

Mike Kohout 

California State University, San Bernardino

mkohout@csusb.edu

CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES¹

ABSTRACT: The Trump administration's second term policies have created a surge in criticism from the liberal establishment claiming that the US democratic system is under attack. However, Trump, claiming a popular mandate from American voters, is using his executive power against what he calls the unelected and undemocratic deep state government bureaucracy. Nevertheless, public trust in all branches of the US government is at an all-time low. It seems that while American voters want their government to be run like a business, they are not pleased with business-as-usual. The central question I address in this paper is whether the current democratic crisis is something new, or whether the US liberal democracy has always been in crisis. While the American establishment and most of the public do not question the political system's democratic credentials, there have always been critical voices arguing that the US liberal democracy has never reached its lofty ideals. I examine those critiques in this paper looking beyond the myths of US democracy to how it is practiced. By focusing on historical critiques and detailing the overwhelming influence of economic elites in US domestic and foreign policies, I hope to show that the US system is in fact a tyranny of the minority. I argue that the US liberal democracy has always been in crisis, if it ever existed in the first place.

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President Trump, claiming a mandate from God, is running the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 playbook, and following a theory called 'Common Good Constitutionalism'² to leverage the power of the Imperial Presidency to protect the American people against the so-called deep state and traitorous business elites. He and his allies are mobilizing the Presidency against un-American values of 'wokeism', 'Marxism', 'communism', and 'socialism', which have taken over the Democratic party, the federal government bureaucracy, most mainstream media organizations, academia, and large segments of US civil society. They argue that the President, elected by the people, is given a mandate to unilaterally protect the US Constitution from both unelected bureaucrats and judges, and elected officials, who are threatening the core values of the republic. It will be up to the US Supreme Court to decide if the President's mandate is constitutional. Given Trump's early moves to disband and disable government agencies, challenge US birthright citizenship law, and *de facto* veto congressional fiscal appropriations, a show-down in the Supreme Court is imminent. However, this is part of the plan, because Trump stacked the Court with three appointees during his first administration adding to the conservative majority eager to deliver him a more 'energetic executive'.³

Lawsuits against Trump's executive orders brought by civil society organizations and Democratic-run states have succeeded in temporarily checking his power. The liberal media has also launched a major critical counter-offensive against his policies. They claim that election numbers do not support Trump's boasts of a popular mandate. In fact, Trump did not win 50% of the vote, and his margin of popular electoral victory was only 1.5 points. His current approval rating is only 47%, with 48% US voters disapproving of his first few weeks in office.⁴ His critics are claiming they are protecting American democracy from Trump's authoritarianism, but most Americans are skeptical. In fact, a vast majority of them do not believe their government nor the mainstream liberal media; they believe the system is broken. Although some argue there is a causal relationship between the public's scorn for their government and the election of President Trump, I disagree. The main reason Trump was elected is because people are unhappy about their economic well-being.⁵ He won because a tiny margin of voters believed he would handle the economy better than Kamala Harris, who represented the Biden administration's failed economic policies. He also won because the US political

² A. Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism*, Medford 2022.

³ J.G. Roberts, *Opinion: Trump v. United States*, 1 July 2024, p. 1, at https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-939_e2pg.pdf, 20 February 2025.

⁴ M. Brenan, "Trump's Inaugural Approval Rating Is Historically Low Again," *Gallup*, 29 January 2025, at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/655955/trump-inaugural-approval-rating-historically-low-again.aspx>, 24 February 2025.

⁵ "Americans Continue to View Several Economic Issues as Top National Problems," PEW Research Center, 20 February 2025, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/02/20/americans-continue-to-view-several-economic-issues-as-top-national-problems/>, 24 February 2025.

system is ruled by a party duopoly, giving voters very little choice but to vote for one of the two major party candidates.⁶

In this paper I examine the current crisis of US liberal democracy focusing on three major processes that raise questions and doubts about the system's credibility and legitimacy. In fact, I argue that what most Americans believe to be a historically robust and constantly improving system has historically been a constantly shifting intra-elite arrangement to serve minority interests while producing a powerful national discourse convincing the majority that the system works for them by guaranteeing a high standard of living and upward mobility. I argue the US system has always been much closer to an oligarchy than to any broadly-defined form of liberal democracy. The following three critiques make my case. First, I examine the most powerful critiques of liberal democracy, which point to the vast gulf between its discourse and historical record. Mainstream public opinion in the US has been registering this gulf for the past two decades. Second, I argue that America's political system, built on protecting minority interests against the tyranny of the majority, has in fact always been a system that perpetuates a tyranny of the minority against the public will. This has led to a long revolution of state capture by economic elites whose interests in most cases differ from those of ordinary Americans. Third, American foreign policy represents the most compelling historical evidence against the existence of a US liberal democracy. While the US government has always claimed to be the world's foremost champion of a rules-based order, it has historically acted in cynical self-interest committing countless atrocities, overthrowing democratically elected governments, and sponsoring authoritarian regimes. In addition, the US led global economic order, the so-called Washington Consensus, allows for corporate lawlessness and mass exploitation both in the US and abroad.

CRITIQUES OF THE US LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Although liberal democracy is a consensus term Americans have used to describe their political-economic system, critics have often disagreed. Edward Said savaged Western liberal democracy, that the US claims to represent, as an 'ideological fiction', with values and ideas that make little sense detached from their historical context of conquest, immigration, and the constant mixing of ideas and people.⁷ His point was that so-called democracies should be judged on their actions rather than their rhetoric. The historian Eric Hobsbawm thought the same as Said when he wrote that 'capitalist liberalism' has an 'empty moral space' at its center that has destroyed non-economic bonds between individuals, as well as pre- or non-capitalist value systems.⁸ He argued that liberal de-

⁶ K.M. Gehl, M.E. Porter, *Why Competition In the Politics Industry Is Failing America. A Strategy for Reinvigorating Our Democracy*, September 2017, at <https://www.hbs.edu/competitiveness/Documents/why-competition-in-the-politics-industry-is-failing-america.pdf>, 19 February 2025.

⁷ E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 2003, p. 349.

⁸ E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, London 1995, p. 201.

mocracies in Europe and the US tied their fragile fortunes to popular social welfare programs mostly to preserve their elitist systems. Both Said and Hobsbawm pointed out that the Western liberal democracy has always been a convenient abstraction used by elites to legitimize their domestic political oppression and economic exploitation, and foreign (neo)imperialism. The ongoing wealth transfer to economic elites resulting in public austerity and growing wealth inequalities in Western countries, and the imposition of so-called structural adjustments immiserating the so-called Global South are proof that Said and Hobsbawm were correct.

In the US, critics have been taking on the sacred myths of liberal democracy for over a century. There is a large literature that challenges the discursive ideal that democratic ideals, enshrined in the Constitution, and personified by the exalted Founding Fathers, have been making democracy historically stronger. One criticism is that the economy has always been of far greater priority than upholding democratic standards for most Americans rich and poor. This has led to a system where economic elites often accumulate great political power, giving it up only during economic crises to save the system. The New Deal (F. D. Roosevelt's 'populist'⁹ policies to save US capitalism, 1933-1938) and the Great Society (L. B. Johnson's civil rights and anti-poverty policies, 1964-1968) are often cited examples of such give-and-take. Progressive critics point to these examples as the golden era of US liberal democracy measurable by the rebalancing of power between politics and economics enabled by low public opinion of business elites, and high public approval of political ones, as well as the separation of the two elites into two adversarial groups. More radical critics disagree documenting the historical stability of 'power elite'¹⁰ networks of business leaders and government officials, operating out of public oversight as a 'corporate overworld',¹¹ 'deep state'¹² regime. Ironically, Trump also uses the term deep state in a strikingly similar way to rail against the unelected bureaucracy and unpatriotic business leaders. However, he does not seek to eliminate the deep state but merely replace its adversarial elite networks with ones friendly to his corporate agenda.

Traditionally some of the most important critiques of American liberal democracy have come from African-American elites. Writer James Baldwin labeled it a 'criminal system' based on mass theft and oppression.¹³ He wrote that Black people's lived experience was proof that the standard white people claim to live by was a lie. The civil rights leader Martin Luther King launched a Poor People's Campaign striving to get American liberal democracy to live up to its ideals. He argued that the system was corrupt and

⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁰ C.W. Mills, *The Power Elite*, New York 2000.

¹¹ A. Good, *American Exception. Empire and the Deep State*, New York, 2022, p. 36.

¹² Ibid., p. 48.

¹³ J. Baldwin, "Letter From A Region in My Mind," *The New Yorker*, 17 November 1962, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>, 15 February 2025.

immoral because of ‘three evils’: racism, militarism, and materialism.¹⁴ More recently, the legal scholars Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado developed critical race theory (CRT), which questions the foundations of the liberal order as universal and neutral.¹⁵ Instead, CRT scholars have documented ongoing structural racism in the US political and legal systems, and, joined by some African-American public intellectuals, called for reparations.¹⁶ Despite the overwhelming evidence of the system’s unequal treatment of minorities, white Americans refuse to accept that race keeps the US from achieving its liberal democratic ideals.¹⁷

Adding to these powerful critiques of US liberal democracy are polls that have shown Americans’ deep disapproval of their elected representatives in Congress. In fact, Americans’ public trust in government is the lowest it has ever been in the almost seventy years of polling.¹⁸ The polling has also revealed that 70-83% of Americans believe that politicians only listen to special interest groups or paid lobbyists. Eighty-five percent don’t believe that their elected representatives care about them, and 72% think there should be limits on money in politics.¹⁹ Another recent poll showed that Americans’ confidence in the US judiciary is at the lowest level ever measured; 65% have no confidence in the judicial system.²⁰ There is an additional poll that completes the picture. Asked which institutions Americans trusted the most, they chose small businesses, the police, and the military. In contrast they showed low levels of trust in big businesses, tech corporations, media, and the US government.²¹

There are two ways to interpret these polls, both furthering the critique of US liberal democracy. The first interpretation may be that decades of corporate propaganda has failed to convince Americans that corporations are the only trustworthy guardians and guarantors of the American Dream. Yet many people still believe that the government should be run by successful business leaders. Trump’s so-called war on the deep state partially reflects the public’s perceived desire to run government like a business. Specifically, Trump’s unconfirmed appointment of Elon Musk into the role of government

¹⁴ K. Nash, M. Rosenberg, “The Revolutionary King; MLK’s The Three Evils of Society, ‘the sickness of racism, materialism & militarism,’” 20 January 2020, at <https://archive.org/details/carson2020ntl2>, 22 February 2025.

¹⁵ R. Delgado, J. Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory. An Introduction*, New York 2017.

¹⁶ T.N. Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>, 19 February 2025.

¹⁷ K. Hurst, “Americans are Divided On Whether Society Overlooks Racial Discrimination Or Sees It Where It Doesn’t Exist,” *PEW Research Center*, 25 August 2023, at <https://pewrsr.ch/45GETYM>, 24 February 2025.

¹⁸ “Public Trust In Government: 1958-2024,” *PEW Research Center*, 4 December 2025, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>, 18 February 2025.

¹⁹ “Americans’ Dismal Views of the Nation’s Politics,” *PEW Research Center*, 19 September 2023, at <https://pewrsr.ch/3t5xzry>, 16 February 2025.

²⁰ B. Vigers, L. Saad, “Americans Pass Judgement On Their Courts,” *Gallup*, 17 December 2024, at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/653897/americans-pass-judgment-courts.aspx>, 15 February 2025.

²¹ L. Saad, “Historically Low Faith In US Institutions Continues,” *Gallup*, 6 July 2023, at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508169/historically-low-faith-institutions-continues.aspx>, 12 February 2025.

efficiency overlord, as well as his appointments of wealthy business leaders into prominent government positions seem to correspond to a plurality of the public's opinion. But Trump's mixing of business with politics is not anything radically new; it continues a long-running trend of the so-called revolving door between the private and public sectors. Ironically, while Trump's critics are offended by Musk, they are silent about the revolving door because even they are part of a powerful consensus in US society that private-sector business skills bring efficiency and competence to the public sector. Furthermore, many in their ranks have taken advantage of precisely the same networks of power, money, and prestige that have allowed business elites to become entrenched in government.

The second interpretation of the polls may be that the political elites ignore public sentiment and demands because they are doing the bidding of their corporate masters. This certainly corresponds to Americans' negative views of corporate influence in government. But it seems at odds with Americans' preference for running government like a business. This process of holding conflicting and contradictory beliefs and seeking out information that confirms existing beliefs is a common feature of American political psychology called cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias.²² It is the outcome of very limited political choices under a party duopoly, and corporate-controlled media that silos and customizes news to reinforce existing political views. The outcome is a divided, cynical, and frustrated electorate making compromised choices that could be avoidable in a more diverse and representative democracy.²³

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

This quote attributed to James Carville, a long-time Democrat strategist, who steered Bill Clinton to the presidency, symbolized the 'Third Way' in American politics, which led to a rapid globalization of the US economy. In fairness to Clinton, the neoliberal era of deregulation, privatization, and the wholesale transformation of the state from serving the public to an enterprise, began under President Carter in the late 1970s. While many critics of neoliberalism point to the 1971 Powell Memo²⁴ as the rallying cry for business to take back government from New Deal progressives, the US state has always served corporate interests before its citizens. Economic historians point out that government at all levels was always administered by private-public partnerships that prioritized business interests.²⁵ Traditionally, American business interests have always had great power and influence over the political system as evidenced by

²² T. Artiaga Gonzalez, F. Capozza, G.D. Granic, "Cognitive Dissonance, Political Participation, and Changes in Policy Preferences," *Journal of Economic Psychology*, vol. 105 (2024), pp. 1-13.

²³ K.M. Gehl, M.E. Porter, *Why Competition In the Politics Industry Is Failing America...*

²⁴ L.F. Powell, *The Powell Memo*, at <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/powellmemo/>, 13 February 2025.

²⁵ B. Cebul, *Illusions of Progress: Business, Poverty, and Liberalism in the American Century*, Philadelphia 2023.

the aversion of economic planning, vocal political support of free market capitalism, suppression of workers' organizations, and the revolving door that allows political and business elites to run both public and private institutions. Taking into account that US law directs corporations to make profits for their shareholders or owners, irrespective of social and environmental costs, we end up with the current system of private benefit and social cost. Additionally, there has been a strong push by corporations to privatize the remaining lucrative public services, especially education and Social Security (pensions and health care), to consolidate corporate power over the economy.

This 'cannibal capitalism'²⁶ has always strived to turn citizens into clients, commodify nature, and strictly limit civil society and popular dissent by capturing the legislative and judicial branches of government.²⁷ In short, it has always stamped its illiberal corporate authoritarianism on the US political and civic life.²⁸ Its current iteration, 'surveillance capitalism', a libertarian, high-tech system of social manipulation, control, and exploitation threatens to annihilate the remaining spaces of political and personal freedom and capacity for organized dissent.²⁹ In fact, it can be interpreted as the final stage of state capture by authoritarian corporate elites, who extract private benefits and impose public costs on the American people as they reshape the final remnants of a historically weak social welfare state into a corporate welfare regime.

US FOREIGN POLICY: (NEO)LIBERALISM = (NEO)CONSERVATISM

Traditionally, American voters have been preoccupied with domestic issues, paying little attention to US foreign policy unless it impacts them directly through economic instability or political conflict. The lack of public interest has given corporate and political elites complete control over US foreign policy, which they market as enlightened, self-interested proselytization of Western values.³⁰ Using a vast network of foreign policy think tanks and corporate media to propagandize Americans that their government is the guardian of humanity's universal values, the foreign policy establishment has instead practiced policies that have been on balance illiberal, cynical, and at best pragmatic.

At times the establishment confirmation bias production fails leading to mass cognitive dissonance, manifested as dissent, which becomes a threat to the elite foreign policy monopoly. One significant example was the Vietnam War (1960-1975),

²⁶ N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism. How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet, and What We Can Do About It*, London 2022.

²⁷ L. Epstein, M. Gulati, "A Century of Business in the Supreme Court," *Minnesota Law Review*, vol. 107 (2022), pp. 49-74.

²⁸ E. Anderson *Private Government. How Employers Rule Our Lives (And Why We Don't Talk About It)*, Princeton 2017.

²⁹ S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for the Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London 2019.

³⁰ S. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (1993), pp. 22-49.

which caused a significant rupture in US society, and open rebellion against its foreign policy elites, who were sacrificing ordinary Americans on the altar of ideology. American anti-war activists and civil rights leaders pointed to the countless US war crimes against the Vietnamese people, and mass deception of the American public, as evidence that the government's liberal democratic values were hypocritical and empty. However, the US foreign policy establishment remained unshaken, drawing on the support of the so-called 'silent majority' of patriotic Americans. Subsequently the establishment consolidated its power by creating networks of foreign policy think tanks to disseminate 'expert' analysis, and by expanding and enhancing the security state to monitor the public and keep it in the dark. To date, this strategy has been producing tacit public support or at least passive acquiescence to US foreign policy.

The recent late-stage meltdown of neoliberal globalization is today's foreign policy crisis in the US. What began as the post-Cold War triumphalism of a global liberal democratic order soon began collapsing under the weight of its contradictions such as the absolutist power of supranational governance institutions often representing corporate interests over national ones. In fact, the globalist discourse disparaged the nation-state as an antiquated, corrupt, and inefficient institution. Corporate-sponsored neoliberal theocrats adhering to the Washington Consensus of deregulation, free trade, and public sector privatization were installed throughout the world in a series of soft coups tied to preferential market access, development loans, and promises of private investment.³¹ When reluctant nations opposed or rebelled against the neoliberal consensus, they were overthrown by economic discipline or regime change. America's neoconservative muscular militarism became US foreign policy's stick to its neoliberal carrot.³²

Most Americans, conditioned by neoliberal and neoconservative propaganda that coupled US foreign policies to unassailable positive American values such as liberty and free markets, went along until the policies' fallout hit home. The War on Terror started out with mass American public support, only to degenerate into a forever war that most people detest because they see it as unwinnable and a waste of scarce resources. Free trade became synonymous with deindustrialization that replaced good jobs with poorly paid ones without benefits, corporate malfeasance, and government indifference. To most people the government was ignoring them, and listening only to the wealthy, who became richer and more powerful by rigging the system to help themselves, and imposing austerity and poverty on the public.³³ To enable such wealth accumulation by dispossession,³⁴ elites have as usual deployed propaganda to scapegoat unscrupulous nations who are taking advantage of American generosity, or immigrants who take Americans' jobs. Trade has always been an integral part of US imperialism, opening markets

³¹ J.R. Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism: And the Reinvention of the World*, Toronto 2005.

³² The Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources For a New Century*, at <https://archive.org/details/ProjectForANewAmericanCenturyRebuildingAmericasDefenses>, 14 February 2025.

³³ M. Desmond, *Poverty By America*, New York 2023.

³⁴ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford 2005.

for investment and goods, securing access to important commodities, and disciplining nations that dared to seek better terms. Immigration has always meant access to a low-cost, flexible, compliant, and disposable pool of workers that can be useful in keeping wages and social reproduction costs down, and breaking up unions to curb dissent.

In US foreign policy, neoliberalism and neoconservatism represent the cognitive dissonance between consensus and coercion resolved by American cultural propaganda often known as soft power. Corporate media and entertainment industries provide Americans with limitless disinformation reproducing the confirmation bias that the US is a force for global good. Therefore, most Americans passively consent to coercive US foreign policy because they believe it protects their values, which many think are synonymous with universal human values. However, the historical record clearly shows that US foreign policy has always been based on narrow elite self-interest, sometimes overlapping with national interests, but never in the interests of some form of universal liberal democracy.³⁵

CONCLUSION

It is ironic and ahistorical for US liberal establishment to label the Trump administration as ‘populist’, by which they mean authoritarianism hiding behind an imaginary mandate from ‘the people’. In fact, what they ignore is that populism in the US was a grassroots movement of self-organized farmers and their allies, who tried to democratize America’s duopolistic oligarchy in the late 19th and early 20th century.³⁶ The movement coalesced into the Populist (or People’s) Party whose candidates won governorships, Congressional seats, and its leaders ran for the Presidency five times. These populists were the only genuinely representative movement that attempted to democratize the US political system, yet their name now stands for those who wish to destroy American liberal democracy.

In fact, as I tried to show in this essay, there is plenty of evidence questioning the very existence of a liberal democratic system in the US today and in the past. Historical formations of power elites from business and government have restricted access and control of the political system to themselves by convincing the US public that they act in their interest. However, critics have demonstrated that power elites usually act in self-interest, often ignoring public interests and opinions.³⁷ They also deploy powerful symbolic discourses of individual liberty, free enterprise, and meritocracy to legitimize their iron grip on power.³⁸ Furthermore, power elites have traditionally used the crisis of democracy discourse to consolidate public deference to elite power and leadership.

³⁵ H. Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, New York 2015.

³⁶ T. Frank, *The People, no. A Brief History of Anti-Populism*, New York 2020.

³⁷ M. Gilens, B.I. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average American Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2014), pp. 564-581.

³⁸ M. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, New York 2020.

This brings me back to Trump. During and after the Great Recession (2007-2009) the US government under both parties bailed out the financial sector which caused the recession and allowed many Americans to lose their homes and jobs. To make matters worse none of the financiers were held accountable for the disaster they caused. This set off two popular movements: the progressive Occupy movement and the conservative Tea Party movement. The spontaneous, grassroots Occupy movement called for a people's democracy similar to the Populist Party more than a century ago, and was promptly absorbed by the Democratic party, its message diluted and its activists co-opted. The Tea Party movement, mobilized and funded by business elites, found a solid base in the Republican party, its message packaged as a return to traditional American values of limited government. Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement is one of the Tea Party's offshoots, along with other conservative or originalist movements, which have taken hold of people's anxieties about economic and social issues and connected them to an invented, glorious past. A people with little regard for their history can easily be manipulated by political ideologies built on myths and invented traditions.³⁹ Some, like Trump's supporters, can be persuaded that America was a great democracy, and returning to that past will make it great again. Others, such as Trump's opponents, believe that America's historical progress is threatened by a movement that is breaking with traditional democratic values. My point is that they are both wrong. There is no crisis of liberal democracy because the US has never been a liberal democracy. American democracy has always been an invention of the power elite used to reproduce a tyranny of the minority that takes and consolidates power from the people.

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³⁹ G. Vidal, *Imperial America. Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*, New York 2004.

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Mike KOHOUT – a professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at California State University, San Bernardino. He is interested in US geopolitics, urban geography, and political-economic geography. He has written on suburbanization in California, immigration, labor, and protest politics in the US and Mexico, and environmental planning in European cities.