

The 2024 Election: A Continuum

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Abstract

This paper delves into the political landscape of the United States in an examination of the 2024 presidential election. It argues that, despite apparent partisan divisions, both major political parties fundamentally chase wealth. Through an analysis of party development in history, an examination of Biden's and Trump's positions on the political compass, and an evaluation of each candidate's domestic and foreign policies, the paper reveals more of their common ground than differences. The paper explores the influence of money in politics, highlighting the rise of super PACs and the dominance of profit-driven motives in both parties. It critiques the media's role, emphasizing its tendency to sensationalize and perpetuate the drama of partisan divisions. Additionally, it questions the viability of third parties, citing the limitations of the first-past-the-post voting system and the challenges they face in breaking the status quo. Despite recognizing their potential to bring attention to critical issues, the paper concludes that breaking the current status quo remains a formidable challenge.

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Biden versus Trump. Liberal versus Conservative. Democrat versus Republican. Our political climate is wrought with bipartisan divisions. Placed on opposing ends, they appear as staunch irreconcilables sharing no common grounds. A nation ruled by either side is depicted as one detrimental to the other. After the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, impeachment trials, the Ukraine-Russia war, and an economy wrought with inflation, the upcoming 2024 presidential election is a highly anticipated event seen as the deciding moment for the rest of American history: Whoever wins, whichever political party takes control of the White House, it will determine the course of America's future.

Yet as striking as this feels, how plausible is it? Is America at a point where its political climate is turning in on itself? This paper examines the degree of difference between America's two major parties, arguing that despite the partisanship portrayed, their policies carry the same principle that chases wealth. It will study Biden's and Trump's economic and foreign policies in an overall examination of their placement in the political compass. This paper will also analyze the plausibility of third parties overwriting the status quo using an examination of its position in the nomination process, as well as the faults of the first-past-the-post voting system.

Development & Interpretations of The Political Parties

Our modern political parties trace back to the time of Federalists versus Anti-federalists, where Federalists favored a centralized government and ratifying the Constitution, whereas Anti-federalists favored states' rights and maintenance of individual autonomy. These eventually developed into party coalitions, with the Federalists led by Alexander Hamilton and the Democratic-Republicans led by Thomas Jefferson. Following its opposition to the War of 1812, the Federalist Party collapsed, leading the nation to be largely held by the Democratic-

Republicans. However, growing divisions over how to disperse national resources led to the formation of the Second Party System: The Democratic Party led by Andrew Jackson and the Whig Party led by Henry Clay. The Democratic Party advocated for the common people, throwing its support towards westward expansion and opposing the use of federal funds for infrastructure projects and a national banking system. The Whig Party advocated for economic development funded by the national government. For a long time, the Democratic Party successfully held control of US politics, establishing an important shift to connecting with the common man, regardless of property status, with an emphasis on personal politics. This party domination, however, eventually faced tensions in the mid-1850s over regional issues. With the North's growing industrial power, a faction emerged from the Democratic Party, one that advocated for greater national security and opposed the expansion of slavery because they feared it took opportunities away from non-slave-owning-industrialists moving west; this party became known as the Republican Party led by Abraham Lincoln. For the next several decades, these parties were held by their regional alliances: the Republican Party to the North and the Democratic Party dominating in the South (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021).

However, following the Civil War, a gradual shift of alliances began occurring. Immediately after the Civil War, Republicans, who held power in the Industrial North, were working to help the newly freed African Americans in the South. Yet as time passed, power started consolidating in wealthy businessmen who no longer found interest in fighting for black rights. Despite the South's active resistance to reforms, the Republican Party decided to leave the region to its own devices, the result of which left Southern black citizens "oppressed and deprived of their new right to vote" (Vox, 2016). By the 1920s, the Great Depression hit, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat, began expanding government power to fight it.

Roosevelt began to connect with African Americans as his New Deal and other Great Depression policies worked to help those who were suffering the most; this led to a drastic realignment of political allegiances as African Americans and other minorities began to vote Democrat (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021).

Currently, the parties hold distinct party platforms. The Democratic Party prefers a more active government, believing greater involvement would achieve larger goals of equality. As such, they favor regulations, such as environmental and anti-discrimination laws in employment, and welfare programs. They advocate for progressive taxes, which are higher taxes for those with higher incomes, increased minimum wage, and less military spending (Diffen, n.d.).

The Republican Party prefers a small government, seeing big governments as obstacles to the natural flow of business. As such, they advocate for deregulation, finding regulatory laws unintentionally harmful. They favor individual responsibility and dislike welfare programs, claiming that there is a lot of fraud and is a waste of taxpayer dollars. They believe in tax cuts for everyone, which follows their preference for small government since a smaller government has less of a need for federal tax revenue. At the same time, they advocate for a flat tax, seeing a progressive tax as a form of “class warfare” (Diffen, n.d.).

With this establishment of the political parties, where do Biden and Trump fall? Even in historical portrayals, the parties appear to take different stances on key issues; it follows that the public perception is that Democrats are progressive liberals and Republicans are conservative traditionalists. Yet examining Biden’s and Trump’s positions on the political compass reveals more of their common ground than their differences.

Analyzing the Political Compass

The political compass is a chart that analyzes a person's political personality. Using two axes of economic and social ideologies, the chart shows the whole political compass applicable to a multitude of nations and democracies. The horizontal axis, labeled "Left" and "Right," measures economic stance. The left represents an economy that is 100% government-driven, representative of a "command Marxist economy" (The Political Compass, 2017). In this type of economy, everything is owned by the government, including how the markets run and what goods and services are produced. This type of economy, as defined by Karl Marx, is "common ownership of the means of production." It can move quickly, has low unemployment rates, and prevents monopolistic practices, but also discourages innovation and cannot respond timely to changing consumer needs, resulting in consistent over and under productions (Longley, 2019). On the right side of the axis is a 100% free market economy, similar to that of a neoliberal economy (The Political Compass, 2017). Under neoliberalism, there is an emphasis on private enterprise, with an economy controlled by private businesses; it focuses on free trade, deregulation, globalization, tax cuts, and a reduction in government spending (Manning, 2022). It holds strong similarities to laissez-faire economics in the sense of limited state interference in an effort to spur innovation through economic growth. The terms "left" and "right" are often misattributed with social positions (The Political Compass, 2017). For example, the Soviet Union under Stalin is often referred to as a right-wing political scene. However, in terms of economics, Stalin would find himself and his communist command economy on the left of the chart.

The vertical axis, labeled "Authoritarian" and "Libertarian," represents the social aspect. The top portion represents an authoritarian government, one where power is consolidated under

one individual or a small group of individuals; these are “systems of government that have no established mechanism for the transfer of executive power and do not afford their citizens civil liberties or political rights” (Lindstaedt, 2023). On the other end lies libertarianism, a concept encompassing the values of individualism, individual rights, a “society of liberty under law,” and limited government (Boaz, 2019). In modern society, many mislabel nations to be right leaning when the correct term would be authoritarian. For example, while many describe North Korea’s Kim Jong Un to be part of the extreme right, his political compass lands him in the top half of Authoritarian. Similarly, Stalin and Hitler, though on opposing ends of the economic spectrum, find themselves united in their social authoritarian aspect (The Political Compass, 2017).

Both Biden’s and Trump’s placement on the political compass fall in the authoritarian right quadrant. Both prefer a free-market economy and are more socially conservative. Contrary to popular opinion, the two candidates hold similar political ideologies. Looking at their policies, it is evident that they do not carry significant differences there either.

Analyzing Candidate Policies

In holding similar political ideologies, according to the political compass, there are not any stark differences between the two’s economic and foreign policies. In general, their economic policies follow similarly to their party platforms. Trump’s economic policy involves tax cuts, deregulation, and a focus on energy independence. His advocacy for tax cuts stems from the belief that reducing corporate tax rates and providing tax relief for individuals stimulates economic growth. Similarly, following his right-leaning economic stance, he believes in deregulation, embarking on a roll-back of “environmental, financial, and industry-specific regulations.” At the same time, his focus on energy independence has led to a promotion of domestic energy production and a reduction of restrictions on fossil fuel industries (Diffen, n.d.).

Biden's economic policy involves infrastructure investment, tax increases, clean energy and climate initiatives, and social spending. Regarding infrastructure investment, he advocates for funding to modernize infrastructure, including public transportation, water systems, and clean energy infrastructure. He has addressed several climate initiatives in an effort to combat climate change and promote clean energy, including a set-up of ambitious goals for greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, he has spent time on social spending projects, including investments in education, paid leave, and childcare support (Diffen, n.d.).

On foreign policy, both are critical of China and accuse it of stealing US "technology and intellectual property." They view China as an economic competitor and threat, that it engages in unfair practices to take the upper hand and must be confronted by the United States. Trump has imposed tariffs on Chinese goods in an effort to prioritize American industries. Biden has followed a similar view on economic competition, making efforts to enhance domestic manufacturing capabilities to reduce dependence on China (Diffen, n.d.).

On the surface, at least with economic policies, Biden and Trump are seen as different. But the substantiality of this difference is questionable. Take, for example, the stance on clean energy. Trump, per his deregulatory beliefs in economics, reduced restrictions on fossil fuel industries, an act that completely opposes the notion of clean energy. Biden has since taken a stance on clean energy. Yet at the same time, nothing substantial is being passed; these talks have so far been more theoretical than something that produces practical results. In examining these policies, it is vital to see that, underneath the superficial sayings, these two candidates, the two parties they represent, chase the same principle: money.

Monopoly, Not Duopoly: The Influence of Money in Politics

Money controls a large portion of the United States politics. Even within American elections, the nomination process cannot be achieved without sufficient funds, funds which range into the millions; in a single presidential cycle, this funding can range into the billions of dollars: “In the 2020 presidential election cycle, candidates for all parties raised a total of 5.7 billion dollars for campaigns. Congressional candidates raised \$8.7 billion. The amount raised by [PACs] ... was approximately \$2.7 billion”. Simply put, money has become ingrained in the election process. Campaigns, whose success depends on hefty financial donations, graciously receive contributions from large corporations; yet this process, with the strong potential for political corruption, has been closely monitored throughout American history, with campaign finance laws taking successes and failures in its fight for transparency (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021).

Initial laws passed under Theodore Roosevelt attempted to “create transparency in campaign funding”: they first prohibited corporate donations, then changed to limit the quantity and how candidates could spend the money. However, the lack of authority to curtail substantial influxes of money and limited enforcement made the laws insufficient. In 1971, Congress attempted to counter this by passing the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), requiring candidates to report all campaign-related contributions; it established regulations on how corporations could contribute to the campaigns and established the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to enforce its laws. The passing of the McCain-Feingold Act was an additional attempt to “restrict... the amount of money given to political parties, which had become a way for companies and PACs to exert influence” (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021). Despite federal attempts to limit the contributions of corporations and, conjunctionally, their influence and potential

corruption, Supreme Court cases ruled against these restrictions, claiming them to be a limitation on the corporation's freedom of speech; essentially, "the Supreme Court...ruled that corporate money is 'speech'" (Johnson et al., 2011). Additionally, the Court allowed unlimited contributions to be provided through super PACs (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021).

Super PACs, officially known as "independent expenditure-only committee[s]," can raise an unlimited amount of money from corporations and organizations to spend on a candidate during an election. Money that flows into super PACs can also be untraceable: "Individuals can mask their identities and their contributions to super PACs by giving funds to outside groups which then give money to a super PAC, a process that is essentially laundering." They mark a new era of politics dependent on a heavy flow of money, putting power and influence into the wealthy, as only the multi-rich corporates would find the need to donate a sum of money greater than that allocated in a regular PAC; it allows wealthy organizations to "have an unfair advantage in electing candidates" (Murse, 2020). In essence, "corporations can threaten elected officials" with the threat of "smear[ing]" their future elections; in other words, if the elected official does not accomplish what the corporation wants, the corporation will "put up so much money to oppose...that official in the next election; so that the person [will not] be able to be elected to any office again" (Johnson et al., 2011).

The strong presence of money and corruption at the election stage presents a grander reflection of the two parties; both parties hold a preference for profit, a uniting preference that leads many critics to begin calling them a monopoly rather than its perceived duopoly. In reality, Republicans and Democrats are not separate distinct parties but rather two large feuding factions of a single party that favors business (Knapp, 2022). They represent "capital," a kind of "money that begets more money." This obsession with money and profit depicts the status quo of

America's political climate. Socially, it does not matter which party comes to power because both are obsessed with maintaining the social hierarchy and each individual's position; when it comes down to action, nothing substantial will take place if it is not something that provides concrete profit or money that makes more money. In this reflection, it is revealed that, though Biden plays himself as someone actively countering climate change, no significant laws have been passed, nothing that critically distinguishes his presidency from Trump's, at least environmentally. It dwindles down to the crucial fact that climate action is not immediately profitable; more importantly, it places Biden against a powerful fossil fuel industry, one that can supply money in opposition to his future elections. Similarly, foreign policy is driven by an obsession with imperialism and profit. So long as a nation supports the idea of "self-expanding" money, the United States will consider them an ally, no matter what genocides, wars, and other atrocities they may be committing. The United States has prided itself as the harbinger of democracy and liberty but will turn a blind eye to a nation's ongoing genocide so long as that nation can continue providing economic profits; trade profits have taken value over humanity (Fayazmanesh, 2020).

In the face of these seemingly apparent revelations, why are these discussions not occurring publicly? How is it that Americans continue to rally behind the two parties despite the fact that both parties rally for money, not the public? One of the main reasons may be that these realities simply are not portrayed in mainstream media.

Faults of the Media

Theoretically, the free press is designed to be a watchdog in cases similar to those of the Watergate journalists: journalists who uncover government scandals and reveal to the public what is actually going on. It is supposed to be a system working for the public to ensure the

government continues to be for the public and not engaging in undercover shady business. Yet rather than having an aggressive press that keeps governments in check, the United States now has a docile one that works in coalition with the government. In truth, part of what nurtures this is a quality of a good journalist: the ability to use connections. In order for journalists to understand what is going on in the government, their view on the Hill, unfortunately, often comes from those working on the inside: government officials. Government officials are working for a specific administration. The information they give journalists will not be a full unwrapping of the truth because saying that will only backfire on their administration: “They do not provide information as a public service, but in order to serve specific political agendas.” News, rather than being an exposé of the government, has become another form of media management: “The news media act more often as a ‘lapdog’ than a ‘watchdog’—providing a forum for government officials to present their perspectives and squabble among themselves, rather than a site for open political debate” (Croteau & Hoynes, 1999).

Many journalists have sacrificed legitimacy in place of maintaining inside government connections for the sake of having a news story to print for the public; in part, this connects with the profit-making enterprise of mainstream media companies. Media is becoming increasingly sensationalist and searching for drama and entertainment value. Electoral campaigns have begun to use the media as a way to manipulate the public and send specific messages, which leads to a decline in substantial news that allows citizens to make informed decisions in a democracy. Rather than being a source of diverse opinions, the media is now centered upon corporate-sponsored messages or only gives their platforms to the wealthy or representatives of powerful institutions, in turn limiting diversity of thoughts (Croteau & Hoynes, 1999).

The media's focus on entertainment value stems from the capitalistic desire to make a profit. In a political climate, entertainment draws from drama, drama provided through a heightened exaggeration of the party divisions. As the media focuses on controversial issues, they maintain the drama-filled tension that brings profit. In turn, the tunneled portrayal of Democrats and Republicans being on polar ends of controversial issues creates a false perception that these parties are fundamentally different.

The United States political system is wrought with a cycle of enriching the rich. It does not matter who holds the presidency during a term; this exploitive nature will persist, a nature that drives how political parties in the United States operate, something almost fundamental to our political structure. Rather than running based on morality or ethics, both parties have built their foundation on the principle of chasing profit, profit which can come through any means necessary. The United States has come to a position where its ruling parties work not for the general public but for the select wealthy; this is no secret. A majority of Americans wish there were more political parties than the regular two. Support for a third party runs high, but how well should Americans expect them to break the current status quo?

Viability of a Third-Party Solution

Firstly, third parties are known as minor parties or alternatives to the two major parties. They do not have much success at the national level but do carry electoral impact. In the past, third parties have pulled enough votes away from the least-liked candidate to hand elections to the less-hated candidate; in short, they helped their preferred party candidate win. In the long term, third parties have brought important issues to the attention of major parties. With their focus on specific issues, if they garner a large enough support base, major parties realize that the topic is something important to address, essentially being a pressure for change (Krutz &

Waskiewicz, 2021). The United States has had several notable third parties in its history, such as the Populists and the Progressives. Currently, there are a few relevant third parties to address: the Green Party and the Libertarian Party.

The Green Party focuses on four pillars: peace, ecology, social justice, and democracy. Their values include grassroots democracy, social justice and equal opportunity, ecological wisdom, peace and non-violence, decentralization (reconstructing the system so that power goes to a democratic and less bureaucratic system), community-based economics, gender equity, respect for diversity, personal and global responsibility, and sustainability and future focus (Green Party, n.d.). If the Green Party were to be elected into power, they would change the status quo. As a party dedicated to protecting the environment, they would be against major corporate industries such as the fossil fuel industry, marking a change in corporate coalition. Similarly, with an emphasis on community-based economics, their economic beliefs place them more on the left side of the economic spectrum, which would break the United States' current status quo of being on the right side.

The Libertarian Party opposes government interference. They believe in the maximization of personal freedom and minimization of government interference. Their values include individual liberty, limited government, free-market economy, non-aggression principle (which states that interactions would be voluntary and consensual, not forced or coerced), self-ownership, peaceful cooperation, and protection of civil liberties (Libertarian Party, 2023). Similarly, if the Libertarian Party were to be elected to power, they would change the status quo. Though their economic beliefs are consistent with the current status, their belief in minimal government interference positions them starkly against the current status of Authoritarianism.

As refreshing as a new status quo sound, the viability of these third-party successes is minimal. In past presidential elections, they have had minimal success. In the 2012 election, Libertarians had 1% of the popular vote; in 2016, Libertarians had 3%, and the Green Party had 1%; in 2020, Libertarians had 1% (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021). Additionally, third parties face a critical obstacle with our current voting system: first-past-the-post.

First-past-the-post (abbrv. FPTP), also known as the winner-takes-all system or plurality voting, is the current American voting system where “the individual candidate with the most votes wins, [regardless of if] they gain a majority (51 percent or greater) of the total votes cast” (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021). The result is a system that favors minority rule and inevitably dwindles down to a two-party system. Suppose there was a fake election with candidates A, B, C, D, and E. Candidate A gets 20% of the votes, B gets 30%, C gets 15%, D gets 25%, and E gets 10%. According to the FPTP system, candidate B wins. Yet the vast majority wanted someone else to win, an issue known as minority rule. (CGP Grey, 2011). Additionally, as more election cycles continue, it will come down to an unavoidable two-party system. Parties that do not attract enough supporters to win an election will “eventually disappear [as] their supporters realize they have no hope of achieving success at the polls. The failure of third parties to win and the possibility that they will draw votes away from the party the voter had favored before—resulting in a win for the party the voter liked least—makes people hesitant to vote for the third party’s candidates a second time” (Krutz & Waskiewicz, 2021). Thus, while the ideologies of third parties can theoretically alter the status quo, the plausibility of it actually occurring is low. Coupled with the bipolar nature media likes to focus on and the extreme dependency on corporate-level donations, it would be an arduous task just to be considered a formidable opponent. In debates, it would be difficult for third parties to stand out when the media purposely

leans towards more controversial Democrat versus Republican discussion; instead of being a unique perspective, it is possible they end up conforming for the sake of boosting popularity. Additionally, with campaign dependency on corporate donations, it would be difficult for third-party candidates to avoid the threatened promises of corporations: if they accept the donations, they would be giving up their commitment to breaking the status quo; at the same time, if they reject the donation, their campaign cannot survive on only donations by the non-wealthy general American public. There are these obstacles to overcome in consideration with the fundamental issues present in the voting system.

Third parties bring attention to significant issues and sentiments that the general American public may reflect; this awareness may pressure the major political parties to begin taking action and enacting changes. However, so long as the first-past-the-post voting system exists, along with the general difficulties of upholding a successful election campaign, third parties are not a considerable alternative to breaking past the status quo.

Conclusion

The United States political climate is a complex web of historical alliances that point Democrats and Republicans as seemingly divergent parties. A closer look suggests that they share a common goal: pursuing wealth. Despite surface-level differences in policy preferences, both parties have gravitated towards a pursuit of economic growth and profit, reflecting the persistence of wealth's influence.

In an analysis of the political compass, it is revealed that Biden and Trump challenge popular perceptions of them being polar opposites in their shared placement in the Authoritarian Right quadrant. Even in their domestic and foreign policies, their differences are not substantial, with both advocating for a shared interest in self-expanding money.

The issue of money's influence runs rampant in politics as corporate interests take reign over the public's interests. Under a united front of business, the notion of a duopoly gives way to a political monopoly, where both Democrats and Republicans favor profit; rather than being driven by morals and ethics, they are driven by their financial interests.

In a discussion of media, it is understood that, rather than serving as a critical watchdog, mainstream media has worked to amplify the bipartisan debates for the sake of profit-making entertainment value. Sensationalism has contributed to a public perception of the parties being fundamentally distinct and prevents the public from being truly informed about their government.

As the public yearns for alternative political parties, the reality is more nuanced: the current voting system, media dynamics, and corporate financial dependencies of election campaigns pose significant challenges to the viability of third parties. Thus, as the nation anticipates the 2024 election, it is likely that neither result poses a significant change in America's course of history.

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