

2024: A Vote Against the Status Quo, But Will It Matter?

Janos Zsofka

Department of Political Science, Diablo Valley College

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Professor John Kropf

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Abstract

The 2024 U.S. presidential election was a unique time in American political history; it offered the voters a choice between two former presidents who each symbolized completely different approaches to governance. For many Americans, including those who previously saw themselves as politically centrist, this election brought out a personal reckoning, not just about the candidates themselves, but about the system as a whole. We are going to explore in this paper the political and economic status quo in the United States, a country labeled as a capitalist democracy. We will argue that both Democrats and Republicans ultimately operate within a framework that preserves elite power and prevents reform, regardless of the theatrical differences between parties. With the Political Compass as a tool, in this essay, we will analyze the limitations of the two-party system, the exclusion of a third-party perspective, and the influence of corporate interests ingrained into our political system. Through personal experience and analyzing policy, this paper ultimately concludes that without structural changes to the system, including term limits, direct legislative input from citizens, ranked-choice voting, early civic education, and accountability for elected officials, there is no candidate, regardless of rhetoric or party, that can meaningfully disrupt the status quo.

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The Political and Economic Status Quo in the United States

The United States economy operates under a capitalist system, characterized by profit driven markets, private ownership and no government control over businesses. It incorporates some social programs like Social Security and Medicare; at its core the economic identity remains capitalist. Politically the United States is framed as a representative democracy, but in practice, many will argue that it is increasingly resembling an oligarchy, where the power is concentrated among a small elite of political, corporate, and media interests (Wolff 2019). This is the foundation of the American status quo, a capitalist economy run by a representative democracy, yet we see how both have evolved in ways that concentrate power, limit any kind of reform and leave many of its people disillusioned and voiceless.

The 2024 election brought us a unique scenario in American politics: a rematch between two former presidents, each claiming to represent a drastically different vision for this great nation's future. The political divide has become so extreme that voters are no longer just selecting a candidate; they are staking a claim on what it means to be American. For much of my life I identified as an Independent, I considered myself politically center but left leaning for the most part. I have always supported the Second Amendment and valued personal responsibility and individual freedoms. I believe women should have the right to choose and that all people, regardless of gender, race, or sexuality, should always be treated with respect and dignity. I had hoped our politics could reflect that balance.

Instead, I watched one side of the political spectrum, the left, move aggressively and abandon moderation. Ideas I supported, like diversity, equity, and inclusion, began to morph into something unrecognizable. These values, which were originally rooted in fairness and tolerance,

have now turned into strict ideological demands that often silence dissent and marginalize voices that do not conform. The way women's rights are treated is one of the most apparent. What began as support for equality developed into something where biological women are expected to surrender their spaces, language, and experiences to validate a much smaller minority groups identity. I also became more and more disturbed by a growing acceptance and celebration of abortion as empowerment, rather than a very deep personal and often painful decision. Supporting the right to choose should not mean pretending that the choice is always easy or that it is something to be casually done, a women should have the right to choose but ultimately a life is ending.

Being an Independent, when it came down to the two parties I leaned more with the Democratic Party, but during the Biden administration, I began to realize that the Democratic Party no longer represented the values I once agreed with them on. It was not the realization that one party was better than another, it was the realization that the entire system was failing. We are confined to a two-party system that limits diversity of thought and suppresses significant change (Sifry 2004). Ordinary Americans everyday face mounting challenges while career politicians, often in office for decades and come from families of politicians, not only build wealth and influence they are completely disconnected from the people (Grim 2023). Economically, both parties always promise relief, yet the middle class has been shrinking for decades, while the big corporations continue to grow. Wages remain stagnant, inflation rises, and the young Americans inherit a future of debt, discord, and disillusionment (Wolff 2019).

The difference between the two presidencies I have lived through, Trump's and Biden's, the contrast was striking. I casted my ballot for Trump in 2024, not because I had become a conservative, but because I could no longer support a political class that turned its back on the

working-class Americans and prioritized ideology over practicality. Despite all of Trump's shortcomings, he did not enter politics to gain power or wealth, he already had both. Unlike career politicians, his promises seemed to be motivated by the desire to change things, not just to win elections.

This paper will examine the true nature of the political and economic status quo in the United States. It will ask the real question, if anything will actually change regardless of who holds office and evaluate whether Trump's return to the White House represents a break from that status quo or is his merely a different face on the same failing system. With the Political Compass as a critical lens, I will explore how both major parties limit democratic representation, and how third-party ideas are routinely shut down, and how real change is going to require structural reform far beyond the Oval Office. To fully understand how limited our choices truly are, we need to look beyond party labels, and that is where the Political Compass comes in.

Red and Blue – The Political Compass and the Limits of Binary Politics

The American political landscape is often seen as straightforward: the left versus the right, Democrat versus Republican. However, this is a false dichotomy that conceals more than it reveals. In reality, the vast majority of political opinions fall across a much wider complex spectrum. The Political Compass, (n.d.) provides us with a multidimensional framework that measures both economic and social beliefs, which then offers a more honest and nuanced view of where voters stand. Traditionally, political models assume all Democrats are progressive and all Republicans are conservative, the Political Compass takes into consideration ideological diversity by assessing where someone falls on two axes: economic (left–right) and social (authoritarian–libertarian).

My own results from the Political Compass put me where I always said I was, slightly left of center economically (-3.75) and nearly dead-center on the social scale (-0.05). In other words, I believe in basic economic fairness and personal freedom. I believe that the government's role is to serve the people and not control them. I believe in both accountability and autonomy. These views are not radical, but they are also no longer reflected in either of the major parties. The Democratic Party's shift toward identity politics and expanded government oversight turned me away over time, while the Republican Party, while more in line with my views on freedom and economic independence, remains limited by its own internal divisions and unwillingness to evolve on key social issues.

I believe the Political Compass reveals what most Americans truly feel: that they do not truly belong to either major party. And yet the system forces us the voters into one of two camps, regardless of how poorly those parties reflect our actual values. This is the very definition of a democracy deficit, a situation where people technically have the right to vote, but have no real representation (Wolff, 2019). So, people like me, who fall in the nuanced middle, will continue to feel politically homeless as long as the system is built around a dichotomy.

Despite frequently occupying the vacant space in the center of the compass, third-party candidates and alternative political views are frequently left out of debates, ballots, and media coverage. As Heineman (2020) notes, the two major parties use legal and institutional tools like ballot access restrictions, debate rules, and winner-take-all voting to block third-party competition, even when those candidates represent real solutions that voters want. This is not just an oversight, it is a deliberate method executed to maintain power.

One example is the consistent public support for term limits and congressional accountability, policies which are promoted by many third-party candidates across the spectrum,

from the Libertarian Party to the Green Party. Yet these ideas are simply ignored and discarded in Washington because they threaten the longevity of career politicians. Even more striking is the public's growing dissatisfaction with the Electoral College, a system that has allowed presidents to be elected without winning the popular vote. A majority of Americans now support replacing the Electoral College with a national popular vote, giving us a true democracy (Corbett 2023).

This is not just about better policies, it is about restoring democracy itself. And it will not happen through the two-party system, which has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to reform from within. As Mazza (2022) argues in *Ditch the Constitution and Start Over*, the founding framework of this country, though revolutionary for its time, was designed to serve the interests of a small, elite class, and has evolved to preserve power for that same class in modern form. That includes lifetime judicial appointments, the Electoral College, and the lack of any mechanism for direct citizen involvement in legislation.

Let's imagine a country where citizens could vote on bills directly, at their local post office, DMV, or online through a secure government website. Imagine a Congress where representatives were required to vote in accordance with the will of the people they represent, and if they do not, face real consequences like early term limits or mandatory public explanations. These ideas are not radical, they are overdue.

But without reforms like these, even outsider presidents, like Trump, are bound by the rules and regulations of a deeply ingrained system that resists change at every level. During his first term he made several attempts to fulfill campaign promises, but many were stalled, blocked, or reversed by the very structure of the government he was elected to lead (Genovese 2001). The real problem is not just who gets elected, but it is that we keep electing people to a system that is fundamentally broken and designed to resist them.

The Political Compass gives us a better perspective which helps us understand our political reality. It shows us that the voters can be far more ideologically diverse than the parties suggest, and that meaningful change cannot come from within a binary system that only serves itself. To have real change to the outcome, we must change the framework. Until then, every election, regardless of who wins it, will preserve the status quo but in different packaging.

Traditional Interpretations – Democrat vs. Republican Platforms

American politics for several decades has been defined by the dominant narratives of the two major parties: the Democratic Party representing liberal, progressive ideas, and the Republican Party standing for conservative, individualist principles. Theoretically, these differences give voters a clear choice between two fundamentally different approaches to government. In reality however, these distinctions have begun to blur, and the result is a system where rhetoric may shift, but the core policies and outcomes remain the same.

The Democratic Party has a strong history of supporting the working-class citizens, civil rights, and the belief in government as a vehicle for social and economic uplift. But that focus has drifted away in recent years. Instead of prioritizing economic reform or restoring trust among the disillusioned middle-class voters, the party has embraced an increasingly ideological platform based around identity politics, government regulation, and symbolic virtue signaling. As some journalists point out that in some analysis of party realignment, the modern Democratic coalition is now largely rooted in urban, coastal, college educated elites, many of whom are disconnected from the true realities of rural and working-class Americans (Heineman 2020).

This ideological shift has alienated the traditional Democrats, especially those who have more moderate or libertarian leanings. The policies that once focused on labor rights and

economic mobility have been overtaken by the cultural battles and the bureaucratic overreach, from increasing government involvement in health, education, and business to increasingly rigid positions on gender and speech. Despite the party branding itself as inclusive, expressing different opinions within its ranks, particularly on issues like gender ideology, parental rights, or even free speech, is always met with silencing rather than fair debate.

On the other hand, the Republican Party continues to brand itself as the champion of limited government, individual liberty, and national security. But in reality, Republicans have expanded government surveillance powers, supported corporate bailouts, and repeatedly failed to cut government spending in any significant way. The party's alignment with big corporate interests, especially the ones in energy, defense, and finance sectors, contradicts its stated goal of smaller government. Meanwhile, actual policy suggestions are overshadowed by culture war hyperbole, leaving little room for thoughtful discussion.

In spite of the differences in presentation, both parties have close connections to the same political-industrial complex. Both take massive corporate donations, both resist term limits, and both rely on partisan loyalty to hold onto power, even if it is at the expense of progress (Grim 2023, Sifry 2004). As Miroff (2007) notes in *The Presidential Spectacle*, elections have increasingly become performative exercises in branding and emotional manipulation, rather than contests of ideas. While the Democrats promise hope and inclusion and the Republicans call for freedom and strength, the end result is always the same: limited accountability of entrenched politicians, and policies that continue to benefit the elite over the middle class average citizen (Wolff 2019).

We see this convergence in areas like foreign policy and Wall Street regulation, where bipartisan agreements will favor military expansion, free trade agreements that hurt domestic

workers, and financial deregulation that allows for massive wealth consolidation (Wolff 2019). If we look at immigration, an issue that greatly divides the people, is often mishandled by both parties. The Democrats fail to provide a realistic enforcement strategy, while the Republicans run on tough rhetoric but rarely implement a systemic reform when in power. As a result of that, millions of Americans, including the legal immigrants, watch as the border remains porous, the asylum system overwhelmed, and the rule of law weakened.

While the parties continue to differ in tone and emphasis, they share an inability, or unwillingness, to challenge the structural forces that drive inequality, stagnation, and corruption, (Parenti 1986). This illusion of opposition keeps voters invested in the system, truly believing that change is just only one election away. But as Genovese (2001) argues in *The Limits of Presidential Power*, no matter who holds the presidency, the institutional framework of government restricts real reform, especially when those in Congress are incentivized to protect the status quo.

For the voters like me, who once hovered in the ideological middle, hoping for thoughtful leadership and practical solutions, no longer have a path forward with these traditional party platforms. The Democratic Party lost me when it started prioritizing ideological conformity over individual freedom. The Republican Party earned my vote in 2024 not because it was perfect, but because it at least claimed to recognize that the system itself is broken. But even then, we must still recognize that no president, including Trump, can bring about lasting change without the support of a system that is prepared and willing to change with them.

Until we get the foundational structures of American politics reformed, this including campaign finance laws, corporate lobbying influence, and institutional inertia in Congress, the differences between the Democrats and the Republicans will remain mostly superficial. The

language may change, the headlines will change, but for the everyday average American citizen, the story remains the same.

Third Party Perspectives and Alternative Theories

If the Democratic and the Republican party no longer truly represent the will of the people, then it is only natural to look elsewhere. Third party candidates and independent thinkers from across the political spectrum, have offered serious critiques of the status quo and bold proposals for reform. But these voices slowly die out, not because they lack any merit, but because our political system is designed to exclude them.

In *Spoiling for a Fight: Third-Party Politics in America*, describes how independent and third-party candidates must overcome a multitude of institutional barriers, from restrictive ballot access laws to media blackouts and the structural limitations of first past the post voting (Sifry 2004). These challenges are a result of decades of the Democratic and the Republican parties' collaboration to protect their shared dominance; it is not accidental. Sifry (2004) describes this system as “a two-party cartel,” in which both sides pretend to be in opposition while cooperating to maintain the machinery that keeps alternative options off the table.

The Commission on Presidential Debates is a great example, supposedly a nonpartisan organization that is actually, you guessed it, controlled by the two major parties. It sets requirements for debate participation that are nearly impossible for a third-party candidate to meet. Candidates like Ralph Nader, Jill Stein, and Gary Johnson who all consistently polled in the high single digits or even low double digits nationally were still excluded from televised debates, which effectively cut them off from the mainstream media. Even though they may

address the frustrations of millions of Americans, without media exposure, ballot access, or big corporate funding, the third-party candidates are treated as irrelevant distractions (Sifry 2004).

But these candidates still often raise issues that the two-party system continues to ignore. Long before the ideas became popular, the Green Party had been advocating for universal healthcare, environmental protections, and campaign finance reform for decades. Meanwhile the Libertarians have advocated for civil liberties, smaller government, and an end to the corporate bailouts. These are solutions to real problems that neither the Democrats or the Republicans do not care to actually solve.

In fact, many of the third-party platforms directly reflect the frustrations that pushed away voters like me and to reconsider their place in the political system. The calls for term limits, and an end to lifetime judicial appointments, transparent lobbying practices, and public funding of campaigns do not come from mainstream candidates, but from the outliers. These changes are the kind of reform that would make the system more democratic, more accountable, and be more in touch with the people it is supposed to serve.

It is also worth noting that third party and alternative candidates do well in local and regional elections when voters are given a real chance to hear them. Looking at the success of independent senators like Bernie Sanders in Vermont or Angus King in Maine tells us that voters are open to nontraditional leadership when they are not forced into binary choices. Similarly to this, ranked choice voting systems, which are currently in states like Maine and Alaska, have started to open the door to a more diverse political representation, suggesting that electoral reform could facilitate a wider ideological participation.

But still, the system remains very resistant to any kind of real change, even as third-party perspectives gain traction. No matter how relevant or urgent their views may be, as long as the power is concentrated in the hands of the small political elites, that are propped up by the monopolized media, and big corporation donors, with the outdated electoral mechanisms, these voices will continue to echo in silence and denied any meaningful influence (Chomsky and Herman 1988).

Critical Interpretations and the Case for Structural Reform

The United States is characterized as a constitutional republic with a representative democracy. Theoretically, the system is supposed to empower individuals to choose representatives who act on their behalf while protecting their individual liberties through the written constitution. In a representative democracy, elected officials should ideally represent the will of the people, while striking a balance between the rights of minorities and majority rule and be held accountable through frequent elections and public engagement. But as we see, the United States often mirrors an oligarchy, where the elites interest controls the policy decisions and public input is limited to infrequent and mostly symbolic voting (Wolff 2019).

While it is easy to point fingers at individual politicians or the political parties, by doing so we are really just ignoring the deeper truth: that the American political system is designed to push against real change. Some may say the system is broken, but in reality, it is working exactly as those in power want it. As multiple scholars, journalists, and political theorists have argued, that the illusion of democracy truly masks a deeply ingrained structure that protects the elite's interests and shields them from any accountability (Parenti 1986). Real change will not come

from simply changing parties or electing different personalities, no it will only come when we dismantle and rebuild the systems that concentrate power and silence the people.

One of the biggest problems within American democracy is the limited direct input the citizens have in a day-to-day federal legislation. Even though most Americans have internet access, and secure digital technology is rapidly evolving, the existing system only allows voters to weigh in every few years through elections. Imagine a system where you could explore legislation openly online and allow citizens to register their position on secure platforms. Representatives would have to vote in accordance with the majority or publicly explain why they did not. And if they repeatedly ignored the will of the people, they would face mandatory early term limits. This would increase transparency and accountability.

Americans no longer ride horses to town halls to be heard, instead we go online. And even though digital tools have given us new challenges, they can also provide us with new opportunities for transparency and civic engagement. As Flory (2019) and many others have argued, our current system prioritizes gatekeeping rather than participation. The lifelong judicial appointments, secretive committee procedures, and big corporation lobbying ensure that policy is actually shaped behind closed doors, and not through an open deliberation with the people who ultimately end up living with the consequences.

As Mazza (2022) bluntly argues in *“Ditch the Constitution and Start Over,”* the founding framework of the United States is no longer appropriate for today's democracy. Designed to safeguard the interests of the elites, the Constitution enshrines institutions like the Electoral College and Senate in ways that distort representation and consolidate power. Judges get appointed for life and are not held to public accountability. The Electoral College regularly undermines the popular vote, allowing presidents to win office even if they lose the will of the

people. While the Constitution provides a good outline, it needs reframing to properly represent the people for a true democracy. And now nearly 80% of Americans, according to a 2024 Pew survey, believe the United States is no longer a good example of democracy for other countries, a staggering indictment of the status quo (Pew Research Center 2024).

We also cannot ignore the role of corporate media in reinforcing the status quo. Mainstream media has been consolidated and has reduced the diversity of viewpoints which creates an echo chamber where opposing views for real change are either excluded or discredited. As Chomsky and Herman (1988) has long argued, corporate mainstream media will manufacture consent by presenting narratives in ways that serve only the elite's interests rather than public inquiry. This trend is also seen in political coverage, where mainstream outlets focus on horse race coverage, sensationalism, and party drama instead of any real substantive policy analysis or even third-party inclusion. A 2023 Harvard Kennedy School study confirmed that over 80% of election coverage only focused on personality clashes rather than real governance issues, distorting voter understanding and engagement by feeding them junk food news (Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center 2023).

Another really serious issue is the lack of term limits. Yes, the presidency is restricted to two terms, but Congress, arguably the most powerful and definitely the least accountable branch, has no limit. Lawmakers frequently hold office for decades, building their influence, securing committee appointments, and gaining wealth through connections, investments, and closed-door deals. As Corbett (2023) notes, many members of Congress consistently outperform the stock market, raising serious questions about their insider information and conflicts of interest. Serving the public was never intended to be a lifelong career, it was meant to be a temporary duty to the people, a contribution to the people and community, a common good.

The principle of service before oneself is one I take very seriously as a veteran. I strongly believe in supporting our military and first responders while encouraging young Americans to consider public service in some shape or form as it is noble and honorable. But how come we only apply this standard to those who wear a uniform? We must rethink civic duty to include participation in government, local leadership, and digital democracy. That means we need to teach the next generation, starting at a young age, that politics is not about taking sides; it is about working together for solutions that serve the common good.

In fact, the United States could take inspiration from multiple different nations with a historical system of mandatory national service, where young adults were required to complete military service. While mandatory military service is not ideal for the military, the principle behind it remains compelling: cultivating a culture of shared sacrifice and dedication to the nation. If the United States had a system that made options between civic administration, education support, or environmental projects required for a couple of years, that could not only strengthen social unity but also instill a deeper sense of patriotism and civic responsibility. Service to the country should not be reserved for the 1% who join the military and first responders, civic responsibility should become something every citizen strives to do for at least two years. Not only would it give citizens some purpose, but it will also act as a rite of passage that reminds all Americans of their role in protecting and improving our democracy.

Another avenue of reform that is worth exploring is sortition, the random selection of citizens for legislative roles. If we revive this ancient democratic practice with modern civic frameworks, it may be possible to diversify representation and diminish the entrenched incentives of electoral politics. For instance, nations like Ireland and Belgium, citizen assemblies drawn by random, have been successfully piloted to discuss complex policy issues (The GovLab,

n.d.). Such methods could enhance representative governance in the United States by adding independent, nonpartisan voices to public deliberation.

We also need to heed President Eisenhower's warning to us in his farewell address, about the military industrial complex, structural reform must address the grip that it has on our nation (Eisenhower, 1961). Both parties for decades have expanded our military budget and global intervention with little to no resistance, prioritizing defense contractors and geopolitical strategies over public consensus. Limiting defense lobbying, increasing congressional oversight, and involving citizens in foreign policy debates could lessen this entanglement.

Finally, education must be a priority in ensuring that any reform is a generational reality, not just a passing dream. Instead of being an elective afterthought, civic literacy should be embedded into elementary and secondary curriculum as a core requirement. We must educate the young Americans about what the government is and how it truly works, and why their voices matter if we want them to value democracy, serve their country, and engage in reform. The foundation of democratic resilience lays on patriotism that is rooted in knowledge, not just blind allegiance.

Conclusion

The 2024 election was framed, like so many before it, as a turning point for America, a choice between two radically different futures. The Democrats warned that democracy itself was on the ballot while the Republicans promised that a second term for Trump would restore order and prosperity. But as this essay has argued, the real issue is not which man or woman occupies the White House, but whether the system either of them leads is capable of delivering the change Americans desperately want and need.

I voted for Trump in 2024, not because I had changed, but because I realized my country had. The values I believed were moderate and principled, freedom, fairness, accountability, and service, were no longer welcomed by the left. But more than that, I came to understand that the problem actually runs deeper than a party. Trump's outsider status appealed to me precisely because he was not a career politician. He represented a chance for change that could come from within, but even he, with all his bravado and promises, ran headfirst into the same wall that stops every reformer in Washington, a system that is designed to preserve itself.

Regardless of whether Trump remains in office or is replaced by another Democrat, the economic and political status quo is unlikely to change in any meaningful way. Congress will still lack term limits. Lobbyists will still write legislation. The Electoral College will still distort the will of voters. Appointed officials will still make decisions the public cannot override. And the third-party voices, those who might offer real solutions, will continue to be shut out of the conversation entirely.

There are things that could change after this election, for better or worse, but only if we, the people, demand it. That means recognizing that democracy is not a spectator sport. It means pushing for reforms that give the citizens direct input into legislation, hold elected officials accountable, and reimagine public service as a duty shared by all, not just those in uniform. It means telling the next generation that politics is not about sides, it is about solutions.

Until we do that, each new election will be packaged as a revolution but delivered as a rerun. The names and slogans may change, but the outcome remains the same. And America, despite all its potential, will remain a nation governed not by the will of the people, but by the will of the system.

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