

The Moderate Effect of Presidential Elections on the Political and Economic Status Quo

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Abstract

The 2024 presidential election marked a crucial moment in American history. When Donald Trump took office in 2025, many Democrats feared that democracy in the U.S. had ended, while many Republicans believed that Trump would “Make America Great Again.” During the campaign process, both presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, promised to make considerable changes to the United States. This raises a critical question: To what extent do the results of a presidential election alter the political and economic status quo? With the lens of the political compass, this paper will explore how much the political and economic status quo changes when a new president takes office. This paper argues that the political and economic status quo only changes moderately by analyzing whether presidents are able to follow through on campaign promises, evaluating aspects of the status quo that do not change, and considering what has changed since the 2024 election.

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Presidential candidates make promises during election campaigns and come into office with the intention of making significant policy changes. However, our two-party democratic system, with its three branches of government, provides checks and balances that limit the extent to which a president can affect the political and economic status quo. While the most recent election has led to changes in certain political and economic issues, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, trade, and immigration, the overall impact of the outcome of presidential elections on the political and economic status quo is moderate. For purposes of this paper, the political and economic status quo refers to the existence of two dominant political parties (and the insubstantial influence of alternative parties), the influence of wealthy individuals and corporations on political outcomes (and limited influence of average citizens), GDP per capita, trade policies, border control, tax policies, and social issues such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). With Trump's return to office, we can see a shift in policies in the conservative direction, including more border control, abolition of DEI policies, and an "America First" approach to trade. While certain changes to these policies are significant, the overall impact on the political and economic status quo is moderate. Using the lens of the political compass, we can examine how elections only moderately affect the political and economic status quo.

The Political Compass

The Political Compass is a two-axis graph depicting the economic and governmental structure of a political system. The horizontal line represents the viewpoints of the left and right. The left advocates for policies such as higher taxes, government assistance, public ownership, economic equality, and regulations on businesses and corporations. The right generally supports

lower taxes, private ownership, individual economic responsibility, and more freedom for businesses and corporations. The vertical line says libertarian at the bottom and authoritarian at the top. Those who support libertarian views typically value policies such as low taxes, free markets, less government spending, personal freedom, and non-interventionist foreign policy. Authoritarian beliefs usually include concentrated power in one leader or a small group, limiting checks and balances, strong control over media and speech, discouragement of opposing parties or opinions, and weaker protection for civil liberties. This creates four quadrants: authoritarian left, authoritarian right, libertarian left, and libertarian right (The Political Compass, n.d.).

Although President Trump and former presidential candidate Kamala Harris seem like stark opposites in the eyes of our two-party system, compared to other leaders in the world and throughout history, they are similar in many ways. While their exact placement may differ, Trump and Harris are both in the top right authoritarian quadrant of the graph. This illustrates the relative similarities of the presidential candidates in our democratic system. Both Trump and Harris lean towards authority, in the form of democracy, as opposed to libertarianism, as shown on the Political Compass. Additionally, they both believe in a free market based system of capitalism. Although third parties in the U.S. do not have much of a voice, the more prominent ones being the Libertarian Party and the Green Party, they can also be observed on the Political Compass. The Libertarian Party is in the bottom right quadrant; libertarian right, which advocates for minimal government intervention and free-market capitalism. The Green Party falls into the libertarian left quadrant, representing ideologies such as environmental sustainability and a more aggressive approach to climate change (Brittenden, 2024). This suggests that the status quo changes little, since both major-party front-runners occupy the same quadrant on the political compass. Third-party candidates with more diverse political views do

not often gain traction and are rarely elected. The candidates with the best chance of winning presidential elections almost always fall within the authoritarian right quadrant of the Political Compass.

Historical Context

Since the United States was founded in 1776, people have debated how much authority the federal government should exercise over the lives of its citizens. This dispute has been present since the nation's earliest days and continues to shape the ideological differences between the two major political parties in the United States.

During the construction of the Constitution, two clear groups began to emerge. These two parties were the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. The Federalists supported the idea of a strong central government and the Democratic-Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, wanted power to stay with the states and with individuals. By the 1830s, the Federalist Party had faded, and in response, the Whig Party came to power. Eventually, disagreements over slavery caused the Whig Party to collapse. This paved the way for the Republican Party, which rose to prominence with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 (Heineman, 1995).

Over time, political parties continued to shift and realign. The New Deal under Franklin D. Roosevelt expanded Democratic support among working-class Americans. The civil rights era in the 1960s provoked a major shift, as many white Southern conservatives moved toward the Republican Party. These changes helped form the Democratic and Republican parties we recognize today (Heineman, 1995).

Understanding how our two-party system currently operates means examining how they have been shaped by politics and economics. The balance between government power, personal freedom, and economic opportunity has shifted again and again, and continues to define the

political lines we see in the United States today (Heineman, 1995). Today, Republicans concur with policies such as lower taxes, private ownership, individual economic responsibility, and more freedom for businesses and corporations. Democrats generally agree with policies including public ownership, economic equality, heavy regulations on businesses and corporations, and believe the government should play a larger role in supporting citizens and the economy, even if that means higher taxes.

Persistent Patterns in U.S. Policy and Governance

Although certain policies change with each new president, the framework of the government of the United States does not. The political status quo is only changed moderately because the government still functions with the laws of the Constitution and unchanging traditions that have been adopted by the American people for centuries. The most prominent example of this is our two-party system.

While third or alternative parties had more influence in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Republican and Democratic parties have been the only ones to have a relevant political voice since the 1790s. The structure of the elections in the U.S makes it very difficult for a third party to gain power. Parties in the United States are also not structurally centralized, and party leaders face issues when trying to discipline office holders who they do not get along with (Heineman, 1995). This creates disorganization and conflicting viewpoints within parties, regulating their ability to maintain unity. As a result, a wide range of political beliefs remain encompassed within the two major parties rather than splitting off into a competitive third party. Furthermore, the electoral college prevents third or alternative parties from gaining leverage. The number of electors in each state is determined by its population. For example, California has 54 electors but over 22 million registered voters. This means they have about one elector per 400,000 voters.

Wyoming, on the other hand, has three electors and a registered voting population of 273,054 which gives them one elector per 91,018 voters. Wyoming has a better ratio of voters to electors which means one voter in Wyoming has the power of three voters in California. Most states use a winner-take-all system, so the candidate with the most votes in that state receives all of its electoral votes. This discourages people from voting for a third-party candidate because it is very unlikely it will be translated into any electoral votes (Second Thought, 2020). This imbalance in representation means that votes in larger states carry less weight, making it even harder for third-party candidates to gain traction. The combination of winner-take-all rules and unequal voter-to-electoral ratios reinforces the dominance of the two major parties and limits the influence of alternative parties.

Another aspect of the political and economic status quo that does not change depending on who is in office, is the domination of wealthy individuals and corporations in a country of capitalism. A small, unelected minority controls much of the economic power. Since political parties need donations to fund their campaigns, they often rely on wealthy individuals and corporations for donations. These donations influence the candidates to act in the best interest of the wealthy campaign donors to secure support and campaign funding in the future. As a result of this dynamic between politicians and wealthy donors, wealthy individuals and corporations have greater influence on elections and more political power than ordinary citizens even though everyone technically has one vote (Wolff, 2024). In addition to this, economic growth depends on private business investment. Consequently, presidents must maintain business confidence, which limits their ability to implement radical reforms, regulating the potential for the status quo to change considerably (Genovese, 2002).

The political status quo also does not change in the sense of the structure of our government. In our country, we have a system of checks and balances to ensure the judicial, legislative, or executive branches never have unilateral control or a disproportionate amount of power. No matter who the president is, their power is always checked by the legislative and judicial branches of government. A president cannot make or interpret laws, declare war without Congress, decide how federal money will be spent, or choose Supreme Court Justices without the approval of the Senate (Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, 2023). The president alone cannot make drastic changes, so the political and economic status quo cannot radically change in their favor.

Gross domestic product per capita (GDP) is a measure of the total value of goods and services produced by a country per person. GDP per capita is a common metric used to measure the economic status quo because it shows the overall output of a country on a per person basis for a specific period of time. The growth rate of GDP per capita has been consistent at approximately 2-3% from 2010 to 2024 (excluding a drop in 2020 and rebound in 2021 due to the pandemic) (Tierney, 2025). During this period, the political party of the president changed three times, Obama to Trump, Trump to Biden, and Biden to Trump. The consistent GDP per capita growth rate across multiple presidencies illustrates that the economic status quo has not been significantly impacted by the outcome of recent presidential elections.

Barriers to Change in U.S. Politics

The political status quo does not change to the extent desired (or promised during the presidential campaigns) by presidential candidates. Although some issues do change moderately every election, presidents do not have the ability to broadly change the status quo in favor of their political party. While presidential candidates often make promises during election

campaigns, they are not always able to follow through with them due to slim majorities in Congress or other priorities. Slim majorities and opposition within parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives make it difficult for the political status quo to significantly swing in the conservative or liberal direction depending on the outcome of the election. For example, a simple majority is required to pass ordinary legislation in the Senate and House of Representatives. While a simple majority is required to pass legislation in the Senate, many controversial issues require 60 out of 100 votes (three-fifths) to overcome a filibuster and bring a measure to a final vote. Currently, the Senate is composed of 53 Republicans, 45 Democrats, and two independents who caucus with Democrats. The House of Representatives is composed of 219 Republicans, 213 Democrats, and three vacancies. Given the slim majority for the Republican Party in both the House and Senate, the president needs nearly all members of his party in both the House and Senate to support a given bill in order for the legislation to pass. Full party support in Congress can be a challenge because each member of Congress is accountable to a different constituency with varying interests (Heineman, 1995).

Obama made many campaign promises that were not kept. For example, he wanted to abolish special tax breaks for oil and gas companies. However, the Senate rejected President Obama's proposal of the "Repeal Big Oil Tax Subsidies Act." The bill got 51 votes in favor, and 47 against it, but it needed 60 votes to end the debate and proceed to the final vote due to the cloture rule (Dwyer, 2012). While Obama was able to gain support from all 51 Democrats in the Senate, he did not get the 60 votes necessary to bring the bill to a final vote.

Obama also pledged to pass the Freedom of Choice Act which would guarantee abortion rights by law. However, it "was not the highest legislative priority" and the bill did not pass. He focused on economic recovery after the 2008 crisis instead (Roche, 2022). This illustrates how

presidents cannot always follow through with their campaign promises because of other priorities which makes it even harder to change the status quo.

In 2016, one of the headline goals of Trump's campaign was to build a wall to prevent illegal Mexican immigrants from crossing into the United States. Although some border barriers were built, the extent of the wall was smaller than Trump's intended plan. Similar to Obama's experience with the "Repeal Big Oil Tax Subsidies Act," Trump was not able to get the 60 votes in the Senate required to advance the legislation for funding the wall because the Republican majority was slim with a total of 53 seats (Bier, 2022).

Trump also wanted to repeal The Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. He wanted to replace it with The American Health Care Act or "Trumpcare." He claimed it would be superior because it was cheaper and would provide insurance to all. It passed in the House of Representatives by four votes. However, it failed in the senate with 49-51 votes. Critics pointed out a major issue; Trumpcare would cut \$880 billion from Medicaid, leave 53 million Americans without insurance, and most likely fail to lower costs while improving care. They also believed that Trump underestimated the complexity of this issue and focused on image more than substance. Public support, even among Republicans, was low. Only about 17% approved of repealing Obamacare (Collier, 2017).

Although his original proposal to repeal The Affordable Care Act was not passed, Trump was able to pass some level of Tax reform in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. This act lowered corporate tax rates, changed individual brackets, and eliminated or reduced some deductions. (Internal Revenue Service, 2017). He wanted to lower the business tax rate to 15% and eliminate alternative minimum tax for corporations. The business tax rate was lowered from

35%- 21% which is still progress but not as much as President Trump originally intended (Michel & Loucks, 2025).

Joe Biden was also unable to change policies as much as he wanted nor as much as he promised during his campaign. For instance, he promised citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants. However, the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 proposed by Biden did not pass because it did not receive a three-fifths (60) majority in the Senate to bring the act to a vote. In 2024, The Border Act of 2024 also failed to pass because 43 voted yes, 50 voted no, and seven did not vote (Uribe, 2024).

During Biden's presidency, he also wanted to raise the top tax bracket to 39.6% from Trump's 37%. Additionally, he promised not to raise taxes for anyone making less than \$400,000 per year and sought to raise the corporate tax rate to 28%. Neither happened because Biden needed every Democrat to vote in favor of the bill for it to pass, but this did not happen. Tax brackets stayed largely the same from Trump's 2017 presidency (Geier, 2025).

During Biden's campaign for the 2020 election, he promised an executive action for vast forgiveness of student loans. However, in June 2023, The Supreme Court voted to block Biden's plan to forgive \$400 billion in federal student loans, in part because of the judges appointed by members of the Republican Party (Howe, 2025).

Biden also promised during his campaign that he would ban the manufacture and sale of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. However, most Republicans and moderate Democrats opposed, so they were not able to get the three-fifths majority to end the debate. Instead, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022 was passed as a compromise. It expanded background checks for gun buyers under 21, provided mental health programs and school safety, created tougher penalties for straw purchases, encouraged states to create and enforce "red flag"

laws to allow courts to temporarily take guns from people deemed dangerous, and prevented people convicted of domestic violence against a dating partner from owning firearms. Some progress was made but a full ban was not achieved (Norton, 2024).

The recent impasse between political parties over legislation to fund federal agencies that resulted in the longest government shutdown in the history of the United States, illustrates that our two-party system and slim political majorities limit the ability of the executive branch to significantly change the political and economic status quo. The House of Representatives and the Senate were unable to agree on funding bills for 2026. Republicans held a 53-47 majority in the Senate, but they needed 60 votes to end the debate and proceed to a final vote. After 44 days, they were finally able to reach the 60-vote minimum, but this demonstrates the challenges presented by slim partisan majorities in Congress (Faguy, 2025).

The pattern reflected in these examples is that presidents and their parties want to alter the political and economic status quo in favor of their party, but they are not able to completely fulfill all of their campaign promises. Many of their promises are watered down or even fully rejected by Congress.

Moderate Policy Shifts Across Administrations

Although the political status quo does not change dramatically from president to president, it does change moderately. There are some examples that can be seen in the most recent election comparing policies under Biden to the new policies during the Trump administration. The political and economic status quo has moderately shifted in the conservative direction, since many of the orders and policies coming to life are aligned with Republican ideology. Some of the most prominent changes include border control, DEI, and tariffs.

President Biden did not prioritize border control. Instead, he focused on reversing some of Trump's immigration policies, such as halting the construction of the wall. Biden's U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 further showed that he prioritized legalization and integration, not physical enforcement (Center for Migration Studies, 2021). Under the Biden administration, 8 million immigrants came over the southwest border illegally (Gilder, 2024). In January of 2025, President Trump signed an executive order called, Protecting the American People Against Invasion. This order revoked several executive orders of the previous administration regarding immigration enforcement priorities. The order also directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to enable agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), created Homeland Security Task Forces (HSTFs) in every U.S. state, and administered increased use of expedited removal on noncitizens (Economic Policy Institute, 2025).

As a result of Trump's executive orders and immigration policy, ICE has deported almost 200,000 illegal immigrants since Trump's return to office. This included 47,885 illegal immigrants with charges of convictions for assault, 16,552 with charges or convictions for sexual assaults, and 2,699 with charges or convictions for homicides. Overall, 1.6 million illegal immigrants have left the United States since the beginning of Trump's second term. Along with deporting people who have entered our country illegally, the Department of Justice has successfully taken hundreds of millions of dollars in illegal drugs from criminals off the streets in our country (The White House, 2025c).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion or "DEI" was one of the main issues President Biden prioritized during his campaign and presidency. Biden signed an executive order on June 25, 2021 to "strengthen and advance diversity, equality, inclusion, and accessibility." The order

covers a wide range of groups including people of color, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, first-generation professionals and immigrants, individuals with disabilities, veterans and military spouses, older Americans who face discrimination based on their age when seeking employment, people who were formerly incarcerated, and people who require religious accommodations at their place of work. This new order directs employers to establish or promote chief diversity officers within their companies and expand diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility training throughout the federal workforce. The Biden administration, and many of its partisans, believe that there are many communities that are under-represented in the federal workplace, especially in positions of leadership. To address this issue, the White House started to embed DEI in federal hiring and employment. The selection of Kamala Harris as Biden's running mate for the 2020 election was an example of a decision influenced by DEI ideology (Society for Human Resource Management, 2024). From the moment Joe Biden started running for president, he had DEI ingrained in his campaign. In an article by Washington Post, it can be read that in August 2019, Biden told a group of journalists, "Whomever I pick, preferably it will be someone who was of color and/or a different gender" (Scott, 2019). This makes it clear that instead of searching broadly for the most qualified candidate, Biden narrowed the pool of people he was going to choose from to a woman of color, which is consistent with DEI principles of choosing the most "diverse" candidate instead of hiring the most qualified one.

In his first week in office, President Trump signed an Executive Order restoring merit-based hiring and promotions across the federal government. He also signed an Executive Order titled, Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity, terminating radical and wasteful DEI programs in January of 2025. Donald Trump has worked to restore the values of individual dignity, fairness, accountability, hard work, and excellence, and removed radical

diversity, equity, and inclusion policies that have undermined hiring by merit. Trump believes that all government hires should be based solely on performance, and that foreign policy positions should be filled by the most qualified individuals, not by ideological requirements or discriminatory quotas. A declaration published by the White House claims that Biden's plans were “illegal and immoral” and “demonstrated immense public waste and shameful discrimination.” It further explains that “Americans deserve a government committed to serving every person with equal dignity and respect, and to expending precious taxpayer resources only on making America great...federal employment practices, including federal employee performance reviews, shall reward individual initiative, skills, performance, and hard work and shall not under any circumstances consider DEI or DEIA factors, goals, policies, mandates, or requirements” (The White House, 2025b). Trump’s prioritization of overturning Biden’s DEI policies and emphasizing fairness and performance during federal hiring reflects a shift in focus when it comes to equality in federal employment, resulting in a conservative shift in policy.

Trump has an “America First” approach to trade. During his first presidency, he withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and replaced the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and imposed new tariffs on Canada and Mexico (USMCA) (Geier, 2025). In 2025, he invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose extensive tariffs on goods from Canada and Mexico, citing a national-emergency justification related to migration and illicit-drug activity. These actions placed a 25% tariff on most Canadian and Mexican goods that did not meet USMCA standards. Later that year, reports indicated that the tariff on Canadian goods not covered by USMCA increased from 25% to 35% (Ross et al., 2025).

Joe Biden enacted federal protections for same-sex and interracial marriages by passing the Respect for Marriage Act in 2022. This provided legal recognition and protection for LGBTQ+ marriages (Miller Center, 2025). He also focuses on federal support for women's healthcare and equity for women in the workplace (The Issues, 2022). Trump, on the other hand, had federal executive actions limiting LGBTQ+ recognition and protections, especially for minors in healthcare and education. Moreover, he only recognizes male and female genders in federal programs (The White House, 2025a).

Conclusion

Now that Trump has won the election, the political and economic status quo has changed moderately from the Biden administration. Republicans believe America is “great again,” but it is not as drastically different as they hoped or as Trump promised. Trump, Biden, and Harris all fall under the same authoritarian right quadrant of the political compass, sharing similar values regarding free-market capitalism and democracy. This demonstrates that election outcomes do not create major changes because the U.S. political and economic system does not shift ideological quadrants. Our two-party system with limited influence of third parties and slim majorities in Congress makes it difficult for a president to significantly change the political status quo, as illustrated by the political impasse that caused the recent 44-day government shutdown. Unfulfilled or diluted campaign promises further highlight how elections only moderately affect the political and economic status quo of the United States.

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