

For All Practical Purposes, the American System of Government Is Failing. How and Why?

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“Unhappy events abroad have retaught us two simple truths about the liberty of a democratic people. The first truth is that the liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of a private power to a point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism – ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power.” Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), 32nd American President (1933-1945), (in ‘Message to Congress on Curbing Monopolies’, April 29, 1938)

“When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in society, they create for themselves, in the course of time, a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it.” Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850), French economist, statesman, and author.

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you super add the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority.” Lord Acton (John E. Dalberg) (1834-1902), English historian, politician, and writer.

“The truth is there are very few members [of the U.S. Congress] who I could even name or could think of who didn’t at some level participate in that system [of bribery and corruption in Washington D.C.].” Jack Abramoff, professional lobbyist and onetime power broker for the elite of Washington, D.C. (during a CBS’s 60 Minutes interview, Sunday November 6, 2011)

“Now [the United States] is just an oligarchy, with unlimited political bribery being the essence of getting the nominations for president or to elect the president. And the same thing applies to governors and U.S. senators and Congress members. ... So now we’ve just seen a complete subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors. ...The incumbents, Democrats and Republicans, look upon this unlimited money as a great benefit to themselves.” Jimmy Carter (1924-), 39th U.S. President (1977-1981), (in a radio interview, Tues. July 28, 2015)

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On January 17, 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969), 34th President of the United States, (1953-1961), and a five-star general, gave a [Farewell address](#) that has echoed through the years. He not only warned his fellow citizens about the danger of a “military-industrial complex”, which could “endanger our liberties or democratic processes”, but he also issued a wish in saying that “we want democracy to survive for all generations

to come.”

Observers have noticed, however, that since the 1980’s, something big has occurred in the United States: the political system and its processes have fallen into the hands of an unscrupulous money establishment in a way that has left a majority of Americans deprived of the basic services they are entitled to receive from their government.

This can be explained by the workings of a political cycle of corruption, through which big money increasingly corrupts basic political institutions and practices.

Before the 1980s, the U.S. system of government had functioned reasonably well along the lines dictated by the U.S. Constitution and following the democratic principle eloquently summarized by President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) when he said that the U.S. government is the “*government of the people, by the people, for the people*” as dictated by the vote of citizens who elect officials and who favor the adoption of common good policies.

The U.S. Constitution is one of the oldest

The United States is an old democracy. Its [Constitution](#) is the oldest written constitution in operation in the world. It was approved on September 17, 1787, after three months of debate, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and it became effective on March 4, 1789.

It is a federal constitution, which created a strong federal government, but according to the principle of separation of powers. At the federal level, it establishes an intricate system of checks and balances between an executive branch headed by a President, a legislative branch with two houses forming the U.S. Congress and a judicial branch consisting of a U.S. Supreme Court and other courts. The purpose was to prevent tyranny. The fifty American states delegated certain powers to the federal government, but undelegated powers are reserved to the states.

This founding document guarantees constitutional protection of basic political rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press, as spelled out in twenty-seven amendments. The first ten amendments are known as the Bill of Rights and they were ratified and adopted in 1791, while the other seventeen amendments have been adopted over time, between 1795 and 1992.

Basically, the U.S. Constitution was a [compromise](#) between the political ideas of Alexander Hamilton (New York) and Thomas Jefferson (Virginia). Hamilton and the Federalists favored a centralized federalism, and were supported by merchants and manufacturers. Jefferson and the anti-federalists rather favored the principle of a decentralized federal system; they supported states’ rights and agriculture. Over time, economic and technological developments and various court decisions tipped the balance in favor of Hamilton’s espousal of a strong, even aristocratic, central U.S. government.

The electoral reforms enacted by Republican President Theodore Roosevelt

Since the 1980s, there has been a fundamental change in the way political institutions function in the United States. And this is not only a matter of change in the governance approach to providing public services, as [some](#) have pointed out. It is a profound change in the way ordinary citizens choose their elected representatives and in the way they convey to public officials their demands, wishes and needs. Their influence has greatly diminished over the years.

For most of the twentieth century, a century during which the American standard of living rose substantially, there existed in the United States a system of laws and practices that protected the sanctity of the voting system as an expression of the choices of the citizenry. Legal entities, such as corporations, banks or other organizations were prevented from using their huge access to money to subjugate the voice of the electorate and debase democracy.



President Theodore Roosevelt

In 1905, for example, [President Teddy Roosevelt](#) (1858-1919), a Republican, in his annual address to Congress spelled out the democratic principle that *“all contributions by corporations to any political committee or for any political purpose should be forbidden by law.”* In 1906, Roosevelt was even more explicit, saying: *“I again recommend a law prohibiting all corporations from contributing to the campaign expenses of any party... Let individuals contribute as they desire; but let us prohibit in effective fashion all corporations from making contributions for any political purpose, directly or indirectly.”* On January 26, 1907, President Roosevelt signed the [Tillman Act of 1907](#), which was the first legislation in the United States prohibiting monetary contribution to national political campaigns by corporations.

How the U.S. Supreme Court has subverted the American electoral system

However, on January 21, 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court chose to roll back laws that have limited the role of corporate money in federal elections since Teddy Roosevelt was president. The more than century-old Roosevelt principle which had prevailed until then according to which *“no corporation shall be considered to be a person who is permitted to raise or spend money on federal, state, or local elections of any kind”* was crudely abolished and thrown into the trash.

Indeed with their judgment in the case of [Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission](#), Chief Justice John Roberts and four other justices created a major revolution in the American electoral system. They rejected historic precedents and judicial restraint in order to put a radical pro-corporate spin on the First Amendment, which protects free speech. They declared that “corporations” and other legal organizations are indeed “persons”, entitled to the same human rights as living, breathing persons, and that they can spend unlimited sums of money during electoral campaigns.

Consequently, since the 2010 decision of the U.S. Court, the [Preamble of the U.S. Constitution](#) that says *“We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect*

Union...” should more appropriately be changed now for *“We, the business corporations of America...etc.”*, in order to fully reflect the new political philosophy of the five-member majority of the Roberts Court. Indeed, with the decision of Jan. 21, 2010, the type of government the majority of the Roberts Supreme Court wished to establish is essentially ‘a government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations’.

Nowadays, the U.S. Government is more centralized and more corrupt than ever

Indeed, over the last quarter century, there has been a quiet political coup in the United States, with far right money interests taking over the American system of government, and this not only includes the U.S. Congress; it includes also the White House and the U.S. Supreme Court. Billionaire oligarchs have taken control in the United States and they pretty much do what they want with the government, irrespective of what the people think or want. This is a throwback to the later part of the 19th Century when [Robber Barons](#) could buy out politicians, pile up the public debt and plunder the public purse at will, while unscrupulously rigging markets and abusing consumers.

People [want peace](#), but the oligarchs—and that includes [Donald Trump](#)—want war, permanent war, and they want to be free to line their pockets with the war industry profits all over the world.

People want [social services](#) and want to reduce poverty, but the oligarchs want to reduce the influence of government, cut taxes and keep politicians corrupted.



[People](#) want their children to be [secure, safe](#) and not the target of [guns](#) when they go to school, but the oligarchs, manufacturers and extremist organizations want to be able to sell military-style assault weapons to everybody who can afford to buy them. Indeed, cowardly American politicians refuse to ban military-style [assault weapons](#), as they are controlled in most countries.

People want to live in a [clean environment](#), but the oligarchs want to be free to pollute and pursue their own private interests.

Most people stand for the rule of law and for [democracy](#), but the oligarchs prefer a system closer to [plutocracy](#), in which their money can call the shots, etc.

The potentially corrupting influence of money has become more and more dominant in U.S. politics, and it has been openly encouraged by numerous [decisions](#) of the U.S. Supreme Court, especially, as we have seen, by the [Roberts U.S. Supreme Court](#), in favor of the wealthy, the powerful and private interest groups, and against the common good.

As a consequence, popular trust in the U.S. government has declined steadily over the last

half century. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), while 73% of Americans were said to have trust in the federal government in Washington D.C., in 1958, that percentage had fallen to a mere 18%, in 2017. This represents a huge erosion of public trust in government in a bit less than sixty years. This is a generational shift of great magnitude and the sign of a profound disgust.

What are the consequences of that shift toward less democracy?

- Americans are the least likely to exercise their right to vote: in the 2016 election, only 55.7% of eligible voters bothered to vote, as compared to an average of 75% in other OECD countries.
- In the U.S., politics has become a rich man's game: In practice and in most cases, no American citizen who is not rich can expect to be elected in the current American political system, unless he or she is willing to become a political prostitute to big money interests. Moreover, ordinary citizens cannot entertain any hope, on their own, of being able to redress the situation.
- More importantly perhaps, it has become harder and harder to encourage government to pass legislation to enhance the [common good](#) and to promote the general welfare of ordinary citizens. Wealthy lobbies, corporations and mega banks, supported by a very concentrated and partisan media, hold the upper hand in anything the government does. These powerful lobbies push the United States to [spend](#) more on its military sector than China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Kingdom, India, France, and Japan combined.
- Not surprisingly, income and wealth disparities in the United States are indecent and growing. The [Stanford Center](#) on Poverty and Inequality has ranked the United States dead last among the 10 richest countries on that score. Half of the U.S. population lives presently in poverty or is low-income, according to U.S. Census data, while the American middle class is losing ground, according to surveys by the [Pew Research Center](#). To compare [income](#) and [wealth](#) inequality that prevails in the U.S. today, it is necessary to go back 100 years, just before the Great Depression. Presently, there is less social mobility in the United States and the social fabric is increasingly disorganized.

Social cohesion is threatened in a country when [income and wealth inequalities](#) become exceptionally wide. This has been a big problem in South America for many years. Now it has become a growing social and economic problem in the United States.

- The United States has the [highest incarceration rate](#) in the world, ahead of Cuba, El Salvador, Turkmenistan, the Russian Federation and Thailand. Its rate is almost 5 times higher than the OECD average.
- An ominous sign: [Life expectancy](#) at birth in the United States fell for the second consecutive year in 2016, due to a dizzying 21% increase in the death rate from drug overdoses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In fact, this is the first time since 1962 and 1963, two years in which the flu caused an unprecedented number of deaths, that the United States experienced two consecutive years of declining life expectancy.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, a vicious cycle of political corruption in the United States has become more and more powerful and has had negative social consequences. It is a cycle of corruption that has allowed the money establishment to tighten its grip on the major American institutions of the Presidency, the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court. Such a cycle of political corruption is self-reinforcing, and as it becomes more and more comprehensive and entrenched, it also becomes very difficult to break up and reverse.

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