

Democracy is Such a Pretty Word

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Abstract

The concept of American democracy is one widely recognized around the world. Ideas of entrepreneurship, liberty, equality, and peace make up the image of American society observed by Americans and other countries alike. However, this idealized version of the country is not a true reflection of the workings within American society and politics. The widely accepted propaganda promotes false impressions of the overall political economy in America while neglecting the effects of certain socioeconomic systems on our society. Capitalism is promoted as the best and only realistic option for economic organization, while the substantial harm from it remains ignored. Examining the structural framework of our government allows for insight into the true nature of our government and politics, which turns out to be quite different from what most people perceive.

Democracy is Such a Pretty Word

Since the beginning of its independence in 1776, America has declared itself a democracy. Founded on principles of popular sovereignty and freedom for all, America has adopted the notion that a truly free country should be ruled by the many, and that democracy is the key to liberation from all forms of oppression. Looking at the word “democracy”, it can easily be split and defined by two Latin roots: “demos” meaning “the people” and “kratos” meaning “ruled by”-- literally translating to “ruled by the people”. The purest form of democracy would be Anarchism, meaning completely equal power for each person and no government structure or social hierarchy separating people by the power they have to influence society. While most people realize that this is not the case in the United States, there is still a large misconception of what democracy is, and whether or not this applies to our country.

The four major proposed theories of American government are pluralism, hyperpluralism, elitism, and democracy theory. Pluralism theory describes American government as one that can be influenced when groups of people come together to make change. Under pluralism, interest groups, PACs, and lobbyists can promote their collective interests and help influence politics in their favor through “strength in numbers”. Pluralism theory supports the idea that forming groups is the best way to achieve change in the government and helps individuals obtain collective power they would not otherwise have on their own. Hyperpluralism follows the concept of forming groups to influence politics, but this more cynical view argues that with so many opposing groups fighting each other, politics become stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to move significantly one way or the other because of powerful groups on either side. Hyperpluralism theory emphasizes the struggle to make change to government and politics because of powerful yet contrasting groups continuously fighting without compromise to get

their way. Elitist theory proposes that the only people who truly have the power to influence politics are those with wealth, regardless of government status. Elitists believe that because of the leverage that money has in our capitalist society, it is impossible to ignore the substantial power that the top elites may have to manipulate politics to their advantage. Democracy theory, of course, suggests that all people have equal say and influence under the law. Democracy theorists believe that even though not everyone always gets their way, each person is adequately represented and has equal influence in politics. Voters exercise their power by voting for candidates who accurately represent the people's wishes, and the entire process is a neat and tidy routine.

While the American government contains many elements of all four theories, only one is a truly accurate representation of the political system. Pluralism theory is accurate in its concept of people creating and joining organizations to amplify their voices and gain influence, but it fails to address the fact that these organizations constantly have to compete with big business lobbyists who give limitless money to campaigns. Hyperpluralism can be seen in instances where opposing groups reach a stalemate in swaying politicians' opinions because of their equal strength and power, but most often, the main turning point in a policy or campaign is a result of more money being funneled into politics from one side versus the other. Democracy theory completely disregards the fact that the "winner-take-all" system of the electoral college means that the government is rarely an accurate representation of what the people want, and brushes past the fact that a candidate can win even if they lose the popular vote. The one common element in the examples of these theories applied to modern American government is that money is a substantial factor in the direction of politics, and power can be gained from it more than anything else. This can be seen in how billionaires like Donald Trump and Elon Musk can gain

substantial political power despite having little to no political background. Elitism can be recognized in the fact that even though policy changes can be made in either direction of the political spectrum, money and power is still consistently concentrated in the few at the very top, while those at the middle and bottom, who make up almost the entire population, struggle to make ends meet and their voices heard. Elitism does not solely focus on the direct influence of money in campaigns and political movements but in the systemic hierarchy of power as well. One-third of US presidents have attended Ivy League schools (which are characterized not only by their prestige but also by their almost unattainable tuition rates) while fewer than 40% of the population even has an *associate's* degree. Approximately 80 percent of both the Senate and the House of Representatives are male, and fewer than 20 percent of the members of Congress are people of color ("Who Governs?", n.d.). These statistics are not nearly representative of the actual population of the country, yet these are the people who hold the most power. Generational wealth, white and male privilege, and access to high-level education give government officials considerable power and ability not accessible to the general public. The systemic privilege keeps the upper class at the top and in power, even if they are not directly contributing or accepting funds. To have true democracy in this country, no group of people should hold more power over others solely because of their place in the socioeconomic hierarchy.

Approaching Politics Through the Lens of Economics

When considering the American Dream, one often pictures large sparkling cities filled with attractive people filing out of buildings, a smiling blonde mother carrying a blue-eyed baby, and young happy children playing ball in their grassy backyard. What we do not consider are the millions of people living below the poverty line every year, the sickening amount of money held by multi-trillion dollar companies, the slave labor, rape, and general exploitation of the people

who make our clothes, or the fact that the only “real” federal change we are allowed to partake in is the election of already billionaire-approved candidates to be the face of our country. When asked what political system is held in America, most people will answer with some form of democracy. As far as the textbooks say, this is true-- everyone over the age of 18 has one vote, everyone theoretically has the same opportunities, and we supposedly have a government of popular sovereignty. However, this institutional approach only addresses a theoretical and outdated version of American government. To truly understand the nature of the government we live under, we must not only look at the supposed framework of the three branches, but also at the economic, social-cultural, and practical interactions between the many structural components of our government.

The industrial idea that America is a democracy is emphasized by our voting system, which states that each person gets one vote and that each vote has equal influence. However, a proposed amendment to the constitution suggests a contrasting point, stating,

Federal, State, and local government shall regulate, limit, or prohibit contributions and expenditures, including a candidate's own contributions and expenditures, to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their economic status, have access to the political process, and that no person gains, as a result of that person's money, substantially more access or ability to influence in any way the election of any candidate for public office or any ballot measure (We The People Amendment, n.d.).

In and of itself, this amendment implies that some people do, in fact, have more ability to influence elections, especially those with financial power. People and companies with absurd wealth donate millions of dollars to elections in America. In return for that donation, candidates promise to vote and make policies in ways that the donors demand, which is often lowering taxes

and regulations placed on said companies and billionaires. The elites continue to grow their wealth as a result of these elections, and then funnel it back into politics when the next election comes around, creating an ongoing and endless cycle of wealth accumulation and influence in politics. Through this cycle, money is seen as the equivalent of free speech, meaning that companies and donors have the right to throw it at whomever they choose. The idea that money equals free speech is fundamentally wrong and allows donors and receivers to get away with blatant corruption and destruction of the so-called democracy. Money is and has always been more influential than “speech”, and America needs to recognize these “mega-donors” for what they really are-- oligarchs.

It is often assumed that through what is known as “trickle-down economics”, large companies will be able to offer more jobs and products, allowing money to slowly flow down and reach the lower and middle classes. However, history has shown time and time again that those with wealth do not want to share it, even with their hard-working employees. As stated in the book *Democracy for the Few*, referring to what we call the “Progressive Era”,

Millions worked 12- and 14-hour days, usually six or seven days a week, and 2 million children, according to government figures, were still forced to work in order to supplement the family income. As is the case today, much of the reform legislation went unenforced. (Parenti, 1996, p. 63 - 75).

Even after multiple states passed laws limiting child labor and hours of workdays, millions of people suffered at the hands of big corporations. Companies forced people to work in exhausting jobs for long hours with minimal pay rather than opening new jobs and beginning to redistribute money back into the lower and middle classes. Prices continued to be high through monopolies that could charge whatever they wanted, and millionaires continued to take money from

America's working class. The trickle-down method was never sustainable nor sufficient in redistributing wealth and power throughout the country. On the contrary, big companies continue to hoard wealth and mistreat their employees and consumers throughout time.

The idea that the elites are necessary for the survival of a structured society is one that has been falsely ingrained in our minds since the feudal era. However, instead of viewing the elite class as divine or "God-given", we now subconsciously view them as intellectually superior "job givers". One report states, "This sort of language [...] suggested that the ultra-rich were merely America's humble servants, without whom we would all be jobless and perish." (Winters, 2024). However, the idea that society's wealthiest are necessary and superior goes deeper than just the concept of job-givers. Society has viewed the elite class as intellectually superior even though many of the people in power are actually surprisingly uneducated. But why? Throughout history, access to education has been given first and foremost to those with the most wealth. Those people were most often white sons of wealthy estate owners. Because their parents could give more money to the schools, they were the first to get accepted into the most prestigious universities across the country-- further promoting their social and economic power and status. Society has always promoted the education of white males over that of women and people of color, leading them to have access to power, wealth, and education-given tools that others did not. They were able to easily rise to power and become a new generation of elites in the country and became a significant origin for why society believed that they deserved more than the rest. The idea that the wealthy are in power because they have earned their place unlike the rest of the country is one that is misleading and rooted in white supremacy and sexism.

In George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, the public's emotion is intentionally fueled towards scapegoats provided by the government such as rebels and foreigners. Orwell's portrayal

of the government allowing scapegoats to distract the country from the real problems within is disturbingly similar to how society is influenced today. As our country continues to divide, our media focuses our attention on easily blamable scapegoats like presidents, people of color, the rise of feminism, sexual orientation, gender expression, democrats and republicans, and foreign enemies. With individual culture wars popping up throughout the country and politics, attention is diverted from the class war-- the fight against the disproportionate wealth and power of elites and the real cause of most problems in America. Being so divided, it is almost impossible to make any real change because so few can see that the problems they are fighting against go deeper than the surface--into the rotting structure of American politics. The few who do decide to bring attention to it are immediately ridiculed, with words like “communism”, “socialism”, “anti-imperialism”, and “decolonization” immediately fear-mongered. “The public was treated to lurid stories of how the Russian Communists ("Bolsheviks") were about to invade the United States, and how they were murdering anyone in their own country who could read or write or who wore a white collar,” writes Parenti in the book *Democracy for the Few*, referring to how the media dealt with the rise of communist parties after WWI (Parenti, 1996, p. 63 - 75). The news, TV, and radio media, often influenced and funded by the government, are able to influence public opinion to instantly squash any ideas suggesting rebellion, or even just the fact that maybe the systems we have in place need to be reevaluated.

The problem with the political system in America is that it is trying to be democratic while still being capitalist. People are constantly fighting for their rights and for their voices to be heard, yet we continue to live in a system that further separates and divides the American people. From even before the making of our constitution, democracy was always the goal. Unfortunately, capitalism and profit continue to take priority. “What is considered national

policy is usually the policy of dominant groups strategically located within the political system” (Parenti, 1996, p. 63 - 75). Our government is no longer representative of the people, but instead of whoever can provide the biggest donations to officials. Elon Musk is a prime example of this with how his huge donation to Donald Trump led him to a spot in government, but he is definitely not the only one. Donors and huge companies have been influencing both political parties with the promise of money and votes for years because money and power have always been more enticing to government officials than true democracy.

Today, in republics such as ours, oligarchs exercise their wealth and power to influence candidates, elected officials, charitable institutions, and alas, Supreme Court justices--to achieve similar outcomes.... What unites them is a shared focus on wealth defense--which in the modern era means fighting against redistribution to the non-rich (Winters, 2024).

When politicians decide to allow their decisions to be influenced by the people with the most power, the voices of the people at the bottom are ignored.

The lobbying and bribery of our politicians influence more than just the American people; it influences the entire world we live in. ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) is a framework to approach the decisions made by governments in a sustainable and acceptable way. “Despite its flaws, ESG is still probably the best available way to help measure the ethical and social behaviors of a company” (Levintova, 2024). It examines many undeniable matters affected by capitalism, from climate change to workplace safety. It helps bring awareness and ethics into important effects of the current economic system, but many politicians and companies have grown concerned about what this may do to their profits.

Oaks pulled about \$100 million of state funds from BlackRock in protest, after blasting ESG metrics as ‘left-wing.’ Not long after, the South Carolina treasurer invited Ramaswamy to meet with his investment staff and soon announced the state’s final \$200 million divestment from BlackRock over its ‘leftist world view.’ (Levintova, 2024).

By calling ESG “left-wing”, elites who benefit from unchecked social, environmental, and economic actions are turning the framework into a political issue rather than a matter of ethics and capitalism. When large corporations are not adequately regulated, they are able to get away with mass pollution and cheap labor--especially in other countries. Companies throughout history have been cutting corners to maximize profits and never be held accountable even when they indirectly cause the death of millions of people. This is something all Americans should be afraid of, regardless of political party or beliefs. Unfortunately, so many politicians deny that things like this are taking place, refusing to listen to scientists or mathematical statistics. They throw around words like “leftist” and “socialist” to pit people against each other in the name of “politics”, fueling the growing division between parties in America and not allowing society to realize that, in reality, this has nothing to do with “right” or “left” political agendas and everything to do with the consequences of a lack of basic human decency on a national level.

The influence money has had over politics in America is concerning, and begs the honest question--can democracy and capitalism coexist? Or are the vital mechanisms of both too contradictory for them to work simultaneously? Democracy literally translates to “ruled by the people” but when combined with capitalism, the issue of exactly *what people* are ruling becomes extremely distorted. In its purest form, democracy would mean the abolition of all hierarchical power, including government. It would mean that each person got an equal say and that they had the right to say it, instead of going through a complicated system of “representative politics” and

“indirect democracy” just to get their voices heard. Clearly, this is not the case in America, and most people are able to recognize and accept that. However, even with our “representative democracy”, millions of people are not represented. In the 2024 election, Trump won the presidency with 77,284,118 votes. Around 244,793,112 people above 18 currently live in the US, meaning almost 70% of people *did not* vote for Trump. A massive amount of the American people are left unrepresented and unaccounted for, yet this is normalized in our country because out of the two main candidates he “won”. Not to mention the fact that Clinton won the popular vote in 2016 and still lost the election because the electoral votes chose Trump. It is so blatantly obvious that this country is not representative of even the *majority* of its people, yet politicians still have the audacity to say that we stand for democracy. In a true democracy, even a representative one, everyone’s vote would actually hold power in elections and there would be enough diversity in both the candidates and parties that everyone would feel represented and have a say in their own lives. To understand why these systems have been operating in this way for so many years without change, we must look at capitalism. Being a politician in the United States means having access to huge amounts of money and power. Much of this power *is* money, and much of it comes from the “mega-donors” who funnel wealth into campaigns and politics in order to influence politicians to vote in their favor. It is a classic example of elite fueling elite, where money is exchanged for votes and power, but done so in a (sometimes) legal way so no one has to be held accountable. “Lobbying” as they call it, is simply a way anyone can choose to influence politicians in their favor. Except it is not anyone. Money is power, and excessive donations hold an implied promise that those who cannot match those donations cannot supply-- “we’ll keep sending you money if you vote against raising our taxes and regulations, we will publicly and privately support you if you endorse our company.” Elite politicians and elite

business owners are the only ones with real political power in the eyes of our government. Neither wants to let go of that power, so they continue supporting each other through policies and structures that keep this cycle in place. It is almost impossible to make any changes in our system of capitalism without access to absurd wealth and funds.

It is undeniable that politics in America are directly and indirectly influenced by money, a result of capitalism. The system we live under is extremely flawed and much of it is because of the power that money holds in our elections and politics. As Sifry and Watzman say in their article about how money in politics influences everyone, from the “cage-free” eggs we eat in the morning, to the gas in our cars, to our underpaid jobs, we are all affected by capitalism (Sifry & Watzman, 2006). It contributes to the psychology we have as a society, from what is necessary to “fit in” to the “immigrants taking our jobs.” Our economic systems influence our world around us, including our politics and the very structures they stem from. To take an institutional approach to the American government is incredibly easy and neat, being able to approach our entire complex system by putting simple definitions and surface-level explanations onto complicated concepts. But it is also incredibly naive, oversimplified, and honestly, ignorant. It can be intimidating to realize that what you have been taught is shockingly watered down and inadequate, but it is important to realize that no one can ever truly know everything about our government and that is why we need to approach it with an intersectional and broad view. We need to not be satisfied with the information we are given, but to always look deeper. The structural approach encourages this, and by educating ourselves, we can embrace our country while recognizing its flaws and finally work towards making impactful changes to our future.

Two Parties Versus One Status Quo

The American government has historically been known as a two-party system with distinct policies and beliefs. It is widely believed throughout the country that each party is the opposite extreme of the other and that it is impossible for them to agree on any issue. Each is constantly demonized by the other, an occurrence only growing as we progress further into the 21st century. It is true that when a person is placed in power, their perceived views and beliefs are reflected in society and what is considered the “acceptable” attitude held on certain issues. With a strongly conservative president, we see a rise of traditionalism, conservatism, outwardly practiced dominant religion, and possibly even homophobia, racism, and sexism in mainstream media. With a more liberal president, the acceptability of these attitudes tends to fade, making room for more progressive conservatism. However, it is important to recognize that even with these societal fluctuations in attitude, many major political issues remain unchanged; and if they are changed, they can easily be changed back when the next president is elected.

The status quo in America is based on two systems: the economic system and the political system. The political system in America is an attempt at democracy, where people hold the power to vote, protest, assemble, and elect representatives. The economic system is capitalism: a policy that is said to allow anyone to change their lives through hard work and innovation. Together, these two systems create the political economic status quo of America and are glorified beyond reason to everyone living in it. We are told to go to war to “fight the commies” and “protect democracy,” yet are never told what exactly communism is or why it supposedly threatens democracy. We are told that capitalism is the best solution to uphold freedom and promote personal liberty, and that homelessness, inflation, corruption, and greed are simply an unavoidable part of life. Accepting these qualities is what makes capitalism part of the

status quo, and ignorance of other economic systems is what keeps it there. The status quo is held together by a debilitating fear of change, a “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t” mentality. But without looking at systems outside the status quo, we are unable to solve the problems that need to be addressed under our current system.

Many Americans remember the broad media coverage of the mass deportations during Trump’s first and second terms of presidency. Images and hashtags circulated the media calling out the inhumane treatment of immigrants and their children. What many do not realize, however, is that these same mass deportations occurred during the presidency of many “liberal” presidents too- including Obama and Biden. As seen in the Figure 1, the total number of deportations made by Obama was astronomically higher than those of presidents before him, despite his being a democrat and claiming to have progressive views.

Table 1.

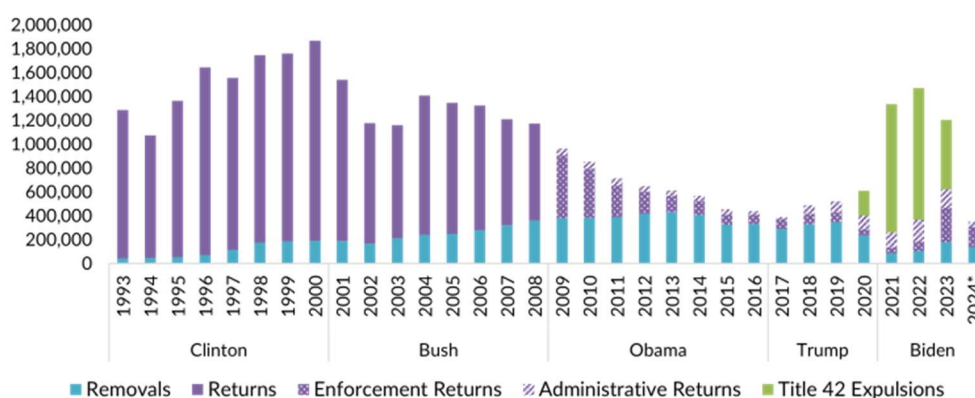
Immigration Enforcement Record, FY 1993-2016

Year	Total Apprehensions	U.S.-Mexico Border Apprehensions	Removals	Returns	Total Deportations
1993	1,327,261	1,212,886	42,542	1,243,410	1,285,952
1994	1,094,719	979,101	45,674	1,029,107	1,074,781
1995	1,394,554	1,271,390	50,924	1,313,764	1,364,688
1996	1,649,986	1,507,020	69,680	1,573,428	1,643,108
1997	1,536,520	1,368,707	114,432	1,440,684	1,555,116
1998	1,679,439	1,516,680	174,813	1,570,127	1,744,940
1999	1,714,035	1,537,000	183,114	1,574,863	1,757,977
2000	1,814,729	1,643,679	188,467	1,675,876	1,864,343
Totals for Clinton Administration	12,211,243	11,036,463	869,646	11,421,259	12,290,905
2001	1,387,486	1,235,718	189,026	1,349,371	1,538,397
2002	1,062,270	929,809	165,168	1,012,116	1,177,284
2003	1,046,422	905,065	211,098	945,294	1,156,392
2004	1,264,232	1,160,395	240,665	1,166,576	1,407,241
2005	1,291,065	1,189,031	246,431	1,096,920	1,343,351
2006	1,206,408	1,071,972	280,974	1,043,381	1,324,355
2007	960,673	858,638	319,382	891,390	1,210,772
2008	1,043,759	705,005	359,795	811,263	1,171,058
Totals for Bush Administration	9,262,315	8,055,633	2,012,539	8,316,311	10,328,850
2009	889,212	540,865	391,341	582,596	973,937
2010	796,587	447,731	381,738	474,195	855,933
2011	678,606	327,577	386,020	322,098	708,118
2012	671,327	356,873	416,324	230,360	646,684
2013	662,483	414,397	434,015	178,691	612,706
2014	679,996	479,371	407,075	163,245	570,320
2015	462,388	331,333	333,341	129,122	462,463
2016	530,250	408,870	344,354	106,600	450,954
Totals for Obama Administration	5,370,849	3,307,017	3,094,208	2,186,907	5,281,115

Compared to other presidents, Trump has actually deported fewer people during his time in office, as seen in Figure 2 comparing the deportations of unauthorized migrants in the country under different presidents. The indefinite family detention along the US/Mexico border has received little to no corporate media attention, unlike the “kids in cages” media coverage seen under Trump, whose policies Biden has continued. (McCarley, 2023)

Figure 2

Repatriations of Unauthorized Migrants in the United States, by Type and Presidential Administration, FY 1993-2024



Why is it that Democrats are constantly led to believe that their candidates will be more humane in their approach and methods of deportations, and Republicans are promised harsher Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) when the result is actually the opposite? The answer is performance. People in power constantly express (alleged) attitudes they know will entice their following into voting for them. Trump’s loud anti-immigrant rhetoric and Obama’s diversity claims are what brought people to their campaigns, believing that each would back up their words. However, these people are rarely held accountable for their claims and promises because if they promote their “policies” loudly enough, no one bothers to check if they are actually followed through.

People in America are beginning to wake up from their class-blind slumber and realize that the reason for their struggles is a result of the system of neoliberalism oligarchs have set up to control the country. Unfortunately, many people do not understand that an implied or direct promise of change is not enough to truly dismantle a system of oppression and separation, from and by the elites. Many disappointed Americans turned to Trump even if they did not agree with his actions in hopes that he would enact systemic change to liberate the working class. Instead, he cut taxes for the rich, decreased regulations on big businesses, and scapegoated minorities and his opponents as the primary reason for a lack of jobs and an increase in poverty.

The key to their electoral success was to cast MAGA as the movement of systemic change and the Democrats as the party of the status quo – a trap into which the supporters of Biden and Harris easily fell.... Exit interviews and other analyses reveal that those who voted for Trump or didn't vote at all were reacting to two major problem-sets, one socioeconomic, the other ethnocultural. The socioeconomic issues included high prices and stagnant wages, growing personal debt, lack of opportunities to get ahead, the impact of deindustrialization and automation, skyrocketing inequality, and feelings of being abandoned and disrespected by the "elites". The ethnocultural problems involved perceived threats to people's identities as Americans, males, whites, Christians, non-college educated workers, Arab Americans, country people, or members of other groups sensing a decline in their status and opportunities relative to those of more favored groups (Rubenstein, 2024).

Trump certainly did make changes to systems within our capitalist society, but they were not the changes the working class wanted. He gave money back to large corporations whose policies and tax cuts allowed them to continue increasing their profit at the expense of the working class. By

having a candidate who seemed more focused on the economy than social issues, many people assumed that he would prioritize economic stability, not realizing that social issues and economic issues are directly connected.

Each election has been increasingly high stakes in the 21st century as each candidate poses as a left or right-wing extremist promising social change and economic stability. In truth, almost every candidate of the two major political parties in the US has been in the same quadrant of the political spectrum: authoritarian capitalist, or the *status quo*. Americans' frustration increases as we continue to see an accumulation of wealth for the top 1% and a decrease of stability for the lower and middle classes. As we continue to face more and more unemployment, low wages, inflation, and homelessness, people become desperate to find a solution. Ignorance of history and political economic systems leads to hatred towards blameless minorities: immigrants, women, LGBT communities, and people of color, as they continue to fight for their civil rights. With attention focused on these minorities, the rest of the United States starts to feel neglected by society and blames these minorities for "stealing their jobs" and trying to "push their woke agenda" on Americans. Desperation and confused anger allow people to ignore the fact that these minorities have been around for centuries and have always contributed to economic *growth*, not *instability*.

What is vicious about this is not merely that elite power makes a farce of democracy, but also that it continually generates solution-less problems. Thus, we export weapons of destruction as if there were no possibility of converting military production into a program to produce goods and services to satisfy basic human needs. We fight over immigration as if there were no such thing as a planned economy capable of remedying our labor shortage without lowering wage rates and bankrupting social services. And we

choose sides in disputes between relatively oppressed and less oppressed identity groups as if there were no way to reduce competition between them for unnecessarily scarce resources and economic opportunities (Rubenstein, 2024).

Politicians allow attention to be focused on individual issues because they know it takes attention away from the silently growing class war. They act as if these major issues can be solved by a simple policy change, intentionally ignoring the fact that these policies rarely solve significant issues for a majority of people and can easily be overturned by the next candidate. Poverty, starvation, unemployment, inflation, inequality, and dissatisfaction with the government are portrayed as inevitable facts of life, unfortunate but unavoidable. In reality, many of these issues stem from an unrepresentative “democracy” and neoliberalism. “Yes, capitalism may have its flaws, but it is better than any other economic system. Just look at what happened in Russia, China, and Cuba! Capitalism created a middle class and promises that if you work hard enough, you will be rewarded in life.” While it is true that capitalism supported many throughout the 20th century, a significant percentage of people were left at the bottom. Capitalism was the epitome of the American dream, but at the expense of whom? “It is also a fact that systemic oppression to some extent benefits everyone who is not a member of the most oppressed group” (Rubenstein, 2024). Laborers, both domestic and foreign, who made the goods that Americans got to have as a result of capitalism. People of color and women, who were pushed to the side and struggled to find jobs to be able to sustain themselves in a world surrounded by abuse and oppression. The lower classes were born into a system of poverty and could not escape it even through the hard work that had promised them liberty.

Even ignoring the history and sacrifice that capitalism is built upon, it is clear that neoliberalism has become the latest mutation of this economic system, which is furthering the

divide between Americans both socially and economically. Capitalism was the system that created the middle class. The concept behind capitalism was to allow people to decide for themselves what they wanted to do with their money and their skills, and that those who “worked hard” contributing to society and the economy would get what they “deserved”. The problem with modern capitalism is that it has evolved into the structure of neoliberalism, a system where big businesses and corporations now have the power to raise prices and lower wages by considerably disproportionate amounts and funnel all profits directly to the top elites running the companies. Corporations have incentive to cut corners and disregard human life yet never have to face the consequences of their actions. Money becomes the top priority and can be used by companies as both a weapon and a bribe, even to a point where countries will go to war over resources used by big corporations. Unfortunately, candidates of both major political parties refuse to reject this neoliberal system. As stated by Rubenstein (2024),

With respect to socioeconomic issues, Harris was not progressive enough. She pointed to reforms adopted by the Biden Administration that were helpful to working people but not remotely adequate to solve the underlying problems causing mass insecurity and suffering. Harris would not even commit to increasing taxes on the super-rich – but, if she had, she would still have had a credibility deficit. This is because the measures advocated by progressives like Sanders – reforms such as taxing the rich and raising the minimum wage – do not have the power to correct major structural malfunctions related to deindustrialization, automation, or even the challenge of low-wage immigration. More radical change is needed.

Money is directly funneled into politics through campaign donations and lobbying, and the people receiving the benefits are often the people making important economic choices-- meaning

most will not want to let go of a system that benefits them most. The changes that need to be made to uplift the American people are structural ones, and ones that most current politicians are not willing to make. In order to break the systemic cycles of poverty, inflation, unemployment, racism, and sexism, we need to not only make individual policy changes but also look towards the values supported by our current economic system: greed, selfishness, and a sad disregard for others.

Since his inauguration in January of 2025, Trump has shocked the public with his drastic policy changes and blatant disregard for constitutional procedure.

In the first 100 days of his second term, President Trump has moved aggressively to fulfill his promise of retribution against an extraordinary range of individuals and organizations, targeting political opponents, news organizations, former government officials, universities, international student protesters and law firms....the administration is using a vast array of government powers to launch criminal investigations, sweep people into ICE detention, ban companies from receiving federal contracts, revoke security clearances and fire employees (Street, 2025).

His aggression towards marginalized groups and his mass reallocation of funding and resources display a right-wing ideology, reflected in those who support him. Everything that Biden had (superficially) worked towards during his term is under attack from Trump, who seeks to take away power from those he and his followers deem unfit. Empowered by his clear displays of neo-fascism, like-minded politicians follow in his lead, coming after organizations that help support and uplift the unrepresented in the country. "That Friday, his administration sent a series of sweeping demands to Harvard University, including an end to diversity programs, audits to ensure 'viewpoint diversity,' and bans on certain student groups" (Street, 2025). His actions

towards dismantling programs that support minorities and struggling communities show where his priorities lie: getting rid of diversity and backtracking social progress rather than helping the country's people get back on their feet. The most worrisome of his actions though, are not what he is doing with his power, but what he is doing beyond it.

Leaving aside the important fact that immigration courts conduct hearings, not trials, Trump here menacingly treated due process and habeas corpus, a basic democratic right encoded in the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution, as an inconvenient luxury. That is the perspective of a dangerous dictator (Street, 2025).

Ignoring the constitutional requirement for all people to have due process and equal protection under the law, Trump and his administration have targeted individuals who threaten their sense of power and removed them in the name of “deportation” of “illegals.” ICE is now being used as a Hawthorne Effect to keep people in constant fear of being detained and deported, not unlike the Gestapo present during Nazi Germany. Even students in American Universities have had their visas revoked, uprooting their entire lives and goals.

Trump's victory and actions this year are a result of prioritizing the status quo above all else. Harris lost the election because her only real campaign was to be the better alternative to Trump, trying to collect the Republican and moderately Democratic votes which wanted to avoid Trump at all costs. She failed to appeal to the growing population of leftists or even left-leaning Democrats because of her clear support for the genocide in Gaza, and her lack of a platform that provided realistic goals and solutions to the struggles Americans were facing.

Harris claims she is working for a ceasefire in Gaza while simultaneously promising to continue allocations of weapons and money for Israel. She repeated calls for a two-state

solution which Israel has repeatedly rejected and added threats against Iran for good measure (Street, 2025).

She has been seen as a passive candidate because her promises and actions seem to always take the “safe route” and are continuously contradicting each other. Her campaign lacks promise of real long-term change, and many voters have begun to realize that there is little that can be done for substantial progressive movement under the maintained status quo.

On the issues — Harris goes whichever way the wind blows. When you take stock of Harris’ entire political career, you see a common feature of many corporate politicians — standing up on the record on some progressive issue when there’s no risk of it becoming policy, then unceremoniously chucking it out when no longer politically expedient (Shibabaw, 2024).

The *fear* that Trump would win was essentially his ticket to victory in this election. With non-conservatives fighting over whether to “vote green” for more direct and immediate policy change or to play it safe and “vote blue no matter who”, many people with similar ideals became divided because of their fear of change: either from Trump or from a challenge to the status quo. “So long as progressivism as defined by Democratic neoliberals excludes the possibility of serious economic planning and collective action, the Dems will be incapable of offering credible solutions to the real problems of our market-driven system” (Rubenstein, 2024). Fear of change to our precious neoliberalist system drove voters away from third-party options, who may have actually introduced systemic solutions to many of the problems our country has been facing. Many people avoided voting altogether because of the overwhelming tension between parties. Voting for the “lesser evil” became a solution for many people in the country, instead of voting for someone who more accurately represented their views because of the fear that they could not

possibly win. The concept of “wasting your vote” is what keeps leftists and liberals divided and our elections full of awful or weak candidates. If voters want to see real change in the way our “democratic” system operates, they need to start accepting criticism of the political economic status quo.

By now, it is clear that Trump’s victory has led to numerous policy changes, including multiple major federal funding cuts, the dismantling of many organizations for marginalized groups, an enormous implementation of tariffs, and a significant increase in defense spending. Many people across the country have felt the effects of these changes and feel anger and shock towards the administration’s decisions. Others support Trump’s actions and applaud him for “challenging the system” and “making real change”. His victory was largely due to the exhaustion felt towards the unending cycle of economic hardship and leaders who make no change. The hope that he would finally create a solution towards the economic instability of the country is what led many people to vote for him even if they did not agree with all of his views. However, when looking at the history or his current and past terms, what has really changed? Not much. There is still an unemployment crisis, and inflation is at an all-time high. Money is still funneled upwards and in, to elite business owners and election campaigns. The real issue, though, is not the man in power but rather the system he is operating under.

The recessions are thus not instances of market failures nor instances when markets function imperfectly because of government interventions. Rather, recessions and downturns are how market capitalism “corrects” the imbalances it also causes. In other words, market capitalism has mechanisms of self-healing alongside the mechanisms that make it sick. Those who live in capitalist systems repeatedly suffer through both mechanisms so long as that system prevails (Wolff, 2019).

Without change to the neoliberalist capitalist system, the economy will keep fluctuating and correcting itself continuously, no matter who's in charge. The acceptance of unchecked capitalism means the acceptance of struggle and instability, whether it is under a party of red or blue.

Moving Forward

Recognizing the faults of a beloved country can be overwhelming and depressing when it seems like a feasible solution is always out of reach. Despite this, admitting and accepting the hypocrisy and shortcomings within our political economic systems is the first of many steps that can be taken towards becoming the country we wish to be. The perfect version of America may look different to each person, but the core of the true American dream comes down to this: liberty and justice for all. Liberty and justice for all means freedom from all forms of oppression, freedom to make change, and freedom from structural abuse of power. Understanding the history and systemic workings in our politics and society means wishing we could just press a magic button that would let us restart the entire process, but with the additional knowledge that we have now. Unfortunately, this is impossible, and no attempt to change time can erase the history of this nation. What *is* possible is educating oneself on the history of our politics and policies, and the different perspectives taken on them. It is possible to raise awareness of issues in our society, both externally and within oneself. It is possible to find strength outside of individuals and join groups and organizations of like-minded people. Finally, it is possible to accept and move forward instead of being held back by fear and hopelessness. Change to a society doesn't happen in a day, or even a decade, but rather with multiple individual yet important steps towards progress. These steps begin within each person, and are rooted in empathy, understanding, passion, and hope. America, like any concept, is imperfect. However, by slowly dismantling the

systems, policies, and attitudes that keep our people oppressed and struggling, we can begin to progress towards a version of this world with more liberty and justice truly *for all*.

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