

**American Elites: The Death of Democracy**

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## **Abstract**

Two of the most important questions that can be asked regarding the United States government are these: what kind of government do we have, and what kind of government do we want? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the four theories of American government, which are democracy, pluralism, hyperpluralism, and elite class theory. The analysis of these questions is conducted by first examining the best approach to understanding the function of our government, and whether that is institutional or structural. By understanding that the structural approach, which considers economic influence, is more comprehensive, it is next important to understand where the government stands, or the status quo. Determining how necessary, or even possible, change to that status quo is, we can come to understand that the United States government is currently best described by the elite class theory, and the focus for the future should be moving toward a true representative democracy.

## American Elites: The Death of Democracy

In general discourse, the United States' government is referred to as a democracy. That is what is taught to students in the classroom, and it is based on the idea that all American citizens have equal representation in the government. Hypothetically, this should be true. The American people are the ones responsible for electing their leaders, and we are ruled by three branches of government who prevent one another from becoming too powerful through checks and balances. In recent years, it has become increasingly obvious that we must find a new way to analyze the government, because the word "democracy" no longer seems to fit.

To remedy this, there are three alternate theories of American government beyond the original theory of democracy. The first is pluralism. This theory proposes that individuals cannot influence the government on their own; rather, they must be a part of a larger group to create that influence. Like democracy, the American people are still able to essentially control the country by aligning with groups that match their interests and using their combined voices to generate change. Under this theory, the primary influencers in the government beyond public officials themselves are interest groups made up of the public. Building off of the pluralist theory is hyperpluralism; in other words, pluralism to an extreme. Under this theory, there are too many interest groups influencing the government, and it is hindering the government's ability to function. Hyperpluralists believe that pluralism as a system grew too rapidly, and people have created so many interest groups that the opposing opinions from each group cancel out and prevent each other from swaying the government in any direction and creating any actual change.

Finally, there is the elite class theory. Elite class theorists understand the United States government as one that is still ruled by the people, except "the people" is referring solely to the

top 1%, or the elites. The members of this small subgroup of the American population are the only ones who can influence the government to act in their interests, and the other 99% are subject to their wishes and interests. Pluralism closely resembles a true democracy, and hyperpluralism stems off of a still democratic base. Elite class theory, however, only resembles a democracy in that some of the population do still have a say in the government; it is more easily compared to an oligarchy. Unfortunately, this is the theory of government that applies most closely to the United States government.

The United States' status as an elite class government is primarily driven by the overarching hold of capitalism on the country's economy and how that system bleeds into politics, which can be examined under the lens of analyzing the government using a structural approach rather than an institutional one. It is also important to consider the political norms that exist in the status quo of United States politics, and whether it is necessary or even possible to create change in that status quo. Under these considerations, the American people must ask themselves the question of what government is best for this country and how that can be attained.

### **Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Power**

The United States government is made up of three branches: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. These are the institutions that most Americans, and all high school textbooks, consider when trying to understand the government. However, it is impossible to truly understand the way our country is run if only politics are considered. Our politics and economy are inextricably linked, and to ignore one when examining the other would fail to paint a sufficient picture. These institutions - the Supreme Court, Congress, the President - exist within a much larger structure: capitalism. In a capitalist economy, property is owned and controlled by private entities aligned with their own interests, and market prices are freely set by demand and

supply. Perfect capitalism has never existed in the United States, but our economy can essentially be described as capitalist. More specifically, it is a liberal market economy, meaning we have a competitive market and decentralized production (Jahan & Mahmud, 2018). This is one aspect where institutionalist and structural analyses of the government agree; our nation does have a capitalist economy.

Where their opinions differ, however, is the extent to which that impacts our government. Institutionalists believe that democracy and capitalism work hand in hand; both emphasize individual freedoms and a relatively less involved central government. Structuralists see the more intricate interactions between the two. They believe that capitalism and democracy, in their truest forms, cannot coexist in a nation. The United States has proven this. Our government is not, as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address claimed, "of the people, by the people, for the people," (Cornell University, 2013). Instead, it is a government of the wealthy, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy. The capitalist economy prioritizes competition, which creates extreme economic disparity throughout the nation. Where democracy prioritizes an equal voice for each and every citizen, capitalism ensures that this cannot exist. The wealthiest citizens, in the top 1%, have a much greater say as to what happens in our government than the rest of the country. They can have real, solid influence on what happens in the government, whereas the everyday citizen's voice is rarely, if ever, heard. This proves that to truly understand the United States government, you must understand the political economy that it exists within.

At many high schools in the United States, a class focused on the U.S. Government is a graduation requirement. Even so, these students do not always graduate with a real understanding of the government and political economy that they live in. This is because the textbooks used for these courses follow the institutional approach for examining the government.

One prominent example is *Magruder's American Government Interactive*, the textbook used for this class. According to the textbook, democracy and capitalism, or free enterprise, are entirely separate entities which reinforce one another in the United States. Under the democracy that the US is intended to have, people can choose their own work and deal with their property as they choose, which ensures equality (Magruder, 2023). This is the institutional belief that capitalism and democracy are based around the same ideals: equality and freedom.

Friedman's "Capitalism and Freedom" is based on these principles. Friedman believed that the free market was necessary for political freedom to exist. Under a capitalist system, equality and cooperation would exist because of people doing things for mutual benefit. For example, a household or individual would produce goods or services for others rather than themselves because it is more convenient for them to get those resources elsewhere. Sellers and consumers check each other in this system, because sellers have other consumers who they could sell to and consumers have other sellers that they can buy from (Friedman, 2003). Under Friedman's theory, this should then translate into political equality, because the entire basis of the free market would prevent coercion both economically and politically. One quote from Friedman perfectly represents the institutional approach:

...if economic power is joined to political power, concentration seems almost inevitable.

On the other hand, if economic power is kept in separate hands from political power, it can serve as a check and a counter to political power (Friedman, 2003).

Institutionalists such as Friedman believe that it is possible for economic power to be considered separately from political power. This would create a true democracy where every citizen of a country would have an equal say in their government, and the government would act in the interests of the people. Unfortunately, this is not true for the current state of our country.

Economic power is tied directly to political influence, as shown by a study done at Princeton University. The 90th income percentile's preference for a policy change was closely tied to the likelihood that the policy would actually change, while the 10th and even 50th income percentile saw an approximately 30% likelihood of policy change whether 0% or 100% of the population was in support of it (Gilens, 2004). Friedman's hopes of separating economic power from political power are as far from reality as they can be.

Furthermore, the high school textbook promotes pluralist ideologies. In their study, students are told that by creating a petition or joining an action group, they can actively affect public policy (Magruder, 2023). This idea leads citizens to believe that just by speaking their mind on what they want to see in the government and getting that opinion to someone in the government, they can actually influence the outcome. In a pluralist democracy, political power is evenly distributed among many different interest groups. Institutionalists who support the pluralist theory believe that there may be inequalities between the groups, but they are evened out by the distribution of resources. Under this theory, it is believed that people are rational enough to make decisions that are good for society and engage in politics through their organized groups. Through elections, citizens are ensured participation in the government's decisions and actions, and groups are given an equal say in policy making (Aligarh Muslim University, 2022). In a nation with an ideal pluralist democracy, citizens would actively be able to participate in their government through joining groups and no one group would have a stronger say than another.

This is not the system that is present in the United States. The amount of money that a special interest group, or more often a corporation, puts into funding a campaign directly translates to their influence on that politician's decisions in Congress. In the 2024 cycle, more

than one hundred members of Congress received six-digit amounts of money from lobbyists (Top Recipients 2025). 65% of the funding for the 2024 election came from PACs, or political action committees (USAfacts, 2024). The more money that a PAC or a corporation has available to put into the government, the more they will see policies that benefit their interests and bank accounts. This is the concern that the structural approach raises: as money gains more and more influence on the government's decisions, the people are losing their voices and influence in their country. Hightower (2006) voiced this concern, saying that what is endangering our democracy is not a military force or a foreign threat of overthrow. Instead, it is corporate lawyers and politicians that are gradually taking political power from the people, who are blissfully unaware of the slow but steady process. Along with this power, corporations are regularly above the law. If the corporation does something illegal, such as dumping oil into the ocean or committing fraud, there is no single person to blame. The corporation itself cannot be arrested, and they have enough money to sweep their wrongdoings under the rug. Capitalism enables this system. The economic disparity created by the United States' "free" market allows corporations to accrue great sums of money, which they use to gain and maintain political power, no matter what they do to hurt consumers or the country itself. The influence that corporations and PACs have on the government is something that the institutional approach overlooks. To see this relationship and the impact it has on American citizens, critically examining the government and its relationship with capitalism is a necessity.

Opposing the pluralist view taken by institutionalists, a common conclusion reached by those who take a structural approach is that we have a neo-liberal economy. This is the principle that the economy should be able to dictate society and is the epitome of structural ideology. To neo-liberals, competition is necessary for society because it enables social Darwinism to exist. In

other words, capitalism creates a “survival of the fittest” system in which successful entrepreneurs and corporations get extremely rich, and unsuccessful ones fall beneath the poverty line. This is further ensured by another principle of neo-liberalism: the shift of capital from the bottom of society to the top. Under neo-liberalism, the top 20% of society grows exceedingly wealthy, and the rest of society becomes proportionally more impoverished. The higher someone is in the economic system, the more their wealth grows. This creates an extreme dichotomy between the rich and the poor, and in George’s words, has turned politics into a question of “who has the right to live and who does not,” (George, 1999). The economic system of neoliberalism, along with movement conservatism, has had severe implications on economic equality in the United States. Since the 1980s, the middle class has experienced a drastic decline, the percent of society living beneath the poverty line has shot up, and the top 1% has grown to hold a much larger percentage of the nation’s total wealth (Ainsworth, 2024). Clearly, the version of capitalism that is running our country is not working. The rich are getting richer in both the literal definition and in regard to power. This system would not be possible without the contrasting forces of faltering democracy and overpowering capitalism that are present in our society.

At the heart of capitalism is the idea that the government should take a laissez-faire approach to the economy or let the free market take its own course without any external interference. However, the United States government has not followed this. Instead, their involvement in the economy has far outweighed their efforts toward improving poverty, unemployment, damage to the environment, and other conditions faced by those in need (Parenti, 1996). The government itself cannot ignore the economy, so it would not make sense to do so when examining the government. Beginning with the creation of trusts in the Gilded Age, the

United States economy has fostered monopolies and economic inequality. This translates directly into political inequality due to the existence of large firms that channel their power into lobbying and donations to manipulate the government to fit their interests (Kurz, 2024). This is not a laissez-faire relationship between the government and the economy. The economy actively involves itself in the government, and the government actively involves itself in the economy. This mutually dependent relationship further supports the idea that a structural approach is significantly more effective for understanding the government's decisions and purposes behind those decisions.

Ultimately, the close relationship with capitalism prevents the United States government from truly being able to be considered a democracy. Regarding the controversial presidential election of 2000, Lazare says,

Despite what it says in the high-school civics texts, the United States is not a democracy. What it is, rather, it is an eighteenth-century republic that has come to resemble a democracy in certain respects, but which at its core remains stubbornly pre-democratic. (Lazare, 2001).

Lazare came to this conclusion because of the Supreme Court's decision to stop the counting of the votes in Florida. This decision proved that the people of the United States did not actually have a say in the course of events in their country. In that election, the Supreme Court essentially elected the nation's president. This was just one instance of the Supreme Court taking things into their own hands and shaping the future of the country to their interests. The most controversial event in recent years where the Supreme Court was seen to have overstepped was the *Citizens United vs. FEC* decision of 2010. In this decision, the Supreme Court ruled with a 5-4 majority to severely diminish restrictions on independent spending of corporations. This doubled down on

a 1976 case that essentially equated money to speech, and the judges that supported the decision falsely assumed that it would not pose any risk toward corruption because the money was not held by a single candidate or party (Weiner 2025). This decision is the ultimate proof that our government is motivated entirely by the capitalist economy. The Supreme Court's decision to allow corporations to put as much money as they desired into funding political campaigns proved that the government can be bought. The institutional approach disregards this, seeing this as an interaction between two separate entities rather than what it is: the corporate puppet masters manipulating the government into serving their best interests over the interests of the people.

Following the textbook's model and separating the government that we live under from the economic structure that exists within bypasses nearly all of the flaws that prevent our government from being a true democracy. Institutionalists feel that it is unnecessary to incorporate a thorough analysis of capitalism into their understanding of the United States' political structure, but the influence that economic power has on the strength of one's political voice cannot be ignored. Our leaders, both corporate and elected, make it impossible for every citizen to truly have an equal say, as true democracy would require. Even when institutionalists consider the pluralist perspective, they fail to factor in the disparity between the action groups with money and those without. These wealthy groups were further enabled to take control of the country by the *Citizens United* decision in 2010, and their power has only grown since. To have any chance of answering the questions regarding the type of government that is currently presiding over the country and whether or not that is the government we need as a people, one must take a structural approach in their research and analysis. While it may be accurate to describe the government as consisting of three branches, those branches must be attached to a

base. That base is the overarching rule of the “winner-takes-all” mentality fueled by a neoliberal and capitalist economy.

### **The Unwavering Status Quo of the United States**

Every four years, Americans are presented with the illusion of choice. We are told that our voices matter and voting in the presidential election is the surest way to make the change in our nation that we want to see. However, whether or not that promised change can actually occur from one election to the next is a question that has plagued our nation from its founding. Every year, Americans are presented with two options to be elected to lead our nation and told by these candidates that they will change our country for the better, and that their opponent will do the opposite. With strong powers of public speaking and persuasion, and a significant amount of money to back them, the “most popular” candidate is elected, and the status quo resumes.

When considering the question of whether presidential elections actually facilitate change in the United States, the most important concept to understand is the status quo that we currently live under and have lived under for a long time. The first aspect of that status quo is the literal interpretation of elections and our government. We live in a historically democratic country under a two-party system. Today, those two parties are Democrats and Republicans, although they have varied throughout history. Much of political debate and argument surrounds the differences between those two parties, such as conservatives leaning toward changing interest rates, while liberals prefer the idea of changing taxes (Wolff, 2019). While these are certainly important issues, the parties do not actually differ substantially in ideology. Both Democrats and Republicans would not begin to question the nation’s economic structure, capitalism, and its impact on our government. One of the largest drivers behind this fact is that the two most successful candidates (nearly always one Democrat and one Republican) are only as successful

in their campaigns as they are seen to be due to the massive amounts of money they are provided with by this system. In the most recent election, the three Republican and Democratic candidates — Trump, Harris, and Biden — raised a combined 4.7 billion dollars, mostly provided by super PACs (Schleifer, 2024). These candidates thrive off of the growing economic disparity in the United States, as they are in the top 1% whose worth is growing exponentially at the cost of the rest of the country. With these candidates, who are the only ones with a real shot at a presidency, benefiting so greatly from the flaws in the United States, what would motivate them to create any real change? As of this past election, the two primary parties had drastically different opinions on the candidate who is now our president: Donald Trump. His supporters in the Republican party believed fully and completely in their slogan; that Trump would be the president to “make America great again”. His opponents in the Democratic party saw a different future under Trump; one of oppression and the dissolution of democracy. Even with these staggeringly different views of the future, the two parties agreed on one thing: the 2024 election would change the United States into a nation unlike any before. Whether or not that will hold true is still yet to be seen.

The literal, defined structure of American presidential elections is one of the driving factors in the continuity of the two-party system and its inability to significantly change the country. Our country, although Washington advised against it in his farewell address, has been consistently run by a two-party system for its 250-year existence. This fact in itself is the main perpetrator of the system’s lasting strength; “Most Americans accept the idea of a two-party system simply because there has always been one. This inbred support for the arrangement is a principal reason why challenges to the system — by minor parties, for example — have made so little headway” (Magruder, 2023). Before even considering the systemic barriers of change in the

U.S., we must first confront the fact that Americans as a whole are resistant to any form of change that would affect their narrow view of what a government should be. If a candidate varies just outside of the average American's understanding of the status quo, they will not find success in the ballots. Those third party candidates who do receive a significant portion of the ballot are often considered "spoilers"; "In a presidential contest, even if a minor party ticket fails to win any electoral votes, it can still pull enough support away from one or both of the major parties to affect the outcome of the election" (Magruder, 2023). This belief is upheld by many Americans, and it dissuades the vast majority from voting for third party candidates, even if their beliefs align more closely with the principles of candidates such as Cornel West or Jill Stein. This hesitance to "waste" votes on third party candidates maintains the political status quo of the United States, where the only feasible possibility for the country is a Democratic or Republican president. The parties themselves have also worked to maintain their hold over the American population by ensuring that they can appeal to most of the American people as possible. Together, the two parties occupy a very similar region of politics, usually avoiding any new or extreme policy decisions.

Compared to other political systems, American parties tend to be moderate; both are built on compromise and usually try to occupy the "middle of the road." Both parties seek the same prize: the votes of a majority of the electorate. To capture that prize, they must win over essentially the same people. Inevitably, then, both parties stay away from extreme policy positions (Magruder, 2023).

As Democratic and Republican candidates begin to look more and more alike, the possibility of seeing change to the nation shrinks even smaller. If the two primary candidates for president have begun to sell themselves to the same people, thus shifting increasingly toward each other's

ideologies, the illusion of being able to change the United States with one presidential election fades away as the country comes to resemble a one-party system; electing a Democrat versus a Republican will not make a difference if the parties' visions for the future of the country overlap.

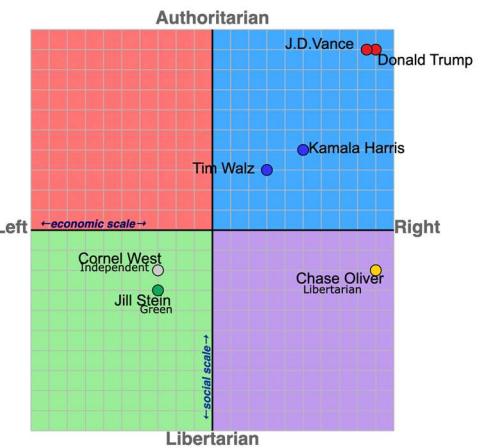
The clearest demonstration of the parties' consistencies with each other is shown by a tool known as the political compass. This is a two-axis scale measuring the social and economic views of politicians or anyone who chooses to take the test, on which you select from a range of 'agree' to 'disagree' on a set of 62 propositions. The political compass was created to be a more accurate measurement of political opinions, as it compares ideologies not only on a left to right basis, but also on a scale of authoritarian to libertarian. This provides a comprehensive understanding of a candidate's policies both politically and economically.

As political establishments adopt either enthusiastically or reluctantly the prevailing economic orthodoxy — the neo-liberal strain of capitalism — the Left-Right division between mainstream parties becomes increasingly blurred. Instead, party differences tend to be more about identity issues. In the narrowing debate, our social scale is more crucial than ever (Political Compass, n.d.).

The political compass' creators believe that their scale, with its measurement of both social and economic policies, is the most accurate measurement of the differences between political ideologies. As the parties in the United States grow to become more similar, as mentioned previously, the vertical scale referring to social policy (authoritarian - libertarian) is becoming an important indicator of where a politician stands. To the right is an image of where each presidential candidate in the 2024 United States election falls on the political compass. Both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris fall in the authoritarian right quadrant of the compass, with Trump and his running mate J.D. Vance nearly touching the upper right corner. Third party

candidates Cornel West and Jill Stein occupy the libertarian left quadrant, and Chase Oliver is libertarian right. The status quo of the United States government is represented by the blue quadrant containing both the Democratic and Republican candidates. Our nation is overwhelmingly authoritarian on the social scale and right-wing on the economic scale (as made obvious by our pseudo-capitalist economy), and without the election of a third-party candidate, that is unlikely to change.

With the 2024 election, the two primary candidates were one of the most controversial pairs yet. Donald Trump, running for a second term, is arguably one of the most far right presidential candidates that the United States has seen, supported by his political compass placement. Kamala Harris, vice president under Joe Biden, has faced criticism from both parties due to her hesitancy to declare solid policies and shifting positions over the years. Trump's campaign was built largely off of his ability to persuade large portions of the American public. The demographics of voters who voted Republican in the 2024 election were majority white, rural, Christian, and without a college education. Although it decreased in the past two elections, 78% of Trump voters were white, and two-thirds were without a degree (Hartig, 2025). He is able to win over his audience with broad statements, aggressive policies appealing to dissatisfied citizens, and catchy slogans such as the well-known "Make America Great Again" that has defined his campaigning since 2016. Trump's efficient and persuasive campaigning has given his party supporters overwhelming confidence in his ability to, in his words, make America great. A majority of Republicans believed that Trump would be the party's best shot at winning the 2024 presidency even a year before elections (Knudsen, 2023). This proves the effect that Trump has had on the party; according to



Republicans, his presidency will move the country in the right direction. If you ask a supporter of Trump, his presidency “is one characterized by more government intervention, less common cause, more mercantilism, less free trade, and more big-power swagger,” and Trump himself believes he is “ushering in ‘the golden age of America’” (Kempe, 2025). With these opinions held by the party, it should seem obvious that the election of Trump in 2024 would have created change for the United States. However, if it is to be believed that the authoritarian right quadrant of the political compass is the status quo, the only change that Trump is bringing is solidifying the hold of that status quo over the country past any point that it has reached before. Republicans believe that Trump is the president who will disrupt the status quo, and that he has “completely turned American politics on its head” (Hunter, 2024). The only disruption that Trump is creating is the disruption of any chance of change to the country. By appealing emotionally to his supporters, he is persuading them that he is creating change in the United States when in reality, he is just perpetuating the policies that have been prevalent in the US for decades and enforcing them to a greater degree. For example, it is a common misconception that Donald Trump’s immigration policies are new to the country. Under Obama, over 2.7 million people were deported (American Immigration Council Staff, 2017). The only difference under Trump compared to the consistent deportation of the past is his use of ICE and border patrol to terrorize communities and his idealization of mass deportation (Lind, 2025).

Agreeing with the Republican party that Donald Trump’s presidency will create change in the United States is the Democratic party. Where they disagree, however, is whether that change will be beneficial for the country or if it will corrode democracy in the U.S. past repair. Throughout history, these two parties have survived due to their flexibility in a changing political environment. They are able to shift and adapt to best fit the needs and desires of the American

people (Mandelbaum, 2020). The 2024 election is no different. Trump appealed to resentful and disillusioned Americans who were dissatisfied with the state of the country under former president Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris, using optimism and joy, appealed to Americans who despained about the negative future of the country. Democrats feared that with Trump's election, the people of the United States would quickly begin to lose their rights, starting with immigrants.

He would aim to strip legal status by ending DACA, TPS, humanitarian parole and other life-saving programs that have supported hundreds of thousands of people who already live, work, and care for their families in this country. The sprawling immigrant detention camps and deportations carried under his first admin were just a glimpse at what he could do under a second term, where he has promised to use the military to conduct nationwide raids in the places where we live, work, and pray to target anyone *suspected* of being undocumented (Moreno, 2024).

Democrats feared that with Trump's election, what was left of the democracy in our country would dissolve into authoritarianism. However, if we are to listen to the political compass, the election of the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris would not be the way to prevent this. Both Harris and her vice president Tim Walz fall in the same quadrant as Trump and Vance: the authoritarian right. Supporters of Harris's run for president believed that the joy she brought to her role would create a new positivity and advancement for the country:

The optimism, laughter and positive energy in Philadelphia on Tuesday felt like a different planet from the dystopian dirge of Trump rallies, which devolve into festivals of personal vengeance for a candidate who has tripled down on the American carnage mantra of his first inaugural address (Collinson, 2024).

Even with this positive image that Harris and her running mate presented when taking over the Democratic nomination after former president Biden stepped out of the race, it took a significant period of time before Harris was able to gather solid enough support to make her a realistic possibility to overtake Trump in the election. One of the driving forces behind this was Harris's lack of forthcoming on her actual policy stances, with her website lacking any statement of policy until August/September 2024, just two months before election day (Betts, 2024). With the overwhelmingly outspoken candidate Trump facing off against the more reserved Harris, the outcome of the election was not a shock to many. As long as the only two candidates in the American election are an authoritarian right Republican and a slightly less authoritarian right Democrat, the so-called options available to the American people are not capable of fostering any real change.

For the United States to leave the status quo, we will need a presidential candidate whose policy opinions do not fall in the authoritarian right of the political compass. In the 2024 presidential election, there were three such candidates: Jill Stein of the Green Party, independent Cornel West, and Libertarian Chase Oliver. Jill Stein with the Green Party aimed to establish her party as a front-runner with a real shot at winning the election. She advertised her party as an alternative to Democrats and Republicans that opposes the consistencies between the two. Stein is selling herself, and the Green Party, as a choice that is pro-worker, supports marginalized communities and reparations, provides an economic bill of rights and a \$25 minimum wage, rent control, and health care as a human right (Hedges, 2024). While some of these ideas are in the same vein as several of Harris's policies, they are more drastic and more consistently promoted by the Green Party than by Harris. Should Jill Stein be elected and implement her policies, the United States would shift away from its status quo. This is supported by the political compass, as

Jill Stein falls in the libertarian left quadrant - opposite of President Trump and former vice president Harris.

However, the reality is that this is an idealistic scenario that the United States is unlikely to ever see. Third party candidates such as Jill Stein are all but barred from making it into the final round of elections by a number of barriers. For one, “the American political system is nowhere near as flexible or open to new parties as it was in the 1840s and 1850s,” (Sifry, 2003, p 44). There is a drastic difference in both economic and public support for third party candidates. In our current society, it is impossible for third party candidates to raise enough funds for their campaigns to match Democrats or Republicans. A driving force behind this, however, is the fact that parties such as the Green Party are against the capitalist system in which politics are funded by corporations and thus do not receive the large amounts of super PAC funding that is funneled into the campaigns of the primary candidates. The lack of public support for the Green Party is largely due to the fear of wasting a vote on a “spoiler” candidate. What this means is that when voters who would otherwise vote Democratically vote for a third-party candidate, even if their policies align more closely with the voter’s interests, that vote is essentially increasing the Republican candidate’s chances of winning the election by decreasing the Democratic candidate’s votes. In other words, “If you vote for ‘progressives’ Jill Stein or Cornel West, you’re reducing the votes needed to stop Trump,” (Zimmerman, 2023). This narrative, aided greatly by Bush’s narrow victory in 2000, dissuades many American voters from voting for third party candidates such as Stein. Finally, beyond the economic and popular disadvantages of the third parties, they are not able to get in front of the public and voice their opinions to the extent that Democratic and Republican candidates are able to. In Jill Stein’s case, “they keep (Stein) off the presidential debates because it’s so expensive to get airtime. The national media essentially

erases (Stein's) exposure," (Hedges, 2024). Related to the lack of funding damaging third party campaigning, it is also much harder for a candidate to build a base of supporters if their voice cannot be heard by the same amount of people as their opponent. To generate measurable change in the country, third parties outside of the authoritarian right status quo must have an equal shot at election.

"That means — for all political parties and their candidates — fair treatment by the media, equal access to the ballot, full public funding as an option to replace dependence on wealthy special interests, inclusion in and expansion of debates and other public forums" (Sifry, 2003, p 45).

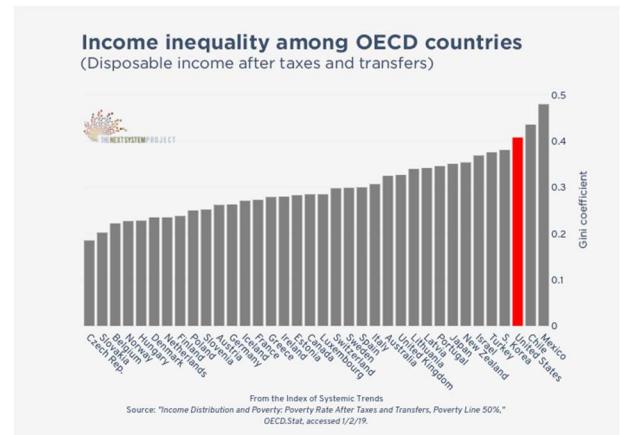
In other words, the United States will need to make a concentrated effort on giving third party candidates such as Stein or West a chance in the election if the status quo is going to change.

The issue with the unwavering status quo in America is not that we cannot change it; it is that the status quo itself is flawed. Since 1970, even with six party changes in the White House, the United States' index on economic, social, and democratic health shows little improvement or even deterioration. "Wages have been stagnant... the wealth share of the top 1 percent has substantially increased... the poverty rate has remained constant... the racial wealth gap has exploded... the average cost of undergraduate tuition has more than doubled" (Poole, 2019). All of this is measured only in the middle of Trump's first term, and has worsened since. Presidential

debates do not even begin to question systemic issues in the country; they focus on surface-level details that appeal to the public without actually affecting the nation as a whole.

Far less important than the details of these debates is their shared function. Both sides keep the public from discussing the systemic causes of recurring downturns. Both sides avoid any discussion of systemic change as a logical part of a rational response to the latest or impending downturn (Wolff, 2019).

It is becoming increasingly important for the United States to challenge the status quo, both politically and economically. Maintaining our two-party system where both parties are essentially extensions of the corporations that fund and control them and politics are dependent on the capitalist economy and economic disparity does not bode well for the American people, save for the top 1%. As Republicans and Democrats shift nearer and nearer to each other in ideology, the possibility of change from one presidential election to the next dissolved into a hypothetical.



## Conclusion

In the United States, the word “democracy” cannot be used to describe the government. The neoliberal, capitalist economy cannot coexist with a democratic government. It is proven that the government cannot be examined solely institutionally; to understand the state of our country, our government must be examined in the light of our economic system. When this is done, the obvious preference for the top 1% generated by capitalism and transferred into political policies demonstrates the accuracy of the elite class theory in regard to the American government. To understand the hold that this system has on our country, the political status quo

demonstrated by the similarities and alignments of the two primary parties must be taken into account. As presidential elections throughout history, and most importantly in 2024, have done little to nothing to implement change in the country to adapt away from the status quo, it has become drastically clearer that change is necessary, and even more clear that the change the country needs will not be easily achieved. To create the government that is best for the American people, the country will need a true democracy, matching the literal definition of the word. This is not something that can be achieved through the two parties that currently rule the country and under the system that benefits their candidates so greatly. For America to not only survive, but thrive, we need a democratic government where people are truly equally represented and can have their voices heard. This cannot be achieved without conscious action being taken toward systemic change in the nation.

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