

American Democracy Will Remain A Mirage Without A Dramatic Overhaul Of The Political And Economic System



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The progressive forces fighting for a democratic future have a truly herculean task ahead of them.

It is no longer an unknown fact or a view propounded by a handful of radical historians and political scientists: the American political system has such severe structural flaws that it is potentially antithetical to democracy and surely detrimental to the promotion of the common good.

Consider the following stark realizations about the condition of American democracy as evidence of the changing times:

The United States has been rated for a number of consecutive years by the Economist Intelligence Union as a “flawed democracy.”

Scores of highly respected mainstream scholars have analyzed massive amounts of data showing that public opinion counts very little in US policymaking (see, for example, Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*; Princeton University Press, 2nd ed., 2016) to conclude that the American political system works essentially in a manner that actually subverts the will of the common people.

Others, like Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, have [argued](#) that, because of rules set in the political system, the American economy is rigged to favor the rich, a view that is obviously wholeheartedly endorsed by Kishore Mahbubani, Distinguished Fellow from Asia Research Institute, at the National University of Singapore, when he declares that the US functions like a democracy

but is actually a [plutocracy](#).

And Timothy K. Kuhner, Professor of Law at the University of Auckland, has gone even further by [arguing](#) most convincingly in *King's Law Journal* that the United States isn't only a plutocracy, but the only plutocracy in the world to be established by law.

To a large extent, of course, the structural flaws in the American political system have their origins in the many anti-democratic elements found in the Constitution. This is the [view](#) of eminent constitutional scholars such as Erwin Chemerinsky, Dean and Distinguished Professor of Law at Berkeley Law School, and Sanford Levinson, W. St. John Garwood and W. St. John Garwood, Jr. Centennial Chair in Law at the University of Texas Law School, and author of *Our Undemocratic Constitution* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Let's start with one of the basic principles of democracy which is "one person, one vote." It is not applicable to the case of American "democracy" where US presidents are chosen by electors, not by popular vote. Hence the "democratic" anomaly of a candidate elected to become the 45th president of the United States after having lost the popular vote by a bigger margin than any other US president. Indeed, Donald Trump was elected president by trailing Hillary Clinton by nearly three million votes. The same thing happened in 2000, when Al Gore won nearly half a million more votes than George W. Bush, but it was Bush who won the presidency by being declared winner in the state of Florida by less than 540 votes.

In any other modern democratic system, such electoral outcomes would be imaginable only if democracy was crushed by some kind of a military coup with the aim of installing in power the "preferred" candidate of the ruling class.

To be sure, there is nothing in the Constitution that grants American voters the right to choose their president. When American voters go to the polls to vote for a presidential candidate, what they are essentially doing is casting a vote for their preferred party's nominated slate of electors.

The electoral college system is democracy's ugliest anachronism. It was designed by the founding fathers in order to prevent the masses from choosing directly who will run the country, and it's simply shocking that it still exists more than two hundred years later.

The existence of the electoral college system also helps to explain why voter turnout for the presidential elections in the world's most outdated democratic model is consistently disturbingly low. More than 90 million eligible voters did not vote in the 2016 presidential election, in what was considered to be one of the most important elections in many generations because of the inflammatory and racist rhetoric of Donald Trump, and while there was a bigger turnout in 2020, the US is still incredibly low compared with other advanced democratic nations around the world when it comes to electoral participation, ranking 31st out of 35 developed countries in 2016, and 24th in 2020, respectively.

The existence of the two-party system (yet another "democratic" anomaly), and even the fact that elections are being held on a day when most people work, are also reasons for the low voter turnout in the US.

In addition, one could also argue that the reason why so many Americans are abstaining from voting, a cornerstone of democracy, is intrinsically related to the long-stemming pathologies of the American political culture, namely due to the manufacturing of a highly individualistic and consumer-driven society intended to promote conformism, ignorance and apathy about public affairs all while the rich and powerful control policymaking.

However, an even bigger "democratic" anomaly than the presence of the electoral college system revolves around US senate representation. A tiny state such as Wyoming, with barely 600,000 residents, has the same number of Senators on Capitol Hill as does California, with nearly 40 million residents. This translates, roughly, to Wyoming voters having 70 times more Senate representation than California voters. Moreover, since most of the smaller states have overwhelmingly white residents, it also means that whites have much larger representation in the Senate than Black and Hispanic Americans.

The undemocratic nature of Senate representation might not have been such a huge problem if its powers were similar to those of upper houses found in many other countries in the world, which tend to be overwhelmingly less than those of the lower houses. In the US, however, the Senate is far more powerful than the House of Representatives as it has virtually complete control over federal legislating and acts as the gatekeeper on treaties, cabinet approvals, and nominations to the Supreme Court.

Yet, perhaps an even bigger insult and injury to the body politic and the

promotion of the common good in the U.S. is the privatization of democracy through the role of money in campaigns and elections. Campaign finance laws in the U.S. always posed at least an indirect threat to democracy by allowing private money to play a very prominent role in the financing of elections, but the 2010 Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission*, which shifted even further the influence of dark money on politics by reversing whatever campaign finance restrictions were still in place and essentially declaring that corporations were effectively citizens and thus could spend unlimited funds on elections, robbed America of whatever hopes and aspirations it may have had of attaining a somewhat well-functioning democratic political system.

Taking everything into account, it is clear that, even though the United States remains a free and open society, conditions which have allowed greater exposure and by extension more public awareness of the structural flaws in the country's political system, the progressive forces fighting for a democratic future have a truly herculean task ahead of them.

While changing the constitution, creating a multiparty system, and fighting the corrupting influence of money in politics are absolute necessities for democracy to function—just as surely as a Green New Deal is an absolute must to protect the environment and save the planet—the anti-democratic forces of this country are working even harder these days to destroy whatever is left of American democracy.

Republicans are bent on restricting voting rights as part of a concerted effort to change the rules in a way that they will impact on the demographic shifts favoring the Democrats. The campaign for restrictive voting legislation goes all the way back to the end of the 20th century, so what we are witnessing today is just a new wave of intensification to roll back decades of progress on voting rights.

The thoroughly anti-democratic and racist mindset of Republican Senators could not have been more glaringly revealed than with their recent use of a Jim Crow relic—the filibuster—to block the most extensive voting rights bill in a generation. Now, activists are concentrating on eliminating the filibuster, which, naturally, should have no place in a normal democracy.

Yet, eliminating the filibuster while everything else stays the same in connection with the workings of the American political system and its institutions carries certain undeniable risks given that the most reactionary and outright proto-fascist

forces in today's political universe are feverishly working on retaking power—first in the 2022 midterm elections, and then in 2024, in the presidential elections. As such, progressives should never lose sight of the importance of always maintaining a multi-level strategy for addressing and hopefully fixing the nation's outdated political system and rigged economy.

Indeed, the American political system needs a dramatic overhaul due to its many structural flaws. Without one, American democracy will remain a mirage.

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