

Competing Theories of American Government and the Structural Dominance of Capital

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the four competing theories of American government, pluralism, elite theory, hyperpluralism, and traditional democratic theory, which will be used to determine which of the four most accurately describes the necessary and usual operations of the United States government. While traditional government textbooks emphasize an institutional approach alongside pluralist interpretation, this analysis argues that such an approach obscures the deeper structural forces shaping political outcomes. Drawing on historical and contemporary evidence, such as the two-party system, corporate lobbying, elite networks, foreign policy and its continuity, and the 2024 presidential election as a whole, this paper advances the thesis that elite theory, operating within a capitalist political economy, is the most descriptively accurate framework for understanding Americans and their governance. By contrasting institutional analysis with structural political economy, this study demonstrates how elections function less as a mechanism of democratic transformations, and more as controlled contests that preserve the deep-seated nature of the status quo. The paper concludes by evaluating whether alternative political economic arrangements would, and better align governance with the public's interest, and what kind of government Americans would ultimately want rather than inherit.

Competing Theories of American Government and the Structural Dominance of Capital

The United States is commonly presented as a stable and representative democracy, governed through a constitutional framework designed to balance power, and protect its inhabitants' rights, and reflect the will of its people. While most introductory government textbooks reinforce this idea by emphasizing institutions, those being Congress, the presidency, the judiciary, and the formal procedures through which political decisions are made. Within this institutional framework, scholars and educators typically describe the American government using one of four competing theories, such as traditional democratic theory, pluralism, hyperpluralism, and Elite class theory. Each offers a distinct explanation for how power is distributed in politics, and whose interests lead to shaping public policy.

Traditional Democratic Theory states that government primarily reflects the preferences of the majority, with elections serving as the main idea for democratic accountability, and policy change. Pluralist theory argues that power is split among a spectrum of competing interest groups, none of which dominates the political system, and that government functions as a neutral middleman among them. Hyperpluralism, a more radical version of pluralism, suggests that the spread of interest groups overwhelms government capacity for change, often leading to inefficiency and deadlock. Elite Class theory, by contrast, contends that political power is concentrated in the hands of a relatively small, interconnected group of economic, political, and social elites who shape policy outcomes, regardless of electoral conditions or public opinion.

This paper argues that elite theory best describes the necessary and usual operations of the American government, as typical institutional and pluralist models fail to factor in the structural influence of capitalism, that being, concentrated in economic power and an ideological

convergence of the two-party system, together bar democratic change regardless of electoral outcomes.

A Capitalist System(ic) problem?

A house divided against itself cannot stand, yet the land that holds it remains unchanged. As much as the house may change, whether painted a new shade of red, blue, or some other color, the way the inhabitants interact with their neighbors, or the way the inside is arranged. The house will, in essence, always be nothing more than what it was designed to be. A house. Just as much as the US is a house, we are its inhabitants, and no matter the affiliation of anyone within, the U.S.' essential structure is not that of a democracy in which equality thrives, but a society where inequality breeds innovation, more widely known, simply, as a capitalist one. No matter the country of origin, age, sex, race, religion, or political affiliation, every human being on planet Earth, irrespective of where on the globe they may stand, is inadvertently affected by the global nature of capitalist society. All contemporary evidence suggests that the direction the US is, and has been heading, a detrimentally high level in wealth disparity and social standards.

The structural approach of the US government is the only appropriate way to view it, due to the inarguable facts that a small group of political figures, economic powerhouses, and socialites owning more than all others could ever dream of. All in all, the United States of America is not run by the political agents in office, or the words written in the constitution. Rather, the United States is built, owned, and run by the capitalist ideology in the background, rather than the faces we plaster to a politically "affiliated" candidate for the presidency who divide and conquer based on one or two points rather than fundamentally restructure it in a way beneficial to all.

The Capitalist System is Independent of Democracy

The theory that a capitalist society brews democracy, to any competent political or economic theorist, is the furthest from the truth that the current structure could ever suggest. While it is true many capitalist societies are embedded in “democracy”, the fact of the matter is that capitalism has proven to work in any politically crafted ideology. “From China, where astounding economic growth persists despite Communist Party rule, to Russia, where President Vladimir V. Putin has squelched opposition, to Venezuela, where dissent is silenced, developments around the world have been tearing jawbreaker-sized holes in what has been a remarkably powerful idea, not only in academic circles but also in both Republican and Democratic administrations — that capitalism and democracy are two sides of a coin.” (Bailey, 2007). The evidence that even in non-opposition countries such as China, capitalism thrives. With minimal analysis, China can be seen as no less than a dictatorship, and yet the Chinese economy grows at the same pace, if not faster than the US’.

In 2024, the US economy reached approximately US\$29.2 trillion, reflecting a 2.8 percent annual growth rate. This growth was primarily driven by strong consumer spending and investments in technology and services. In contrast, China’s economy expanded by 5.0 percent in 2024, bringing its gross domestic product (GDP) to approximately RMB 134.9 trillion (US\$18.9 trillion). This growth was fueled by robust manufacturing and high export demand. Despite challenges such as real estate instability and trade restrictions, China outpaced the US in growth rate; however, China’s domestic consumption remains lower than that of the US and faces significant challenges. (Xiao, 2025).

This disproves the notion that the United States and its democracy is, in reality, not tied to capitalism in any way more than name. As when analyzed, the authoritarian dictatorship that China lives under, had a national economic growth of almost double that of the US. While the US may hold a higher GDP yield, the growth factor in the US compared to China is proof that democratic ideals and capitalism do not go hand in hand.

Global Distrust and Social Inadequacy is a Result of Capitalism

Capitalism has the biggest impression on US foreign policy, and by proxy, the global political stage. If the US government was not embedded in the structure of capitalism, its involvement in global affairs, and cause thereof would be minimal at most. “Washington has employed three primary means to compensate for these deficiencies: repeated unilateral violations of liberal principles; arms exports; and a search for greater profits from oil (which presupposes systematic control over the producers—one of the real reasons for the wars in Central Asia and Iraq)” (Amin, 2014). This shows that the true internal component causing disarray in US foreign political ideology is not politicians' views on sovereign states and their actions, rather the overarching capitalist structure that the US finds itself within that guides its actions. In addition, On the 30th of June and 11th of December of 2009, the Iraqi Ministry of Oil awarded contracts for several of the nation’s oil fields to international corporations, establishing joint ventures between said foreign countries and the ministry itself. These contracts made evident that the companies would extract oil for a fixed fee of just about \$1.40/barrel, with payment being dependent on reaching production thresholds that the ministry sets. This “agreement” highlights the structural mechanisms through which global capitalism acts and operates. While the nation of Iraq was still sovereign in nature, the extraction of natural resources becomes a battlefield for international profiteering, reinforcing the argument that

capitalistic economic incentives, rather than democratic process or domestic well-being, ultimately shape international affairs (Oil firms awarded oil Contracts, BP group wins Iraq oil contract, 2009). Instead of the will of the people and direct representation, the nation finds itself acting as a mediator for the profit of privatized corporations, and their benefit. This directly contradicts the notion that the United States exists within a system that represents the opinions of the people, thus proving that the “institution” of government we live in is unequivocally affected by the all-encompassing global system that is capitalism, and its representation of the one percent. In close relation to oil industries intruding on the affairs of US intervention, it is evident that industries, such as arms exports possess just as much, if not an equal amount of influence over US foreign influence. “Another company that reported profits during the invasion was Lockheed Martin, which supplied fighter jets to the US. One year after the invasion, the company reported a 41% rise in profits, owing this to a strong demand for information technology services and warplanes.” (Iraq: 20 years..., 2023). This sudden surge in profit demonstrates that corporate gain is directly tied to military engagement, suggesting that U.S. intervention is not driven solely by political or humanitarian concerns, rather its significantly shaped by the monetary incentives of private companies. The government, rather than representing the interests of the public, ends up a mechanism through which multinational corporations can secure both contracts and influence thus reinforcing the structural dominance of capitalism instead of traditional democratic ideals.

Political Lobbying and Corporate Influence

In addition to profiting directly from military intervention and resource extraction, corporations have exerted significant influence over US policy by means of lobbying, further demonstrating that the nation operates under capitalist ideology and benefit rather than the

founding democratic ideals. LMT has spent millions on lobbying efforts not only to secure “defense” contracts, but to ensure that military spending is aligned with its profit objectives regardless of political affiliation (Open Secrets, 2024). Similarly, corporations involved in Iraqi and Afghan oil deals, including major international energy companies, leveraged lobbying and political connections to achieve agreements which favor their bottom line, such as joint venture contracts. “ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly traded oil company, has agreed to ramp up oil production from current levels of 270,000 barrels a day to 2.25 million barrels a day, within seven years, after which a license fee of \$1.90 a barrel will be paid by the Iraqi government. In the opening round in July, BP and CNPC won the rights to develop the Rumaya oilfield, also near Basra.” (Chulov, 2009). In extreme close relation, ExxonMobil had previous lobbying expenditures totaling just over \$100 million from 2004-2009 (OpenSecrets, 2025). This direct correlation in corporate lobbying and government led to the shaping of legislation, securing of contracts, which stipulated substantial investments and operating fees, with high potential for extreme returns, and influence of resource allocation. In turn, this effectively dictates US actions, highlighting that political outcomes reflect money’s economic strength, and the ultimate structural dominance of capitalism over democracy.

Government Equity Must Exist, Regardless of Money.

If the United States’ political infrastructure and institutions thereof primarily serve the interests of economic elites rather than the public, the question is not just what governmental landscape we do have now, rather what we need, or want as a people. A truly democratic government would require mechanisms to ensure the voices of all citizens are not just heard equally but dictate policy with the same equity as wealthy and influential economic leaders, allowing political institutions to serve for the public good, rather than private profit exclusively.

A government that truly represents the people must hold true to the notion that a reduction in corporate influence over political processes gives true voice to the common citizen. Lobbying and campaign finance allow international mega-corporations and economically tied elites to shape national legislation, military influence, and allocation of resources to suit their own interests primarily (Chulov, 2009; OpenSecrets, 2025). Reforms could include public financing of campaigns, allowing for the distribution of money across political platforms to be more even, allowing for the prevention of corporate buying of political interest in legislation and action, thus ensuring political decisions reflect public interest more equally than private profit. Measures in regard to transparency would allow voters to hold political figures and corporations accountable. In tandem, these measures chain the structural dominance of capitalism by its neck, allowing for a democratic system to better fulfill its intended purpose.

In addition to curbing economic influence, a government that aligns with democratic ideals would need political participation as well as representation even throughout. Systemic barriers such as gerrymandering, and winner-take-all electoral systems favor economic elites and deep-rooted political power structures disproportionately. Gerrymandering, being the manipulation of electoral district boundaries to favor specific political interests, undermines the principle of fair representation. “Gerrymandering, the practice of drawing districts to favor one political party or racial group, skews election results, makes races less competitive, hurts communities of color, and thwarts the will of the voters. It leads many Americans to feel their voices do not matter. We promote solutions to ensure fair redistricting and fight for an accurate and equitable census.” (Gerrymandering & fair representation, 2025), and the winner-takes-all electoral system balloons these issues by allowing candidates to win with, in reality, less than majority of votes, often leading to unrepresentable outcomes. The implementation of reforms

akin to proportional representation could address this by allocating a set number of seats based on the percentage of votes received, ensuring a more accurate reflection of voters' will.

(Proportional democracy explained, 2023). Implementing automatic voter registration and making the day of election a national holiday could, in theory, allow increased voter participation. The adoption of proportional representation or ordered choice votes would allow for a greater representation of societies diverse political views rather than the gerrymandered, winner-takes-all system of today (Roth 2022).

Wealth Inequality, & Foreign Policy's Alignment with the Public's Interest.

Democracy cannot function effectively in a society of extreme economic inequality, as the dominance of capital concentrates power and in turn limits meaningful opportunities for common citizens. “One of the things that clearly has happened in recent decades is globalization...And deregulation has been on the agenda for many countries in different regions of the world. One of the effects of that has been growing income inequality or persistent income inequality...Backsliding leaders play on inequality and deepen polarization by encouraging a sense of grievance among the public.” (Stokes, 2025; Steimer, 2025), suggesting that an ideal government would adopt measures to address imbalance. Potential reforms, such as taxation policies to redistribute wealth and fund essential public services, such as universal healthcare and education. This taxation ensures that wealthy individuals and multinational corporations contribute a fair share of their income to public service, giving the revenue needed to support and improve societal living (Finette, 2024).

Most publicly traded shares in the U.S. are owned by institutions rather than individuals, particularly by the “Big Three” asset managers—Vanguard, BlackRock, and State Street. Accordingly, these institutions have substantial influence in corporate governance

through proxy voting. Most large fund families have a centralized stewardship group that makes voting decisions for all funds in the family. Recently, however, these institutions have faced intense public scrutiny, political pressure, and shareholder disagreement regarding their voting decisions. A common theme has been a call for decentralization away from the stewardship group model. For example, the INDEX Act was recently re-introduced in the U.S. Senate and would require passively managed investment funds to “pass-through” voting rights to their beneficial owners. This post is based on our paper, *Decentralizing Voting Power* (available on SSRN), where we study whether decentralizing a fund’s stewardship structure materially changes voting. We do this by exploiting a novel setting where, for a subset of its funds, Vanguard shifted voting authority away from its centralized stewardship group to the funds’ external investment advisers. We find that decentralized voters are significantly more likely to oppose management on both management proposals and shareholder proposals.

(Monsen et al., 2025).

This supports the idea that economic concentration in the hands of a few limits the broad participation in corporate decisions much like the lack of access to social programs. Expanding social programs such as universal health care could redistribute power and resources, enabling citizens to exert influence merely due to the fact the financial freedom brought on by such reform would allow for heightened political participation, and thus, more influence over their own, and by extension, communities’ lives as well. On top of economic reform for the people, a true serving government must also conduct foreign policy based on diplomacy and its humanitarian goals rather than corporate profit. US military interventions and extraction of, in essence, annexed resources, more often than not, are dictated by the economic interests of

transcontinental corporations instead of public or democratic interest (Barbieri, 2017). Major reforms would include widespread reduction of military intervention being motivated by corporate gain, instead, prioritizing international cooperation on global issues, i.e. international humanitarian problems, and general public health. Policies that enforce ethical and transparent foreign activity, due to the massive global influence the US holds, would shift global engagement from profit-driven exploitation, ever closer to global homogeneity. The alignment of foreign policy with the interest of the general public would demonstrate structural commitment to democracy as an overall system.

Implications

Ultimately, all evidence presented throughout demonstrates the United States, while in name and wide belief is a democracy, operates under a structure that prioritizes capitalist ideals rather than the equal representation of all under its name. The widespread lies from political affiliation, to elections, to its very own constitutional safety rails, mask the absolute dominance of economic power in shaping not just domestic, but international policy. Capitalism, through the means of concentrating wealth and influence in the hands of a few corporate figures and large institutions, has created a system in which the founding principle of democracy, that each and every voice of a citizen matters, has been undermined. From the largely influential political lobbying efforts of global conglomerates to the advances on resources through the means of war, it is evident that the US government is more aligned with profit maximization over democratic consensus. Moreover, capitalism's global reach, as shown in US intervention within Iraq and Afghanistan, clearly shows that massive multinational corporations and war mongering investors profit immensely from conflict, shaping foreign policy in ways that serve economic objectives rather than domestic ideals. Adjacently, concentrated corporate ownership in the US, as shown

by Vanguard and Blackrock, reveal the tie between economic influence and political influence. The dynamics introduced by this overarching structure are more often viewed exclusively through an economic lens, leaving the common citizen with limited influence over their own governance. While addressing these systemic imbalances requires large scale change from many angles, it is more than doable to redistribute economic and political power. Expanding access to social programs provides financial security that allows citizens to engage in meaningful participation politically, in turn, shrinking the influence of wealth on political participation. Equally as influential, reform regarding the dissemination of corporate voting power, and increase in lobbying transparency are essential to restoring democratic accountability. Electoral change, including the proportional representation and national voting holidays, could further push the political system to reflect the will of the average, politically diverse, people of the US, rather than the seeded economic elite. Subsequently, true democracy necessitates the alignment of US foreign policy with public interests, not corporate profit. Shifting military and economic engagement toward international cooperation, ethically managed resources, and global benefit, would prove a structural commitment to democracy on a global scale. The prioritizing of the well-being of people over the accumulation of wealth for the few at the top would allow the United States to fulfill the true ideals that had lay for hundreds of years since its conception. All in all, capitalism, as it currently stands, is not merely a complementary part of democracy, it's a competing force that shapes the policy, governing bodies, and global influence in ways that privilege the economic elites. Meaningful reform requires the confrontation of structural reality and the implementation of policies that redistribute wealth, and ultimately power to align government action with collective interest. Only then can a house stand on its own and operate as a true democracy rather than a capitalist satellite hidden by democratic institutions, and without

these, the house remains divided, and the promise of democracy will continue to be overshadowed by the overarching influence of capitalism.

The Inadequacy of the Political Dispersion Prism

From its earliest foundations, the United States has presented democracy as its central national ideal. Regardless of background, Americans are commonly taught to regard democracy as a core national value. As individual people become more aware, many begin to align themselves with a “team,” particularly one that individual may think will preserve a democratic legacy as such. In politics, these teams manifest in the forms of political parties, embedded within a status quo, which claims to lead the nation forward via democratic participation. Politically, this status quo is characterized by the two-party system, operating within long-standing constitutional institutions, while economically, it reflects a market-based system shaped by corporate influence, global finance, and organized interest groups.

Despite the sharply polarized rhetoric and cultural conflict that define modern competition between Democrats and Republicans, the 2024 presidential election reflects a high degree of continuity in the United States’ political and economic status quo rather than a fundamental shift in national direction. This limited scope of change can be understood through elite theory, which suggests that political outcomes are largely shaped by a relatively small and interconnected group of political, economic, and institutional actors whose interests often bypass traditional party divisions. The influence of political lobbying organizations, bipartisan donor networks, and elite social and professional circles, ranging from rigid institutions such as global economic forums to more lax associations among political and financial elites contributes to the consensus of shared policy that persists across administrations. While connections do not imply

uniform intent, they illustrate how interlinked policy can act as constraint on the outcomes available to voters, reinforcing continuity even as the elect may change.

The Electorate of Elite Consensus

From its earliest foundations, the United States had presented democracy as its central national ideal. This principle of popular sovereignty implies a direct chain of accountability; voters express their desire at the ballots, and elected officials take it into their hands to translate that will into public policy. Elections, therefore, are theorized to be one of the most critical mechanisms for national redirection, the means by which “we the people” orient the state. The polarized condition of the 2024 presidential election with each side promising to transform America, is the latest, and most dramatized effect of this foundational belief. Yet now, a critical examination reveals that the machine which the system forms into is often broken. The process of translating the public's preference into policy is neither clean nor guaranteed, rather than suggesting that the electoral theatre often obscures a more powerful force acting upon the nation's direction.

The persistent gap between public opinion and the political outcomes the public receives finds its explanation within elite theory. American politics is significantly shaped by a relatively small, crossbred world of political, economic, and institutional actors. While elections determine which individuals hold office, they do not disrupt the underlying networks and shared interests of the ruling class, as “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence” (Gilens, 2014). Through this lens, the electoral contest between the two major parties is less a battle for the public good, and more so a discreetly managed competition within a narrow valley of acceptable change.

The evidence of this disconnect is wide, typically regarding major issues consistently favored by large majorities of Americans. For decades, public support for measures like stringent background checks on firearms purchases, Medicare negotiation for lowered drug cost, and the raising of the federal minimum wage has failed to overcome partisan deadlock on top of inside opposition. The system created due to such, was no accident, rather a feature of influence. The donor class, being a tiny wealthy segment of the population that funds both political parties, exercises overbearing veto power through campaign contributions and lobbying. “Indeed, under most circumstances, the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn’t adopt (without) the preferences of the poor or the middle class than of the affluent” (Gilens 2012, *Affluence and Influence*), the result is a landscape of policy that remains rather stable, given the supposed economic chaos the losing party claims the winning will enact.

Given the outcome of the 2024 election, the elite theory lens suggests that while rhetorical priorities and political elects may shift, major policies which are favored by and crucial to economic elites, such as financial regulation, sustained high military spending, and dodgeable corporate tax structure, are unlikely to undergo any fundamental transformation. The administration which emerges victorious will still be constrained just as viciously by the same donor networks that have guided those preceding it. The dynamic of such, being visually demonstrated by the Political Compass. While the tool places the Democratic and Republican nominees in distinct separation, they remain within the same “Authoritarian Right” sector of the ideological spectrum. Most notably, the policy preferences of the American public on many economic issues seem to fall to the left of the compass. This representation strongly depicts how the Overton Window of politically feasible debate in the two-party system excludes some of the

largest social opinions, systematically filtering out policies that might threaten elite consensus. Therefore, the myth of popular sovereignty continues to be sustained by a political canvas painted with so many different shades of color, though none fundamentally change its purple nature.

Architecture of Constraint

The intense, almost all-consuming conflict between America's Red and Blue is the dominant narrative modern politics follows. This very narrative frames each election as a generational battle between two individual, populous civilizations, the stakes of which leading to the most dire consequences if loss occurs, one where every vote is an addition to the defense of the virtuous sides ideology. This perpetual battle, consistently amplified by media and partisan ideology, creates a powerful illusion of a distinct and binary choice regarding the nation's future. Voters are moved by fear of what could come in the event of opposing victory, ensuring extreme engagement in the electorate. However, this theatre show of opposition obscures the more fundamental reality, one of issues that directly shape the political and economic status quo, and by proxy, the architecture of corporate power, the scope of the national security state, and priority of global finance. The two leading parties often operate within a narrow window of consensus, leaving the drama of contest as nothing more than to mask the limits of what could be changed.

This containment is no accident, rather a predictable outcome of the US electoral system. "The United States stands out among the world's democracies for having an unusually small number of competitive parties; and for such a large, diverse, and multiethnic society to have just two dominant parties means that those parties will be strikingly vast, complex, heterogeneous coalitions" (d'Amora, 2023). The U.S.' single-member districts, like those used in nearly all

elections, structurally and psychologically reinforce a two-party system. Duverger's law implies that in election systems with single member districts where the candidate with the most votes takes the whole district, leads to voters only seeing the two primary parties as worth voting for, and votes given to other parties as “wasted.” These third-party systems are systematically disadvantaged by this winner taking all formats, leading to the punishment of voters who use their vote on a candidate who cannot win. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which the two dominant parties all but control ballot access, participation within debates, and the majority of funding. As a result, the system is engineered, not to maximize electorate choice, but rather to stabilize competition between the two established and institutionalized teams. This very feature is what allows for the elite consensus, as described previously, to operate so smoothly within the US political climate, simplifying the landscape of influence.

Amidst the current political landscape, the history of recent political “uprisings” within and outside major parties provides clear evidence of such containment. “In essence, the Tea Party allowed for the rebranding of conservative Republicanism and gave activists an unsullied standard to mobilize behind.” (Williamson, 2011). Movements periodically arise that promise to break the consensus, leading with anti-bailout, and anti-establishment ideals, such as the Tea Party’s political disruption on the right or the social democratic political “revolt” led by Bernie Sanders on the left. Their initial success reveals the genuine appetite for such ideals within public conscience, and the will for a rupture in the status quo. Yet the systematic response is telling, leading to the consistent neutralization of said movements. Their energy is either channeled back into supporting the party's eventual mainstream nominee, vilified by party elites allied with said mainstream media, or starved of the institutional support needed to govern within the US political climate. The fate of genuine third party and independent candidates is definitive: they

are excluded from debates, denied federal funding, and their ideas dismissed rather than engaged with. This process ensures that the party platform, while differing on cultural and regulatory issues, overlaps on fundamental neoliberal ideals and foreign policy that define elite consensus.

Thus, the institutional design of the two-party system acts as a preemptive filter in political change. Given the outcome of the 2024 presidential election, this structural containment strongly suggests that regardless of political affiliation for the winning candidate, the scope of change will be limited to policies that are already compatible for the donor class and institutional interests. The overarching system is engineered in a way to produce victors, who are by necessity, only viable within its own bounds. These bounds exclude radical departure from the status quo, leading to a dynamic that is depicted by the political compass. When plotting two major party candidates, they may appear distant from each other on the standard left to right spectrum promoted by the very parties they are a part of. However, on the compass' grid, they consistently cluster within the authoritarian-right quadrant, reflecting their shared adherence to a capitalist, market dominated economy and interventionist foreign policy. In sharp contrast, third party candidates like the Green Party's Jill Stein, or the Libertarian Party's Chase Oliver are plotted far outside the status quo's cluster. Their exclusion from the political mainstream is not just electoral, but more so ideological. The distance on the compass reflects the exclusion from mainstream debates and legislative agenda, leading to the idea that the "choice" offered to Americans is a choice between two opponents within a preapproved political climate, not one between two fundamentally different systems.

Elite's Network and its Bound Administrations

Elite theory provides the framework for the previous, however, it is more so the interlocked networks of power that allow it to be operational. The "status quo" is not a passive

condition, rather it is an actively maintained ecosystem. Sustained by a tangible structure, a full complex of formal institutions, social circles, and career pathways that connect the highest orders of government, finance, and think tanks. This infrastructure ensures that the individuals who cycle in and out of appointed positions, regardless of leading party, end up within shared social norms, policy circles, and professional relationships.

As the case of the Bohemian Grove and its theatrical performances rather dramatically illustrates, there seems to be a great deal of truth to the earlier-cited suggestion by Crane Brinton that clubs may function within the upper class the way that the clan or brotherhood does in tribal societies. With their restrictive membership policies, initiatory rituals, private ceremonials, and great emphasis on tradition, clubs carry on the heritage of primitive secret societies. They create among their members an attitude of prideful exclusiveness that contributes greatly to an in-group feeling and a sense of fraternity within the upper class. In conclusion, this discussion of the Bohemian Club and its retreat as one small example of the intersection of the upper class and corporate community, it needs to be stressed that the Bohemian Grove is not a place of power. No conspiracies are hatched there, nor anywhere else. Instead, it is a place where powerful people relax, make new acquaintances, and enjoy themselves. It is primarily a place of social bonding. The main sociological function of the Bohemian Club and other clubs is stated by sociologist Thomas Powell, based on his own interview study of members in upper-class clubs: The clubs are a repository of the values held by the upper-level prestige groups in the community and are a means by which these values are transferred to the business environment. The clubs are places in which the beliefs, problems, and values of the industrial organization are discussed and related to the other elements in the larger community. Clubs, therefore, are not only effective vehicles of informal communication, but also valuable centers where views are presented, ideas

are modified, and new ideas emerge. Those in the interview sample were appreciative of this asset; in addition, they considered the club as a valuable place to combine social and business contacts. (Domhoff, 2006).

This power elite is not a conspiracy, but a network of similar individuals whose



overlapping interests and experiences create a de facto governing class. The 2024 presidential transition shows a changing of the guard, yes, but the underlying framework remains, ready to socialize and constrain the new admission

just as the previous. (Blumberg, 2025)

The most visible mechanism of continuity is the revolving door, or the constant flow of persons between regulatory agencies, elected officials, and the industries they are meant to be overseeing. This creates an immense conflict of interest and a powerful bias toward incrementalism. A defense contractor becoming the Secretary of Defense, banker on Wall Street becoming the Secretary of the Treasury, and corporate lobbyists taking the position of Chief of Staff (Open Secrets, 2025), for the agency they lobbied. Data from this revolving door database quantifies this, showing hundreds of such discrepancies in recent decades, with the effect being partitioned. First, it ensures that regulators share the worldview and priorities of the regulated. Second, it creates a powerful incentive for ambitious officials. Lucrative career offers in the

future from the private sector depend on maintaining a good relationship with such, leading to not “rocking the boat” while in public “service” positions. This pipeline guarantees that the people in charge of management are, in essence, changeable parts within the same great machine. While more often than not portrayed as nothing more than discussion groups, it can be argued that they shape much more.

Beyond individual career moves, elite consensus is created and reinforced in dedicated social spaces. Exclusive bipartisan forums like the World Economic Forum, the Bilderberg meetings, and domestic policy planning groups like the Council on Foreign Relations and Business Roundtable serve as neutral grounds where political, financial, and intellectual elites interact. “Collectively, the superclass wields economic, political, and social influence that far exceeds that of traditional power structures.” (Rothkopf, 2008). Here, away from public scrutiny and partisan posture, the shared support and set of assumptions about globalization, market solutions, and national security are reinforced. The physical corridor of K Street in Washington D.C., being home to the world's most powerful lobbying firms, operates as a permanent and bipartisan influence. “Furthermore, the superclass is bolstered by an array of advisory firms, think tanks, and consulting groups that provide expertise and strategic guidance. Institutions such as McKinsey & Company, Goldman Sachs, and the Brookings Institution play a crucial hand in crafting policies and advising both governments and corporations. These entities act as conduits for the flow of influence, ensuring that the superclass maintains its grip on power. For instance, McKinsey's consultancy for various governments around the world on economic reform and public policy exemplifies how such firms can drive the superclass's agenda on a global scale.”(Rothkopf, 2008). Lobbyists, many of which are former officials, draft legislation and lead

it through Congress, then advocating their corporate interests to both sides of the given spectrum, ensure that business priorities are embedded in law regardless of electoral outcome.

The incoming administration will not have found a blank slate, rather a predetermined labyrinth of relationships and expectations. Its appointees will be taken from pools of vetted suitors, chosen by those networks, e.g. cabinet workers being screened by Wall Street banks or think tanks like the Brookings Institution, stated themselves (Kourlis, 2011). This policy is shaped by legislative language drafted along K Street, and consensus positions created in forums like the Council of Foreign Relations. This reality often misleadingly characterized as the “deep state,” is less a secret cabal, than a mere bureaucracy as a result of continuity, more widely recognized as a permanent professional ruling class, embedded in both state and private institutions, prioritizing systemic stability, a predictable market, and incremental adjustment over revolutionary change. Consequently, as a new president may issue emboldening executive orders just as much as he shows passion in speech, the new administration's ability to fundamentally alter the political and economic status quo is starched by the very advisor it relies on, and from the networks in which they emerge. All coalescing to reinforce not the notion that the lobbyists and elites bend to policy, but more than the policies will come to bend to the circuitry of the system they are embedded within.

The Spectacle of Division

The American political landscape is dominated by a series of seemingly irreconcilable conflicts: access to abortion, rights to firearms, immigration policy, and integration of transgender rights. These widely regarded “culture wars” are not trivial in nature; they speak to the questions of individual identity and morality, generating naturally justifiable passion. This passion, often amplified into consistent, voluminous spectacles of politics by partisan media,

frame every election as a last stand for a way of life. “While previously polarization was primarily seen only in issue-based terms, a new type of division has emerged in the mass public in recent years: Ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party. Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party's members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines” (Iyengar, 2018). This observation explains why cultural conflicts have become such dominant features of the American political landscape. As partisan identity operates increasingly more so as a social identity, political disagreements over issues like abortion, firearms, and other topics become less of an experience in debate, and more as moral confrontations between opposing groups. The result of this is a political environment characterized by what is known as “affective polarization,” that being a visceral dislike of the opposing party's voters, which now outweighs simple policy disagreement as the main drive of political behavior. This figurative battle for the nation's soul consumes the energy of public debate. However, this focus raises a critical question: does the devouring nature of cultural conflict systematically divert attention away from the less scrutinized arena where economic and political power is consolidated and preserved within the hands of the few?

Evidence suggests that the current cultural polarization functions as a powerful mechanism used for diversion. Quantifiable media analysis consistently shows that coverage of elections prioritizes partisan drama and cultural issues, rather than debate with substance such as complex economic issues like financial regulation and antitrust enforcement, or plain monetary policy (Berry, 2013). Similarly, campaign advertising analytics show that the most potent and frequently spread attacks focus on cultural vulnerabilities, not on the dissection of an opponent's ties to corporate donors or support claims. This is not necessarily a coordinated conspiracy by a

group, rather it is a feature of the political economy where the media profits from outrage, and parties find it easier to mobilize their voters through partisan identity rather than through intricate political platforms. The resulting mess is a lack of actual legislative and true political scrutiny. While every media report and Twitter (now, X) post is dissected 24 hours after its release, the bipartisan votes to increase the Pentagon's budget beyond its own request or the extension of corporate tax loopholes often pass with little to no mainstream media coverage or public outcry, as more often than not, media gaze elsewhere.

Separate from the culture war, a quiet consensus on economic fundamentals persists. Democrats and Republicans may stage fierce battles over rate of taxation or scope of a specific regulations, but fundamentally they agree on the foundational architecture: a market-dominated economy, the sanctity of corporate personhood and shareholder primacy, the necessity of open global capital flows, and a financialized model of growth (Gilens, 2014). This consensus is maintained by the shared donor class identified in previous sections, which invests in both parties to keep these bedrock principles "off the table." The cultural theater, therefore, serves a vital system-maintenance function. It provides the illusion of a fundamental choice, a battle for America's soul, all while ensuring that the economic prevalence of the status quo remains undisturbed. Voters are presented with a choice between two cultural identities, each linked with the same underlying economic model.

The main underlying question regarding the latter; is the diversion a deliberate act, or a structural byproduct? The reality of the matter is that it can be identified as both. Political theorists have understood the utilization of "wedge issues," more commonly known as the method used to divide and conquer based solely on political opinion, in turn leading to the best political turnout (Frank, 2004). In tandem, the complexity of economic policy affects the media's

economic incentive to churn out structurally biased material, leading to cultural impact. For the 2024 election, this dynamic became a pivot point. It ensures that regardless of the winner, the most volatile and publicly debated battles will remain the center of cultural attention, i.e. appointments to federal judiciary, executive orders in regard to social issues, and the definition of national identity. These are the areas in which a president can exert direct and significant authority, leading to symbolic wins for their base. Meanwhile the more consequential yet less sensational economic governing bodies, shaped by elite networks outlined in previous discussion, lead forward the continuity already established, insulated from the electoral competition it powers.

Managed Change

The 2024 election concluded with its declaration of a political winner, just as the elections that came before. Partisan media frames this either as a national salvage, or a historic catastrophe, however in application of a critical lens henceforth used in thanks to previous analysis, the question becomes not a simple “who won,” but more a question asking “what can truly change within the existing architecture?” The preceding has established that any administration coming forth operates within a web of constraining ideals. A great mechanism for filtering figures into the two-party system, the pull of elite networks, and the diversion of cultural politics, all require a realistic assessment of the post-2024 landscape, and proper distinction between areas of conflict subject to future change. Where and when party platforms differentiate themselves, and how presidential power can be exerted within areas of continuity.

Significant differences between the major party platforms do exist, and in these areas the election outcome does matter. The prominence in things such as Cultural and Regulatory Policy, leading the way through executive political authority, as well as judicial appointments, shape the

enforcement of environmental regulations, labor laws, and widespread antitrust actions. The direction of agency rulemaking at the EPA, ELRB, or FTC will see clear shifts depending on the party in power (Heritage Foundation, 2023). Another area would be Fiscal Policy. While the base structure of the tax code is resilient, the marginal rates for corporations and high earners, as well as funding levels for social programs are legitimate points of partisan conflict. Power structures such as the composition of the federal judiciary, cabinet opinion, and the posture of diplomacy on issues such as climate change or LGBTQ rights will inevitably reflect the winner's cultural base. As much as the analysis in previous sections may implore you to believe, these changes are not insignificant. They affect people, markets, and the tone of the nation. However, they largely represent adjustments within the established system, rather than a substantial transformation of it.

In stark contrast, several cornerstone policies exist within their domain that show deep bipartisan consensus that the 2024 election will not be disrupted, regardless of the victorious campaigns discussions. Imperative foreign policy such as the US commitment to NATO is a core principle of collective defense, a hard-fast strategic ideal used as a method of containment towards major economic opposition to the US such as China, and sustained high defense spending, both enjoy broad support within the foreign policy blob (Ashford, 2020). Related, is the architecture of the U.S.' Homeland Security. Foundationally, the post 9/11 surveillance state, governed by laws like the PATRIOT Act and overseen by an overarching intelligence network (United States: D.O.J, 2001), faces next to no serious debate for dismantlement from either party, just the same as the corporate subsidies and finance that back it. The fundamental structure of subsidies for agriculture, fossil fuels, and pharmaceuticals, alongside the government's role as a fallback for the financial systems of which they are held up (known as "too big to fail"), remains

unbothered (OpenSecrets, 2024). All of which are consistently defended by powerful and bipartisan lobbying coalitions. (Sebastian, 2024).

This analysis is solidified by applying the Political Compass, not just as a means to identify candidates, but to the likelihood of policy outcome. While the candidates themselves may be plotted apart, the cluster of politically viable policies sits in a tight threshold. For instance, the policy of Medicare for All, as far left on the economic axis, or the dissolution of the Fed, on the far right of the same axis, are plotted well outside the bounds of the viable cluster area. In effect, they are “off the compass” of serious debate within Washington, proving their lack of viability within the duopoly. The policies that will pass, i.e.: a revised tax rate, sanctions package, and modulated subsidies, all land well within the acceptable and established elite consensus.

The Overall Effect

Ultimately, the 2024 US presidential election, while characterized by its apocalyptic rhetoric and cultural polarization, presented itself as a decisive battle for the direction of the United States. The opposing campaigns, both amplified by a media ecosystem that finds profit in conflict, framed the contest as a binary and existential choice between two unrepairable versions of America’s future. However, as this analysis has demonstrated and confirmed, this theatrical show of choice is of profound misdirection. When examined through the critical lenses of elite theory and structural constraints, as well as the derivative nature of culture wars, it becomes self-evident that the election outcome signifies not a national rapture, but the reaffirmation of the nation's deep-seated political and economic status quo. The fundamental architecture of the power, in part due to a nationwide duopoly, market-oriented economy dominated by corporate and financial interests, and a robust national security state, all remain the definite features of

governance in America, consistently resistant to the “transformative” shocks created by the two-party electoral system.

The election theater of opposition obscures the deep continuities that flow amongst it. The elite networks we find among socialites, financial, and political elites all within the revolving doors of Washington and Wall Street, to the exclusive forums from Davos to K Street, ensures a strong, long-lasting consensus on core national policy. This consensus, which embraces high defense spending, strategic postures towards China, post 9/11 surveillance apparatus, and financialized economic models, transcend the partisan affiliation and operates as a powerful and self-employed constraint on any modern administration. Simultaneously, the two-party system, consistently reinforced by Duverger’s Law and the systematic splitting of third-party alternatives, functions as an insurance agent, ensuring that political candidates and policies that are viable within this stringently narrow window of elite consensus achieve political success. The intense and effective polarization over cultural issues, while deeply impactful on the lives of citizens, serves to distract from public scrutiny due to this underlying consensus, pushing democratic energy into symbolic fights rather than the economic foundations that remain undisturbed.

Therefore, in direct answer to the project's central question: given the outcome of the 2024 election, can Americans expect fundamental change or business as usual? The answer remains clear, and that is that the election will result in a "business as usual" rhetoric throughout the elite class, bothered every now and then by significant, yet not fundamental shifts at the margins of US regulatory policy and cultural disagreement. Areas of continuous conflict, such as environmental enforcement standards, the tone of diplomatic engagement, and appointments to the federal judiciary, will see measurable change reflecting the winning candidate’s base.

However, it is important to note that these shifts represent adjustments within the established ecosystem, not a large-scale transformation. The “iron triangle” (i.e. lobbyists, congress, and bureaucratic agencies) of institutional sustainability, a donor-class influence, and a constant structural containment will push the winning administration, whether new or previous, to accommodate its changes to the already existing structure it will find itself within.

The promise of democratic sovereignty, in those elections enable the people to steer the nation state, is revealed to be nothing more than, in large part, a myth. The 2024 election, for all its sound and fury, has functioned not to redraw new borders in the US map of power, but rather to reaffirm its existing ones. The stage of political combat with its distinct red and blue teams, is kept intact by the very idea of said contest. Ultimately, the American electorate is presented not with a choice between fundamentally different political and/or economic structures, but with a managed selection of figures for a status quo whose core remains, for the foreseeable future, untouchable.

Conclusion

The analysis that has been presented throughout this paper demonstrates that the American governmental system, while formally structured as a representative democracy, operates in practice according to a far more constrained, elite-focused model. When examined through the four theories of government, those being traditional democratic theory, pluralism, hyperpluralism, and elite class theory, it becomes increasingly evident that elite class theory is the most accurate description of the typical operations of the United States government. The institutional frameworks are often emphasized in most government textbooks, while valuable for the understanding of its mechanics, only end up obscuring the structural realities that shape our political outcomes. Elections, party competition, and structural checks do exist, but only within

the boundaries established by a concentrated power, seeded in elite networks and capitalist political economy, consistently favoring stability over real transformation.

An institutional approach in mainstream political education reinforces the illusion of democratic responsiveness and the sidelining of capitalism. Treating the economy as a neutral or external background rather than the true system of power, pluralist and traditional democratic theory fail to explain persistent patterns of political continuities despite consistent shifts in public opinion and electoral results. As demonstrated through corporate lobbying, campaign finance, defense contracting, and resource extraction, political decision making is consistently shaped by economic leverage. This reality disproves the pluralist and traditional democratic theory, where public preference often fails to translate into policy unless in line with elite consensus.

The structural containment of our political choice is further reinforcement of our two-party system. Despite intense cultural polarization and partisan conflict, both parties remain anchored to shared ideological constants such as market capitalism, corporate power, interventionist policy, and a national security state. The political compass illustrates this overlap clearly, showing that while political figures may act opposed along cultural lines, they cluster closely on their fundamental ideals. This overlap is not accidental, rather it is maintained through institutional design, lobbyist influence, and elite socialization. Elections therefore function less as a real mechanism for democratic society, and more as managed change. As the 2024 presidential election shows shifts in regulatory ideals, or cultural position may occur, but the underlying framework of power remains unharmed. Elite networks, often sustained through revolving door careers, lobbying, and exclusive forums, ensure continuity throughout administrations regardless of affiliation. Cultural “wedge issues”, while consequential to the average person, both serve to deflect attention from the economic foundations we lie upon, and

channel democratic energy into symbolic conflict while bipartisan consensus on core structural issues proceeds unchallenged.

In tandem, these findings lead to the assumption that the United States does not operate as a traditionally democratic nation in practice, nor does it reflect a genuine pluralist distribution of power. Instead, it functions as a capitalist political system in which democratic institutions exist and are subjected to elite economic interests. The question then becomes, from what form of government the United States claims to have, to what kind of government its people should want. A democracy capable of fulfilling its founding promise would require more than regulated elections, and continuity. It would make necessary a true redistribution of economic and political power, the reduction of corporate influence over policy, and structural reform. Expanding social programs, democratizing political participation, reforming campaign finance methods, and aligning foreign policy with ethical and cooperative principles are not mere policy preferences, they are necessities for democratic nature.

Without confronting the dominance of capitalism as a leading force, democratic reform remains superficial. As long as economic power is the dictator of political feasibility, elections will continue to offer variation without transformation, and our democratic ideologies will remain controlled by the structures they are surrounded by. Capitalism, ultimately, does not operate within the American system, rather a competing one. Only by recognizing and addressing this structural issue, can the US move toward a form of government that prioritizes national well-being over the concentration of wealth. Until then, the promise of democracy will remain present in name, but always limited within practice.

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