

The Winner Of The 2020 Election Won't Be Inheriting A Genuine Democracy



Today's election is widely regarded as the most important national election in recent U.S. history, voters remain divided and polarized over what should be essentially the future of the country. Issues over racism, immigration, guns, women's rights, police brutality and climate change are what essentially divide Republican

voters from Democrats. The former, galvanized by the extreme and divisive rhetoric of a racist and reactionary president, wish to preserve the values of "traditional America" (white supremacy and patriarchy, militarism, rugged individualism and religiosity), while Democrats worry that another four years of Donald Trump in office will spell the end of democracy.

Is destroying or saving U.S. democracy what the upcoming election is all about? In this interview, political scientist *C.J. Polychroniou* says it is high time that we did away with the political rhetoric when it comes to U.S. democracy and look at the facts: The U.S. has a highly flawed system of democratic governance and doesn't even rank among the top 20 democracies in the Western world, and thus is in dire need of major repair. In fact, Polychroniou argues, it is far more accurate to describe the United States as an oligarchy, a regime where an economic elite and powerful organized interests are in virtual control of the policy agenda on most issues of critical importance to public interest while average people are mainly political bystanders.

Alexandra Boutri: The general consensus among a significant percentage of voters opposed to Donald Trump is that the upcoming election represents a pivotal moment in U.S. politics, for what is at stake is nothing else than the future of democracy itself. True, or an exaggeration?

C.J. Polychroniou: Trump's presidency has been marked from the beginning by

lies, strong authoritarian impulses, contempt for the media and disdain for science, big gifts for the rich and big cuts for the poor, and complete disregard for the environment. His political posturing is outright neo-fascist, and, as such, this president surely has little concern about the subtleties of democratic governance. Of course, U.S. democracy was in a crisis long before Trump came to power. In fact, one could easily make the argument that the U.S. is not a true democracy at all (it qualifies as a mere procedural democracy), and was never meant to be when you get to understand the architecture of the Constitution, who the framers were, and why they opted to ditch, in the manner of a coup, the Articles of Confederation, during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. In fact, the drafting of the Constitution itself was not a democratic process: The delegates were sent there by state legislatures with a mandate to revise the Articles of Confederation, but, instead, they worked in total secrecy in producing an entirely new legal document for the future government of the United States.

The Constitution that the framers produced, with its system of checks and balances, was as a legal document way ahead of its time, since back then, monarchy was the prevailing form of political rule throughout the world. But in addition to designing a system of governance that would prevent the rise of an absolute ruler, the framers also wanted to make sure that the masses themselves would not be in a position to determine political outcomes. Indeed, the framers were seeking a form of government that would keep the elites safe both from the caprice of absolute rulers and from the whims of the rabble. They were indeed in complete agreement with the view of John Jay, one of the so-called Founding Fathers and the first Chief Justice, when he said, "Those who own the country ought to govern it." Hence the purpose behind the introduction of the Electoral College, which blatantly violates the very basic principle of democracy, i.e., one person, one vote; hence also the anti-democratic nature of the Senate, where states with very small populations get the same number of senators as states with huge populations.

The U.S. is also the only democracy in the world where politicians are actively involved in manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts. Political gerrymandering has a long history in the U.S., but as Common Cause National Redistricting Director Kathay Feng pointedly put it, "In a democracy, voters should choose their politicians, not the other way around."

In addition, federal election campaigns funded entirely by private money makes a

mockery of the democratic process for electing public officials, while the “winner-take-all” system, which is not in the Constitution and therefore can be changed without a constitutional amendment, can easily be regarded as undemocratic under modern election law jurisprudence, as has correctly been pointed out by [former Republican governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, and law professor Sanford Levinson](#).

In sum, there is no other democracy in the advanced industrialized world with the “undemocratic” features of the system of democracy found in the U.S., including its two-party system which severely limits public dialogue and debate among competing political views. Little surprise, therefore, why even the conservative weekly magazine *The Economist* has labeled the U.S. a “flawed democracy.” As a matter of fact, U.S. democracy does not even rank among the top 20 democracies in the Western world, according to the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The U.S. form of governance fits far more perfectly with that of classical oligarchy, although in the last four years, the country also had a leader who behaved more in tune with the traits of the tyrannical man outlined in Plato’s *Republic*.

Why then is the U.S. Constitution treated as some sort of a sacred document? Why aren’t there calls for a constitutional amendment, or even for an entirely new constitution?

It’s amazing what propaganda and lack of knowledge can do to a citizenry and therefore to the prospects of a democratic polity. All sorts of myths have been built around the so-called Founding Fathers, while the idea of the United States as the “world’s greatest democracy” is echoed by every politician either running for or while in office. Only a handful of political analysts and legal scholars are raising the question of the undemocratic nature of the U.S. Constitution. I suppose it’s the similar mentality behind the pathetic habit of U.S. politicians ending every speech with “God Bless America.” Here, the hypocrisy is quite striking since the framers of the Constitution were very specific about the separation of state and church. The word “God” does not even appear in the Constitution. But no one seems to be raising these issues in today’s U.S. political culture. For the unfortunate fact is that it has always been something of a taboo in the U.S. to point out the flaws of the political system and its political culture. This is why the use of the term of “anti-Americanism” was invented in the first

place: to frighten open-minded citizens from exposing the flaws in the workings of the U.S. political system and criticizing U.S. policies.

The U.S. Constitution is extremely difficult to amend: It requires a two-thirds vote in both chambers, then ratification by three-quarters of the states. Of course, scores of constitutional amendments have been introduced over the years, but not one has become part of the Constitution. But here is an interesting fact about what the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence thought of constitutions: Thomas Jefferson was of the view that any constitution has to lapse after every generation. The laws and constitutions drawn by previous generations, according to Jefferson, in a letter written to James Madison from Paris, should not be binding on future generations. Yet, the U.S. is stuck with the same Constitution for the last 231 years, with a Constitution drafted by men whose language and mode of thinking bear no resemblance whatsoever to the mindset of most 21st century Americans and to the dictates of contemporary democracy. On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of Chileans just voted to rewrite the country's constitution, which dates to the era of General Augusto Pinochet. This is how democracies ought to work.

How comparable are capitalism and democracy?

Capitalism can function under different forms of government, including brutal dictatorships. There is nothing inherent in the dynamics of a capitalist economy that allows democracy to flourish. Calls for the recognition of social rights and demands for freedom, political participation and democratic governance have always come in fact from those who were exposed to the cruelties and injustices which are naturally built into a capitalist system of economic and social life. Democratic rights were gained, advanced and secured under capitalism, almost everywhere in the world, through prolonged social and political struggles from below. They were not granted to the masses by the masters of capital themselves. The right of workers to unionize, for instance, has a long and bloody history behind it. The U.S., in fact, has had the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrialized capitalist country in the world. By the same token, there are limits to how far democracy can advance under capitalism. Direct participatory democracy and economic democracy are anathema to a capitalist organization of socio-economic life. And under neoliberal capitalism — which is essentially a politico-economic project that aims to return society to the age of predatory capitalism when labor power was completely “free” — nature is totally at the mercy of unrestrained capital exploitation, and state policies cater exclusively to the interests and needs of the plutocrats, and thus democracy is a sham. Competition is seen as the defining characteristic of what it means to be human, citizens are turned into consumers, and society is dog-eat-dog.

How exactly would one go about proving that the U.S. is actually an oligarchy?

This is not very hard to prove if you approach the question with a critical eye instead of engaging in breast-beating about how great U.S. democracy is by virtue of the simple fact that we enjoy basic civil liberties and civil rights, which are the very basic elements of even the most rudimentary form of democracy. You can start by looking at the distribution of economic and political power. That is the most direct and obvious way to figure out whether a society functions democratically or is controlled by a power elite. The U.S. is one of the richest countries in the world, but also one with extreme levels of inequality. The richest 1 percent own 40 percent of the country's wealth, according to a study produced a few years ago by economist Edward N. Wolff. By the same token, the top 1 percent incomes have grown in recent years to be five times as much as the bottom 90 percent incomes. Economic power, of course, translates almost automatically into political power. This does not mean that the capitalist state is by extension a mere tool in the hands of the capitalist class, as crude Marxism used to contend back in the era of the Comintern, but the government agenda is heavily influenced, if not outright shaped, by economic elite domination.

A few years ago, two mainstream political scientists, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, tested the different theories of U.S. politics (majoritarian democracy, pluralism and elite theory) by looking at a huge set of policy cases for a period covering more than 20 years (from 1981-2002). What they found is shocking even to those of us who are fully cognizant of the undemocratic nature of the U.S. political system: Economic elites and business interests had overwhelming impact on U.S. government policies, while average citizens had little or no independent influence. Another mainstream political scientist, Larry Bartels, also published recently a book, mainly an empirical study, titled *Unequal Democracy*, exposing the myths of U.S. democracy by showing how the political system favors overwhelmingly the wealthy.

In sum, there is no doubt about it: What drives U.S. politics and the framing of government policy is economic-elite domination. Moreover, average people seem somehow to be cognizant of this realization, which probably explains why such an overwhelming percentage of U.S. citizens do not bother to vote: "democracy" isn't working for them.

If U.S. democracy is so highly flawed, what then is really at stake in the November elections?

There can be no denying that even procedural democracy has been facing a historic crisis under the reign of Donald Trump. When it comes to transparency and accountability, Trump has broken new grounds with his disregard for such democratic niceties. He has blatantly challenged the authority and independence of agency watchdogs overseeing his administration and has retaliated against officials who have exposed wrongdoings of his administration. He has encouraged actions to silence certain broadcast news outlets and individuals and even threatened to shut down social media industries. He has dispatched federal agents to cities to crush protests, and has even refused to accept that there would be a peaceful transition to power in the event he loses the November 2020 election. As I noted before, he has been acting as Plato's tyrannical man in the *Republic*, which probably explains why he fancies so much dictators like North Korea's Kim Jong-un and strongmen like Turkey's Erdoğan and Russia's Putin. No doubt, he is jealous of their authoritarian powers. But it should be pointed out that the Republican Party as a whole has moved so far to the right that it has become part of the illiberal political universe, as a [major study](#) just published by a Swedish university confirms.

Be that as it may, much more is at stake in the upcoming election than democratic formalities. Aside from his catastrophic handling of the coronavirus pandemic — which has resulted in the death of more than 225,000 Americans, the highest total in the world — and the death figures continue to rise on an almost daily basis, Trump's white supremacy vision will tear completely apart U.S. society, his economic policies will exacerbate even further the huge inequalities present in U.S. society and his nuclear posture will move us closer to Armageddon. Finally, and far more important, there are his anti-environmental policies and refusal to even acknowledge humanity's greatest existential crisis, namely global warming. During his reign in power, he has initiated an unprecedented number of regulatory rollbacks, with complete indifference to their impact on the environment and people's lives. In that sense, he doesn't pose just a threat to democracy. As Noam Chomsky never tires of repeating, Trump is a real menace to civilization, to organized human life, like no other leader has ever been in recent history anywhere in the world.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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Polychroniou on a book on the Russian Revolution.