

The 2024 Presidential Election - The Rich Rule, The Rest Don't

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Abstract

The 2024 presidential election seemed like a fight between two parties with completely opposite social and economic views. President Trump promised citizens to “Make America Great Again”, while President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris promised to protect “Democracy”. This paper will examine the status quo from a left-libertarian perspective. We will examine how the two-party system hurts democracy as both parties essentially cater to wealthy individuals and big corporations. We will examine how government policies are shaped from campaign donations versus the need to create a democratic society. We will also look at media influence in suppressing third party voices and media houses managing the news to maintain the status quo. The rise of oligarchic and plutocratical style of governance due to capitalism is examined by looking at two highly debated topics on the campaign trail- Immigration and Climate crisis. This paper argues that elections are mechanisms managed by the top 1% and irrespective of who is in the presidential office, special interest groups and institutional design limit any meaningful change and hence preserve the status quo. The paper concludes that U.S. elections are mere symbolic gestures to placate large groups of people who believe that they have real influence in government policies.

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In the 2024 United States Presidential election, many Americans were desperate for change, hoping that the next president would change the trajectory of our country. Voters were clearly divided along party lines and their loyalty towards their chosen party had nothing to do with the candidate's policies. As much as I would like to believe that United States is structured as a democratic country, the reality is our country is constrained by the two-party system and the concentration of wealth among the elite few. The narrow range of electoral choices and the corporate lobbying in the name of campaign donations, unfortunately limit any ideological change. I recently came across a quote by Mark Twain "If you don't read the newspaper, you're uninformed. If you read the newspaper, you're mis-informed." Media coverage of political campaigning makes us believe that the stakes of any given election are unusually high and the candidates on both sides have a fundamentally different vision for the country's future. However, beneath this rhetoric lies the central truth that no matter who gets elected, the American political system functions within the boundaries that preserves the status quo. Research shows that regular folks have zero input when it comes to government policies, unlike the elite few who have made the decisions for us for decades to benefit them (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 575). The quintessential question that we keep asking ourselves is, do elections in U.S. create any meaningful structural change in policies or does it work towards preserving the power in the hands of the modern-day Goliaths, aka the elite few?

Let's first examine the two major candidates in the 2024 Presidential election. It started with a second go between two former presidents, Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Both the Republican and Democratic Party felt like they had picked the best "man" for the job. In the June

2024 presidential debate, Democratic Party's best pick, Joe Biden was steadily losing momentum on the campaign trail and performed very poorly in the June 27, 2024, debate (The Associated Press, 2024). The Republican Party's top pick, Donald Trump seemed like was just lying through his teeth and making up facts on the spot, but the media consensus was he performed better than Biden. However, political writer and consultant, Tim Miller described the overall debate as "The worst performance in the history of televised presidential debates" (MS NOW, 2024).

On July 21st, 2024, Biden ultimately withdrew from the race due to financial and political pressure from his own party and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic Party candidate (Shear, 2024). Interestingly, no one from the Republican Party seemed to be bothered by the lies and felony charges of Donald Trump and he continued to be the Republican Party's chosen candidate for the 2024 presidential election. The selection of a new candidate with less than four months from the election day did not help Kamala Harris. The voters viewed her as an extension of Biden's policies and her campaign was plagued with huge corporate donations. Voters expected little to no change in the existing conditions under her administration resulting in her losing the presidential election (Saul, 2024).

A Deeply Divided Country: Money and Media

The media representation and election campaigns made us believe that Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are running on completely different agenda and belief system. However, behind that façade they are both catering to the same set of people who financed their campaign. While the president might change but the political framework and bureaucracy pretty much stay the same under both administrations. The scholars of U.S. politics have pointed out how the campaign promises are nothing but rebranding of existing policies with no lasting change in the system itself (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). It really does not matter who the president is, key areas

like military spending, business regulation and economic policy pretty much stay the same under both the parties. Additionally, Hacker and Pierson (2010) point out that American politics is increasingly influenced by the super-rich and big corporations. They argue that these powerful groups have figured out how to push their own agendas, making sure the government creates rules that favor them instead of the average person. They call this "winner-take-all politics", where the system is set up so that almost all the money and economic growth end up with the elite group, while the common folks get left behind.

The institutional framework of our government makes this gap even worse. The Supreme Court treating corporations as individuals and the rules that govern who pays for the elections means that the corporations with the biggest bank has far more influence than the smaller organizations. The U.S. Supreme Court landmark case of 2010, *Citizens United v. FEC* exasperated an already existing problem of political lobbying. It allowed big corporations and special interest groups to spend obscene amounts of money to create favorable corporate policies. It opened the floodgates to legal form of bribery, which further fueled inequality and unfair policies (Johnson, 2011).

In addition to the economic and political constraints that bind the elected officials to pledge their loyalty to big corporations, media plays a significant role in how we perceive these candidates. Media did an outstanding job in magnifying the polarization of the two candidates and further dividing the country. Croteau and Hoynes discuss how the corporate media falls short of true watchdog journalism in a democratic society. The media should keep an eye on people in power, like politicians and big companies. They should call them out when they do something wrong. However, the media does not really act like that anymore. Instead of challenging powerful people, reporters often depend on them for information. In a democracy, people need

good, clear information so they can make smart choices, like who to vote for. However, the media spends a lot of time on personal dramas, like scandals or gossip, instead of focusing on important decisions and policies (Croteau & Hoynes, 1999).

Herman and Chomsky's (2002) explained in their "propaganda model" how advertisement revenue and structural incentives in media ownership shape the news we view. They point out how the media and political parties work together to keep us frustrated with political debates that focus on narrow issues so that we are not paying attention to the fundamental capitalist structure that threatens our democracy. The media does not always show enough different opinions, which can make things seem one-sided. They use cultural and social issues to further divide us versus uniting against the policies that favor the rich. While not all media content is managed, but who owns the news channel has a lot to do with how the news is framed and presented to us.

Political scholars like Iyengar et al. (2019) argue that media has further divided the country to an extent where citizens feel extreme resentment towards the opposition party even though there is not much policy difference. It is unfortunate that a person's party affiliation is shaped by candidate and media narrative versus public policy. This results in political debates and news channels clashing about topics like immigration, gender identity or faith versus focusing on serious issues like increasing minimum wage, healthcare, climate crisis, education, regulating corporations, etc. It feels more like a distraction technique, where the goal is to get citizens wound up about irrelevant stuff versus focusing on influencing meaningful structural change.

The United States of Capitalism

The leaders of most industrialized countries take pride in advocating for a capitalist society and preach that it is set up for the benefit of all citizens. We have come to believe that capitalism is something that fuels the engine of economic growth. The reality is the system is set up to fuel the bank balance of the big corporations and the elite crew. Richard D. Wolff, who is a Marxian economist contends how neither the Republicans nor the Democrats see the inherent issues with capitalism (Wolff, 2019). Wolff argues that recession is not some random accidents but are embedded into the capitalistic system for market corrections. Historically in capitalism, markets cycle through a rise and fall period. However, due to spread of capitalism around the world, market corrections impact the global economy. President Trump and leaders from other capitalist countries understand that their position and future in the office can be disturbed by recession and impact their vote bank. Both Republicans and Democrats understand their job security is tied to the economy and hence they continue to make false promises on the campaign trail about a better economy and put pressure on the Federal Reserve to lower interest while they are in office. When it looks like the promise of great economy is losing ground, the president will conveniently blame it on unfair trade agreement with other countries or the opposition party.

Companies are driven by profit margins, and their primary goal is looking out for their stakeholders. When companies miscalculate or overestimate what they can sell, it leads to decline in sales and eventually hurts their bottom line. Wolff argues that recession is way to correct the market imbalance and explains to us the flip side of growth. When businesses lose money, they either close their doors or let go of their employees. Layoff is an ugly side effect of recession, leading to families struggling to pay for basic needs like food, healthcare and housing. This creates a viscous cycle where the government is also collecting less taxes which leads to budget cuts. This impacts social programs when people need it the most. Conservatives' solution

to dig us out of the recession is to decrease the interest rate, while liberals prefer handing out money to boost the economy. Again, none of these work as long-term solutions but act more like band-aid for a large incision.

Wolff points out how fans of capitalism equate capitalism to democracy (Wolff, 2024). The hard truth is that democracy and capitalism are opposites of each other and cannot coexist. Wolff argues that the top 1% is making the decisions for the rest of us and we just live in an illusion that a capitalist society is a democratic society. Wolff uses a corporate analogy to break down the facts for us. He explains how the executives who are the decision makers in corporations are rarely impacted by their poor decisions, but the employees bear the burden of poor decisions. For example, most of the tech companies in the bay area offer stock options to employees and coax employees to work hard and sometimes over their scheduled hours as they are also part owners (shareholders) in their company. In a capitalist society, we are made to believe that you are in control of your own destiny. However, hearing news about tech layoffs seems like an everyday thing. These companies did not fail to turn over profit because the workers were not smart enough or hardworking, these companies failed either because of corporate greed or poor decisions made by the executives.

In terms of politics, Wolff argues that political parties are run autocratically by the lobbyists that pay to play. There are few key players on the top that decide how the government spends billions of dollars. Like Wolff says this is exactly opposite of democracy. Just like in the corporate structures, the goal of the executives is to fill their own pockets; the goal of the super-rich is to ensure we do not experience any real democracy. In a capitalist society, it is almost impossible for a common man to win the game as the rules of the game keeps changing and the rich who decide the rules ensures it only benefits them.

The Political Compass- Left-Libertarian Perspective

Many political experts feel that our country is stuck in a two-party chokehold with the Republican and Democratic Party, hence any big change is practically impossible. In a 2025 Al Jazeera interview, a former journalist stated how both the parties on the surface might have opposing views, but they are essentially two sides of the same coin. The system is designed for us to feel like we are rooting for ideologically different players who are working for us, but the rules of this game are decided by elite few who control the White House. The election is designed to make us feel like we are being heard but the presidents are nothing but puppets of large corporations. The journalist describes the United States government as a totalitarian system, where the democracy is managed by corporations with little to no influence from voters (Al Jazeera English, 2025).

The political compass is a graph that shows the economic and social structure of the United States political system (The Political Compass, n.d.). On the X-axis as one moves up from the bottom to the top of the social scale, the political ideologies of those individuals move from libertarian to authorization. The people on the bottom of the X-axis support more liberal views like decentralization of power, personal freedom and managing fiscal budget responsibly. As we move up on the X-axis the views of these individuals are geared towards more authoritarian style of governance. They believe in power being held by the top 1% and they are not a huge fan of checks and balances imposed by courts or congress. They tend to suppress freedom of speech and non-conforming opinions to protect their status quo. They are usually anti-immigration and tend to believe in the “divide and conquer” motto. On the other hand, the Y-axis depicts the economic scale when we move from left to right. The people on the left of the

economic scale advocate for more socialistic governance, such as increasing the taxes to support government programs, regulating business, social equality, serving the needs of many versus select few. The people on the right support tax-cuts, decreased regulation for businesses, support capitalism, and are not a huge fan of welfare programs.

When I took the political compass test in February 2026, I was placed on the bottom left-libertarian quadrant of the political compass (The Political Compass, n.d.). I felt happy and proud to be on the quadrant alongside Bernie Sanders, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. The assessment seemed valid as I strongly believe in liberty and social equality for all. I believe in creating a world where everyone thrives and power is not held by few people. In a society that has a higher percentage of middle class, everyone thrives. In a true democratic society, people are in charge of their own destiny and big corporations are not managing the economic and social aspects of the majority. When people's voices are heard and changes are made according, we will see the economy flourish. If we elected leaders from this quadrant, we would not be living in an oligarchic or plutocratic society under the guise of a democratic governance.

There were other interesting elements that I noticed on the political compass. Most of the presidents were on the top right authoritarian quadrant of the political compass. I was surprised to see Vice President Harris and President Trump with opposing views on the campaign trail being in the same authoritarian quadrant. They clearly have similar views on how the government and economy should function. Other notable leaders who were in the authoritarian quadrant of the political compass were Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Prime Minister Boris Johnson. It was clear that voters tend to gravitate towards people in the authoritarian quadrant and fall prey to their rhetoric. I recalled a funny meme that Prof. Kropf shared in one of his

lecture slides, both Democratic and Republican candidates seem like two cheeks of the same butt. The political compass was eye opening and cleared any misconception I had about Democratic president being far “left” and Republican president being far “right”. They both essentially have the same ideologies and cater to the same set of people.

Due to the restrictive two-party system, third party candidates have very little skin in the game. In the 2024 election, the two prominent third-party candidates were on the bottom left and right quadrant of the political compass. Jill Stein from Green Party falls into the left-libertarian quadrant of the political compass and Chase Oliver from the Libertarian Party falls under the right-libertarian quadrant of the political compass. The Libertarian party proposes limited government interference and a free market economy. The Green Party advocates for environmental sustainability and a more aggressive approach to climate change (Brittenden, 2024). These diverse political views and policy changes are rational and benefit everyone. But due to the historical dominance of the two-party system, these third parties are never given enough exposure by the mainstream media resulting in very little traction on the campaign trail. Historically, we can never quite agree on how to balance economy, government control and individual freedom hence the status quo of the two major parties continues to prevail (Heineman, 1995).

Immigration- The Hot Button Topic

Immigration has always been a hot button topic, and it is used as a political prop on the campaign trail. The constant debate about immigration does an excellent job in polarizing the country. What many people fail to understand is that there is political and economic incentive for both parties to continue to fuel the immigration debate. If the immigration problem was solved, one of the important driving factors in political debates would disappear. There is also an

economic incentive in keeping the status quo persistent, due to the genuine need for immigrant labor in this country. A recent Gallop survey showed us the stark difference between the Democrats and Republicans on their stance on immigration. As per the survey, 88% of Republicans propose that immigration levels should be decreased, whereas only 28% of Democrats have the same opinion (Jones, 2024). The 2024 movie “A Day without a Mexican”, uses comedy to highlight a quiet but unspoken need for immigrant labor. In this country we rely on cheap labor and vulnerable people to keep the costs low in multiple sectors from farms to big corporations, and we cannot function without immigrant labor. Allegedly, President Trump has himself hired undocumented immigrants to work in his multiple casinos, hotels and other business ventures.

The right-wing political parties use a xenophobic attitude against the immigrants and minority group to gain more electoral votes, whereas the left-wing to some extent abandon the issue and do not work towards any meaningful structural change (Carreras, 2025). When Trump took office in 2017, he immediately started working on his campaign promise and allocated funds to build his “big, beautiful wall”. He signed executive orders to ban immigrants from several poor countries with Muslim majority, claiming he is doing this to enhance national security. He paused President Obama’s DACA program and started promoting the “Raise ACT”, which would have cut the number of immigrant visa into half. The COVID-19 pandemic gave him the perfect opportunity to further his agenda and reduce migration into United States. In 2021, when Biden was elected president he reversed a lot of Trump policies, and this was not surprising at all. This undoing of immigration policies of the previous administration has been a recurring pattern in the last few decades when the opposition party comes into power (Baxter, 2021).

In the 2024 election cycle, President Trump took an even stronger stance against immigration, contrary to his opponent Vice President Kamala Harris. While Trump did debate a lot on the immigration issue in his previous campaigns, but this time around the focal point was not building the wall but on mass deportations and building detention centers. In his bizarre rant at a presidential debate, he went as far as falsely accusing the Haitian community in Spring Field, Ohio of “eating dogs and cats” (PolitiFact, 2024). As soon as President Trump was elected to the office, he started signing multiple executive orders, some of them surrounding immigration. He villainized every other ethnic minority and aggressively started deporting non-citizens, including those who were seeking asylum or had their immigration petition pending in courts (New York City Bar Association, 2025). While we still do not have any official figures from the government on how many people got deported since President Trump took office in his second term, there are immigration watchdog groups tracking data and reports that the administration deports around 30,000 people every month (American Immigration Council, 2026). When it comes to immigration, the status quo is geared towards blaming the immigrants. The previous administrations had a bit of a relaxed approach to deal with the influx of immigrants, but President Trump believes in only allowing people who can pay five million dollars for his gold visa to enter this country. The rest of hard-working, talented or asylum-seeking individuals are not welcome in this country under this new administration. This is another classic proof that we do not quite live in a democracy but an oligarchy.

Environmental Policies and Climate Crisis

In an interview with journalist Stan Cox, Noam Chomsky voices his frustration about all the challenges associated with possible livable future, the primary focus in that interview was the non-committal nature of United States and world leaders to combat climate crisis under the Paris

agreement. Chomsky points out how U.S. being the worst offender is unwilling to make any binding commitment which allows other industrial countries to just follow suit with empty promises. Chomsky also warns about dangers of rising sea levels, extreme heat, and stronger storms that could make parts of the world unlivable. He argues how it is nearly impossible to make any lasting environmental policies when the concerned citizens are up against the unlimited cash flowing from oil and gas industry going into the pockets of congressmen in the form of “campaign donations”. The right-wing stance on climate crisis has always been constant denial of global warming and inevitably Trump administration has been the flag bearer of climate catastrophe. The administration has pulled out of Paris agreement, deregulated large oil and gas companies, and openly vowed to increase use of fossil fuels. Chomsky points out in his interview how the Democrats are no saints and use Greenwashing to mislead voters. Companies like Exxon Mobil, on one hand heavily invest in fossil fuels but assure us that they are the good guys because they are investing money in finding solutions to combat climate crisis (Cox, 2021). If hypocrisy had a face, the oil and gas companies would be the top contenders. United States is the worst offender of climate crisis but it’s the poor countries across the ocean that pay the real price of our wrongdoings.

The climate policies in United States swings like a pendulum between the two administrations constrained by bureaucracy and corporate donations ensuring the status quo remains the same. The Biden administration had proposed several environmental policies to produce clean energy and reduce greenhouse gases. The Biden administration was up against powerful fossil fuel companies, special interest groups and established relationships with the previous administrations which posed a real barrier to alter the deeply etched mindset of congress (Eilperin et al., 2021). The complex web of challenges with huge donations at stake

creates significant barriers for any meaningful structural climate change. As most career politicians on both sides of the aisle are heavily funded by energy sectors, the adoption of new climate policies that benefit the environment and future generations is slim. Even if Democrats claim that they are working towards positive change, most of the environmental policies have not had any significant impact, hence maintaining the status quo.

Conclusion

The 2024 presidential election campaign slogan promised us two completely different styles of governance, depending on who you chose to vote for. President Donald Trump promised Americans he will rule with an iron fist and fix immigration, create stronger economy and “Make America Great Again”. The Democrats pretty much promised the same things but worded it differently. They called themselves the torch bearer of democracy and public service. From a left-libertarian perspective, switching presidents does not guarantee a different outcome, unlike what the campaign slogans promise. The president is just a piece of the puzzle that is tied to systemic bureaucracy and wealthy campaign donors. It’s the special interest groups and large corporations that hold true power in our oligarchic society; career politicians are at their mercy to get reelected. After President Trump was reelected, he signed multiple executive orders to further his divisive and nationalistic rhetoric under the disguise of patriotism. The unfortunate reality of the two-party system is that they both serve to protect the same set of people - large corporations and the elites. There is no real reform when it comes to immigration, taxes, environmental laws, social programs or corporate regulations. Regular folks are living under the illusion of democracy and hoping for a better outcome every election cycle. Many voters are misinformed or unaware about how both parties are monetarily tied up to corporate interests. The bottom line is that without an alternative third party to vote for, we will forever be stuck with the status quo.

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