrounds American elections, the clearer it becomes that the two-party contest is not built to offer transformation; it is designed to preserve the illusion of choice. The major parties claim to stand for different futures, but both operate within boundaries set by wealth, media, and institutional power. Ideas that challenge those boundaries are pushed out. Candidates who question the system itself are ignored or undermined. And voters are encouraged to focus on personalities and culture wars instead of asking who the government actually serves.

Even though the 2024 election was hyped up as a fight for the country's future, in the end, it mostly worked to keep things the same. The big issues did not get solved, the same people stayed in power, and the system that benefits the wealthy stayed exactly where it was.

The Democratic Party and the Status Quo

The Democratic Party talks a lot about progress. It brands itself as the side fighting for working families, climate justice, voting rights, and equality. In 2024, that message came back stronger than ever. Joe Biden's campaign told voters that democracy itself was at risk, and the

only way to protect it was to keep Republicans out of power. A lot of people believed that, not because they were excited about Biden, but because they were scared of the alternative. That fear was enough to keep people loyal to a party that keeps promising change but rarely delivers more than small steps.

This is not new. Over the last few decades, Democrats have become skilled at managing expectations. They say the right things, pass a few symbolic policies, and then blame gridlock when nothing major happens. This is called the politics of performance, where politicians act like they are doing something meaningful while actually protecting the same systems that keep inequality and corporate power in place (Miroff, 2000). President Biden's term was filled with examples of this: some relief on student loans that was later blocked, modest climate action that still allowed drilling, and promises to tax the rich that never really came through.

Part of the reason is who the party actually listens to. Even though Democrats campaign as the party of the people, their biggest donors are often the same as the Republicans'. Big tech, Wall Street, and health insurance companies. These industries fund both sides. That is why it is hard for the Democrats to go after them seriously. Jacobs and Shapiro argue that politicians in both parties have learned how to shape public opinion instead of responding to it, using carefully crafted messages to sell moderate policies as if they are bold moves (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). The result is a party that sounds progressive but governs cautiously.

That dynamic was obvious in 2024. Biden's campaign focused on defeating Trump rather than offering a big, clear vision for the country. Green criticized this strategy, pointing out that the party's messaging relied more on fear than inspiration (Green, 2024). While that approach might win votes, it does not build real trust or momentum for change. Voters are told to “vote

blue no matter who,” but they are rarely given policies that address the root causes of their problems, whether it is unaffordable housing, student debt, or wage stagnation.

Even historically, the Democratic Party has followed this pattern. Silbey explains that major parties in America have always adjusted their language to match public pressure without actually challenging power (Silbey, 1991). That is how Democrats manage to appeal to both corporate donors and progressive voters at the same time. They offer just enough to keep the base from walking away, but not enough to seriously shift who benefits from the system.

By the time the 2024 election ended, the Democrats had lost power. Not because they challenged the system too much, but because they did not. Their campaign continuously relied on fear of Trump and reminders of past threats, but it seemed they failed to offer a bold vision that spoke to everyday struggles. Once again, the party that talked about progress stuck with safe policies and familiar strategies. When voters decided to go in a different direction, it was not because Democrats pushed too hard. It was because they did not push hard enough.

Another problem for the Democrats in 2024 was how much they listened to political consultants and wealthy donors instead of regular people. Their campaign choices were based on what looked safe in polls, not what actually mattered in people’s lives. That is why big ideas from activists and organizers, like Medicare for All or canceling student debt, kept getting watered down. The party talked about justice and progress, but behind the scenes, it kept playing it safe and protecting the same people who already have power.

The Republican Party and the Status Quo

The Republican Party always claims to stand for freedom, tradition, and tough leadership. In 2024, they leaned into that image hard. Donald Trump ran on promises to fix the economy, protect the border, and fight back against “woke” culture. He told supporters the country was

falling apart and that only he could save it. That message fired people up, especially those who felt ignored or left behind. But while the party talked like it was ready to shake things up, most of what it offered would have kept the same powerful people in charge, just under a different name.

Trump's biggest policy win, the 2017 tax cuts, mostly helped corporations and the wealthy. The GOP tried to sell it as something that would help working people, but that did not really happen. The rich got richer, and not much trickled down. Even some conservative writers admitted this. Hunter said that many of Trump's supporters were not excited about his economic record; they were just frustrated with a system that did not work for them (Hunter, 2024). That frustration was real, but the party did not offer real solutions. It just shifted the blame and kept the same system running.

Republicans also like to say they believe in small government, but their record does not match their words. Under Trump, spending went up, especially on defense and subsidies that benefited big business. Environmental protections were cut, corporate regulations were rolled back, and public services like healthcare and education did not improve. Groups like the Heritage Foundation still say conservatives believe in free markets and limited government (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.), but in practice, that usually means letting big companies do whatever they want while regular people struggle to keep up.

Instead of focusing on those economic problems, the GOP leaned hard into culture war issues. Immigration, gender identity, and school policies. All becoming the headline topics. These issues get a lot of attention, but they do not do much to fix the problems that hit people's everyday lives, like rent, wages, or healthcare costs. They are used to create outrage and loyalty, while the money keeps flowing in the same direction. Historian Silbey also explains this well,

saying along the lines that political parties are good at absorbing voter anger without actually giving up power (Silbey, 1991). That is what Republicans did in 2024. They took the anger, turned it into a distraction, and left the system untouched.

By the time the election was over, it was clear the Republican Party had not really offered a different future. They just promised to manage the same system with louder voices and different enemies. Like the Democrats, they talked about change but worked to keep the same people in charge. The performance looked different, but the outcome was not.

A lot of Trump's support came from people who felt like the system forgot about them, and in some ways, they were right. But instead of fixing that system, the Republican Party just gave them new people to blame, like immigrants, schools, or activists, while still helping big corporations behind the scenes. It is a strategy that keeps voters angry but does not make their lives better. The anger is real, but the solutions never show up, and the people in charge stay exactly the same.

The Political Compass and the Illusion of Choice

Most people in the U.S. are taught to see politics as a fight between left and right, between Democrats and Republicans. That is how elections are framed, how debates are run, and how the media tells the story. But when you look deeper, especially using tools like the Political Compass, it is obvious how narrow that view really is. The Compass adds another axis, not just left vs. right, but also authoritarian vs. libertarian, and shows just how limited the choices are when both major parties fall into the same top-right section: pro-business and socially controlling.

My own Political Compass results place me a little to the left economically and somewhat toward the authoritarian side socially. That means I care about fairness and economic

justice but also believe in responsibility and structure. You would think with all the political noise in this country, someone would speak to that. But neither major party really does.

Democrats lean socially progressive but stick to corporate-friendly economics. Republicans talk about personal freedom but often push laws that limit rights and benefit the rich. The result? No one actually fits the middle ground where people like me, and millions of others, might land.

A lot of younger voters feel this. They care about climate change, debt, housing, and basic fairness, but do not see either party doing much about it. People show up hoping things will finally shift, but then watch the same leaders make the same deals. That leaves people feeling frustrated and ignored. It is not that young people do not care; it is that the system keeps offering them more of the same, and pretending it is something new.

This is not an accident. The system is set up to keep the conversation in a tight, comfortable space. The Political Compass helps explain how both parties can look like opposites while really working within the same boundaries. Most of the time, they are just arguing about how to run the system, not whether to change it. Silbey talks about this too. He explains how American parties have always shifted their message just enough to match public frustration, while still protecting the institutions that hold power (Silbey, 1991). That is exactly what we are seeing now.

It is not just theory; researchers have proven it. A study by political scientists Gilens and Page found that the average American has almost no influence on actual policy decisions (Gilens & Page, 2014). Instead, wealthy elites and well-organized interest groups are the ones who shape what laws get passed. So even when voters show up and pick a side, the outcomes rarely reflect what regular people want. That is why the Political Compass feels so accurate, it shows how much of the political spectrum is completely ignored in national politics.

This limited range of choice creates frustration, but it also feeds the illusion that things are more divided than they really are. The parties argue loudly over social issues and personal scandals, but when it comes to the economy, corporate power, or foreign policy, they are usually aligned. The fights are real, but they are happening inside a very small box, and because most people only see what is inside that box, they think that is all there is.

The 2024 election was a perfect example of that illusion. People were told the country's future was at stake, but both major candidates offered slightly different versions of the same system. A version that works for the wealthy keeps outsiders out and ignores most of the political spectrum. It is no wonder so many voters feel like they are choosing between the lesser of two evils, because they are.

Third Parties and the Fight to Be Heard

For all the talk about American democracy being built on freedom and choice, elections do not give voters many real options. Most people just pick between two major parties, not because those parties fully represent their views, but because third-party candidates are rarely treated like serious contenders. They are kept out of debates, left off ballots in key states, and ignored by major media. The 2024 election showed this again. According to Hedges, while Donald Trump and Joe Biden dominated coverage, independent voices, like Cornel West, were pushed to the sidelines, even though he spoke to real frustrations that many voters feel (Hedges, 2023).

West ran on a platform that focused on justice, ending corporate control of politics, and serving people who are usually left out of national conversations. His campaign was not built around spectacles or empty slogans; it was about calling out a system that serves the powerful and leaves most people behind. But as soon as his message started to gain traction, the machine

kicked in. News outlets barely mentioned him. He was shut out of the debates. Some states made it harder for him to get on the ballot. It is not just unfair but shows how the system protects itself.

Political writer Sifry explains that both major parties work hard to keep third parties out (Sifry, 2004). They write the rules, control the money, and use fear to keep voters locked in. Every election, we hear the same warning: “Don’t waste your vote.” But the truth is that the message protects the two-party system, not democracy. People end up voting out of fear, not hope. They are told a third-party vote helps “the other side,” even if neither side actually represents them.

Many third-party platforms speak to concerns shared by a large number of Americans. Policies like universal healthcare, limits on corporate lobbying, and stronger protection for workers have broad public support. Yet these ideas are rarely given serious attention in national debates. When candidates outside the two-party system bring them up, they are often labeled unrealistic or extreme without much explanation. This creates a cycle where ideas that challenge powerful interests are dismissed before voters can consider them fully, even if those ideas reflect real public needs.

Chomsky and Herman describe this kind of system as “manufactured consent.” They argue that mass media, politics, and big corporations work together to limit what ideas are considered acceptable (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Third-party candidates like Cornel West do not just get ignored, they get filtered out. The media does not need to attack them directly. It just makes sure people do not hear about them at all. When voters are not exposed to real alternatives, they assume there are none.

That is what made 2024 feel so familiar. Even with all the energy around change, the only candidates who got serious attention were the ones who played by the rules of the system.

Cornel West offered something different, but different is not welcome when both parties are working to keep things predictable. His ideas challenged corporate power, foreign policy, and economic inequality, and because of that, they were treated as “unrealistic” or “radical.”

If voters keep being told that only the two main parties are legitimate, then the system never has to change, and it will not change. The barriers to third-party success, like ballot access laws, debate restrictions, and a lack of media coverage, are working exactly as designed. It is not that third-party ideas do not resonate; it is that the system makes sure they are never given the space to grow.

Radical Critiques of the System

If you zoom out from the drama of elections and really look at who benefits from American politics, a pattern shows up fast. No matter which party wins, the wealthiest people and biggest corporations tend to come out on top. The issues that affect everyday people, rent, debt, healthcare, and wages, stay the same or get worse. This is not just bad leadership. According to radical critics, it is exactly how the system is supposed to work.

Phillips, a former Republican strategist turned critic of elite power, argued that both major parties have helped build an economy that rewards the rich and leaves most people behind (Phillips, 2002). Over the last few decades, both Democrats and Republicans supported trade deals that outsourced jobs, financial deregulation that helped Wall Street, and tax cuts that favored the wealthy. Politicians made speeches about opportunity and freedom, but their policies made sure the richest Americans stayed on top. This is not a bug, it is the system doing what it was built to do.

This critique is not just about money; it is also about control. Another study by Gilens and Page tested how much influence average citizens actually have on policy. The result? Not

much. When the opinions of everyday Americans conflict with those of wealthy elites or well-organized interest groups, the elites usually win (Gilens & Page, 2014). So even when voters show up, donate, or call their representatives, it rarely makes a difference unless their views match the interests of people with power.

Koehler calls this the “lesser evil gambit,” the idea that voters are always pressured to pick the candidate who is slightly less harmful, even if neither one actually helps them (Koehler, 2024). It is a cycle that repeats every four years. People are told that voting third-party is a risk, or that now is not the time for big change. So, they vote for someone they do not believe in just to stop someone else, and once the election is over, the big issues still do not get solved. The same corporations write bills. The same lobbyists shape policy. The system never really gets challenged.

Radical thinkers say this happens because real democracy threatens the people who already have power. If voters actually had a full range of choices, and if the media gave space to anti-corporate candidates, things might start to shift. But instead, those voices are blocked or ignored. Politicians give speeches about reform, but their real job is to keep things running smoothly for the people funding their campaigns.

This is not a hopeless message, it is a wake-up call. Until more people realize how the game is played, the results will not change. The 2024 election, like many before it, gave people two main options and told them everything depended on their choice. But for radical critics, the real choice was never on the ballot.

The answer is not just different candidates, but a different way of doing politics. What if regular people had more say in how laws get made, not just during elections, but all the time? In some places, communities come together to help decide local budgets or big policy decisions.

That kind of direct involvement could make things feel more real and less like a game. Right now, it feels like voters are only invited every few years, and the rest of the time, the same insiders run the show.

Media, Fear, and Manufactured Consent

By the time election season hits, the media has already decided what kind of story voters will get. Cable news, online headlines, and political ads do not just report what is happening. They shape how people think about the election, which candidates' matter, and which voices do not get heard at all. In 2024, the media told Americans they had two choices: Biden or Trump. Everything else was treated as noise or a distraction. And even though the country felt more divided than ever, the media worked hard to make sure the system itself did not change.

Miroff calls this the “presidential spectacle.” He says modern politics is all about performance, politicians acting out roles, giving speeches, and putting on a show for the cameras (Miroff, 2000). That was obvious in 2024. Biden ran on the idea of restoring order, while Trump played the role of the outsider ready to tear everything down. Behind the scenes, the media mostly helped keep both of them in the spotlight and ignored the candidates who actually wanted to challenge the system.

That is not a mistake. Chomsky and Herman explain in *Manufacturing Consent* that the media does not exist to serve the public, it exists to protect the interests of the powerful (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Ownership, advertising, and political connections all influence what stories get told. Candidates like Cornel West, who called out corporate greed and foreign policy failures, did not fit that narrative. So instead of debating his ideas, the media left him out of the conversation entirely. No major networks gave him real coverage. He was kept out of the

debates. His name rarely made the headlines. That is how the system makes alternatives disappear, not by attacking them, but by pretending they are not even there.

At the same time, the media kept voters in a constant state of fear. *Common Dreams* pointed out that 2024 coverage focused more on what people should be afraid of than what candidates actually planned to do (“Portray Trump as Fascist,” 2024). Voters were told that democracy itself was on the line, or that liberal elites were destroying the country. It did not matter which side you were on. Fear was the strategy, and when people are scared, they do not think about long-term solutions. They just vote to stop the thing that scares them most.

That is how manufactured consent works. When people think they are choosing freely but only hear two voices, only see two options, and are constantly reminded that everything depends on this one choice, the system stays in control. Media makes it feel like democracy is alive and well, even though the range of real ideas and candidates has been cut down before voters even walk into the booth.

All of this leaves voters feeling stuck. They know something is wrong, but they are told their only choices are the ones on TV. The debates feel fake, the ads feel manipulative, and the headlines just repeat the same points over and over. People start to tune out, not because they do not care, but because they are tired of being tricked into thinking this time will be different. The system does not have to silence people directly, it just has to make them feel like speaking up will not matter.

The 2024 election did not just reflect this media control; it depended on it. While the news framed it as a fight for the soul of America, it quietly helped protect the institutions and interests that benefit from keeping things just the way they are. And just like that, the system kept working, not by force, but by design.

Conclusion

After all the debates, ads, and endless media coverage, the 2024 election ended pretty much how it always does, with the same people in charge and the same problems still in place. Both major parties acted like they were offering totally different futures, but once you cut through the noise, the system stayed exactly the same. The rich got richer, corporate donors kept their access, and voters were once again left choosing between two options that were not built to serve them.

What the Political Compass, academic research, and critical voices all show is that American politics runs on limits. Limits on what kind of ideas are allowed in, which candidates get attention, and how much change is actually possible through the ballot box. The Democrats talk about progress but protect the status quo. The Republicans promise rebellion but hand power back to the same elites. And third-party candidates who want to break that cycle get silenced before most voters even know they exist.

The media plays a huge role in this. It keeps people distracted, afraid, and focused on personalities instead of policies. It sells the election as a life-or-death event but leaves out the voices that actually want to change the game. As Chomsky put it, consent is not forced, it is manufactured. And it works (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

That is why, no matter who wins, most people feel like nothing really changes, because for now, the system is working exactly how it is supposed to. Not for the majority, but for the ones who already have everything. Until that system is challenged directly, not just managed or repackaged, elections like 2024 will keep delivering the same result: a new performance, but the same old power.

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