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Investigative historian

Jimmy Carter Is Correct That the U.S. Is No Longer a Democracy

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On July 28, Thom Hartmann interviewed former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and, at the very end of his show (as if this massive question were merely an afterthought), asked him his opinion of the 2010 *Citizens United* decision and the 2014 *McCutcheon* decision, both decisions by the five Republican judges on the U.S. Supreme Court. These two historic decisions enable unlimited secret money (including foreign money) now to pour into U.S. political and judicial campaigns. Carter answered:

It violates the essence of what made America a great country in its political system. Now it's just an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery being the essence of getting the nominations for president or being elected president. And the same thing applies to governors, and U.S. Senators and congress members. So, now we've just seen a subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors, who want and expect, and sometimes get, favors for themselves after the election is over. ... At the present time the incumbents, Democrats and Republicans, look upon this unlimited money as a great benefit to themselves. Somebody that is already in Congress has a great deal more to sell."

He was then cut off by the program, though that statement by Carter should have been the *start* of the program, not its *end*. (And the program didn't end with an invitation for him to return to discuss this crucial matter in depth -- something for which he's qualified.)

So, was this former president's provocative allegation merely his opinion? Or was it actually lots more than that? It was *lots* more than that.

Only a single empirical study has actually been done in the social sciences regarding whether the historical record shows that the United States has been, during the survey's period, which in that case was between 1981 and 2002, a democracy (a nation whose leaders represent the public-at-large), or instead an aristocracy (or 'oligarchy') -- a nation in which only the desires of the richest citizens end up being reflected in governmental actions. This study was titled "[Testing Theories of American Politics](#)," and it was published by Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page in the journal *Perspectives on Politics*, issued by the American Political Science Association in September 2014. I had summarized it earlier, on April 14, 2014, while the article was still awaiting its publication.

The headline of my summary-article was "[U.S. Is an Oligarchy Not a Democracy Says Scientific Study](#)." I reported:

The clear finding is that the U.S. is an oligarchy, no democratic country, at all. American democracy is a sham, no matter how much it's pumped by the oligarchs who run the country (and who control the nation's 'news' media).

I then quoted the authors' own summary: "The preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy."

The scientific study closed by saying: "In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule -- at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes." A few other tolerably clear sentences managed to make their ways into this well-researched, but, sadly, atrociously written, paper, such as: "The preferences of economic elites (as measured by our proxy, the preferences of 'affluent' citizens) have far more independent impact upon policy change than the preferences of average citizens do." In other words, they found: The rich rule the U.S.

Their study investigated specifically "1,779 instances between 1981 and 2002 in which a national survey of the general public asked a favor/oppose question about a proposed policy change," and then the policy-follow-ups, of whether or not the polled public preferences had been turned into policies, or, alternatively, whether the relevant corporate-lobbied positions had instead become public policy on the given matter, irrespective of what the public had wanted concerning it.

The study period, 1981-2002, covered the wake of the landmark 1976 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Buckley v. Valeo*, which had started the aristocratic assault on American democracy, and which seminal (and bipartisan) pro-aristocratic court decision is described as follows by [wikipedia](#):

[It] struck down on First Amendment grounds several provisions in the 1974 Amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act. The most prominent portions of the case struck down limits on spending in campaigns, but upheld the provision limiting the size of individual contributions to campaigns. The Court also narrowed, and then upheld, the Act's disclosure provisions, and struck down (on separation of powers grounds) the make-up of the Federal Election Commission, which as written allowed Congress to directly appoint members of the Commission, an executive agency.

Basically, the *Buckley* decision, and subsequent (increasingly partisan Republican) Supreme Court decisions, have allowed aristocrats to buy and control politicians.

Already, the major 'news' media were owned and controlled by the aristocracy, and 'freedom of the press' was really just freedom of aristocrats to control the 'news' -- to frame public issues in the ways the owners want. The media managers who are appointed by those owners select, in turn, the editors who, in their turn, hire only reporters who produce the propaganda that's within the acceptable range for the owners, to be 'the news' as the public comes to know it.

But, now, in the post-*Buckley-v.-Valeo* world, from Reagan on (and the resulting study-period of 1981-2002), aristocrats became almost totally free to buy also the political candidates they wanted. The 'right' candidates, plus the 'right' 'news'-reporting about them, has thus bought the 'right' people to 'represent' the public, in the new American 'democracy,' which Jimmy Carter now aptly calls "subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors."

Carter -- who had entered office in 1977, at the very start of that entire era of transition into an aristocratically controlled United States (and he left office in 1981, just as the study-period was starting) -- expressed his opinion that, in the wake now of the two most extreme pro-aristocratic U.S. Supreme Court decisions ever (which are *Citizens United* in 2010, and *McCutcheon* in 2014), American democracy is really only past tense, not present tense at all -- no longer a reality.

He is saying, in effect, that, no matter how much the U.S. was a dictatorship by the rich during 1981-2002 (the Gilens-Page study era), it's far worse now.

Apparently, Carter is correct: *The New York Times* front page on Sunday 2 August 2015 bannered, "Small Pool of Rich Donors Dominates Election Giving," and reported that:

A New York Times analysis of Federal Election Commission reports and Internal Revenue Service records shows that the fund-raising arms race has made most of the presidential hopefuls deeply dependent on a small pool of the richest Americans. The concentration of donors is greatest on the Republican side, according to the Times analysis, where consultants and lawyers have pushed more aggressively to exploit the looser fund-raising rules that have fueled the rise of super PACs. Just 130 or so families and their businesses provided more than half the money raised through June by Republican candidates and their super PACs."

The *Times* study shows that the Republican Party is overwhelmingly advantaged by the recent unleashing of big-corporate money power. All of the evidence suggests that though different aristocrats compete against each other for the biggest chunks of whatever the given nation has to offer, they all compete on the same side against the public, in order to lower the wages of their workers, and to lower the standards for consumers' safety and welfare so as to increase their own profits (transfer their costs and investment-losses onto others); and, so, now, the U.S. is soaring again toward Gilded Age economic inequality, perhaps to surpass the earlier era of unrestrained robber barons. And, the *Times* study shows: even in the Democratic Party, the mega-donations are going to only the most conservative (pro-corporate, anti-public) Democrats. Grass-roots politics could be vestigial, or even dead, in the new America.

The question has become whether the unrestrained power of the aristocracy is locked in this time even more permanently than it was in that earlier era. Or will there be yet another FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) to restore a democracy that once was? Or is a president like that any longer even possible in America?

As for today's political incumbents: they now have their careers for as long as they want and are willing to do the biddings of their masters. And, then, they retire to become, themselves, new members of the aristocracy, such as the Clintons have done, and such as the Obamas will do. (Of course, the Bushes have been aristocrats since early in the last century.)

Furthermore, the new age of aristocratic control is not merely national but international in scope; so, the global aristocracy have probably found the formula that will keep them in control until they destroy the entire world. What's especially interesting is that, with all of the many tax-exempt, "non-profit" "charities," which aristocrats have established, none of them is warring to defeat the aristocracy itself -- to defeat the aristocrats' system of exploitation of the public. It's the one thing they won't create a 'charity' for; none of them will go to war against the exploitative interests of themselves and of their own exploitative peers. They're all in this together, even though they do compete amongst themselves for dominance, as to which ones of them will lead against the public. And the public seem to accept this modern form of debt-bondage, perhaps because of the 'news' they see, and because of the news they don't see (such as this).

Investigative historian Eric Zuesse is the author, most recently, of [They're Not Even Close: The Democratic vs. Republican Economic Records, 1910-2010](#), and of [CHRIST'S VENTRILOQUISTS: The Event that Created Christianity](#).

MORE: [Jimmy Carter Citizens United Democracy Video](#)

Conversations

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Add a comment...



James Jones · Murray State University

Technically, the US is a republic. In practice, it is most certainly an oligarchy.

Like · Reply · 1017 · 23 hrs



Terry Gordon · Morehouse College

Wow, right on James, I was going to point out that our pledge of allegiance is "to the Republic, for which it stands", and so many brain-dead folks don't see or recognize that.

We may have practiced Democracy in the past, but that was put on that slippery slope long before our current President came into office.

So for those of you saying you want proof, read the pledge.

Nuff' said.

Like · Reply · 182 · 22 hrs



Mark Schmalstieg · Weir High School

Correction..... Constitutional Republic that has morphed into a mobocracy!

Like · Reply · 164 · 22 hrs



Tom Cat · Tiburon, California

Always has been, check your history

Like · Reply · 31 · 22 hrs

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James Sefcak · Colorado Technical University

Carter nail it! Thanks to this Conservative Court's ruling of "Citizens United" has turned our democracy into an oligarchy where the people's vote no longer counts only the very wealthy and corporate CEO's are heard. Citizen's United will now go down in history books as the worse ruling every made by the Supreme Court. They single handedly destroyed American democracy which the conservatives have always wanted to do for the sake of extreme wealth and power.

Like · Reply · 145 · 22 hrs



LJ Mercado

Same conservative court that brought us ObamaCare and Gay Marriage?

Like · Reply · 67 · 16 hrs



James Smiley

James--do YOU really think politicians and PEOPLE should vote on issues or for candidates that would specifically affect profit and bottom lines of corporations, businesses, etc---and those entities HAVE NO SAY?? Of course, THAT'S UNCONSTITUTIONAL and that's what the Supreme Court ruled. By your viewpoint, a sitting Congress--and Democrats WOULD, would just vote to limit corporate profits, the next step would be LIMITING INCOME--where does it stop? And they only care about the OTHER party--they would never vote for something that affects their pockets too.

Like · Reply · 15 · 15 hrs



Iconoclast

LJ Mercado Two opinions among the hundreds issued since Roberts

won the nomination to the Court. Yep. A conservative court.

Like · Reply ·  13 · 14 hrs

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Roy Dean · Oklahoma State University

Cannot say that only the Republicans are affected by the influence of corporate money. Hillary Clinton benefits directly from donations and speaking fees paid by corporations world wide and from foreign governments. Obama benefitted from donations from many sources, many of which were wealthy people and corporations owned by liberals.

Like · Reply ·  339 · 23 hrs



Mike Smith

Ya think Roy?

Like · Reply ·  30 · 22 hrs



Laura Kenyon · Billing Manager and group fitness instructor at The Club at Ricochet

2 wrongs do not make a right.

Like · Reply ·  37 · 22 hrs



Roy Dean · Oklahoma State University

Mike Smith I do. If the liberals are appalled by the influence of the Koch Brothers' money they should be equally appalled at the active peddling of political influence the Clintons have engaged in since Bill left office.

Like · Reply ·  142 · 22 hrs

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Randy Winton · CSUN

How can we be a true democracy when that presupposes an educated and informed people capable of governing themselves? There are too many Huffington Post mass media types shoveling out falsehoods and half truths to too many ingorant and gullible people for democracy to work in today's America.

Like · Reply ·  181 · 23 hrs



Gordon Blacketer · Claypool, Arizona

AND THE LYING FOX DUDES TOO. MANY ARTICLES HAVE APPEARED DELINEATING THEIR LIES. LOOK IT UP. SOME HAVE APPEARED ON FACEBOOK. NO, YOU DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH.

Like · Reply ·  35 · 23 hrs



John Wagner · Consultant at CDI Corporation

Gordon, aren't you an angry little person, typing in all caps? Take a big breath and SHADAP!

Like · Reply ·  68 · 22 hrs



John Smith

Gordon Blacketer Damn, on Facebook no less. Must all be true.
Are you sure you are not from Cesspool Arizona

Like · Reply ·  34 · 22 hrs

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Marti Webster Lanier · Works at Retired

Sooo Are democrats going to List all their donors?? Their are MORE WEALTHY DEMOCRATS THAN REPUBLICANS!

Like · Reply ·  239 · 23 hrs



Lex Clouseau · Siddhartha Night School

How would we know whether there are more Democrats, or Republicans, who are wealthy donors? Isn't that kind of the point?

Like · Reply ·  67 · 23 hrs



Gordon Blacketer · Claypool, Arizona

PROVE IT. SAYING IT DOES NOT MAKE IT SO. WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE? Let us see your research and let us view the facts you discover. To hell with the opinion or rhetoric. Prove it.

Like · Reply ·  79 · 23 hrs



David Clark · Top Commenter at Top Commenter

As usual the libertards/DomeCRATs deny this.

Like · Reply · 96 · 23 hrs

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Gary Gravino

After 7 years of Obama, Carter is definitely right.

Like · Reply · 285 · 23 hrs



Leonard J Shapiro · W.T. Woodson High School

Gary, its not obama fault. its our fault that we allowed this to happen . we have take our eye off of government too long. the start of the erosion of our freedoms was with reagan and has continued with each election.

Like · Reply · 213 · 23 hrs



Jim Nolan

Even a blind squirrel finds an Acorn once in a while.

Like · Reply · 40 · 23 hrs



Gordon Blacketer · Claypool, Arizona

What in the hell are you blubbering about? Oh, I agree Carter is right as even I have commented frequently about. However, Obama is the Oligarch? Good grief. Do research and discover what the King Koch and Prince Koch brothers have been doing in our country even in education and voting rights etc. Get real.

Like · Reply · 183 · 23 hrs

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Richard Smith

Besides the obvious Republic answer, ask and quickly answer the simple question "what 1 thing JC has EVER been correct about?" Good luck!

Like · Reply · 28 · 23 hrs



Thomas McDonald · School of Hard Knocks, The University of Life

He was once the President of the United States. What have you ever done?

Like · Reply · 59 · 23 hrs



Philip Allen · Works at Hurtigruten

Thomas McDonald And he was a good president. Carter is a good man. A man of principle and morality. And as far as I can tell, the only president of the 20th century to not go to war against anybody.

Like · Reply · 95 · 23 hrs



Tom Cat · Tiburon, California

Philip Allen How does his underwear smell?

Like · Reply · 15 · 22 hrs

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Mark Edelman · Hollywood, Florida

Well Jimmy, It took you a very long time to realize that. Shame on you. The 1% and the Blood Sucking Lawyers and Politicians will go to any lengths to make the People of this country and the World Miserable. I only hope that they will be JUDGED after they Die.

Like · Reply · 81 · 23 hrs



June V Citizen

Mark Edelman, I'm sure they will have an in on that too, when they die for judgement.

Like · Reply · 8 · 23 hrs



Leslie Sudberry Jr. · Ashtabula High School

Actually he and a lot of others on both sides of the political spectrum have said this for years , but the media treated these folks in the same manner as the Iraq war critics

Like · Reply ·  28 · 22 hrs



Karl Jones · Staryer University

June V Citizen Judgement after death does not concern itself with finances and political position -- everyone will face the judgement with the same defense.

Like · Reply ·  16 · 22 hrs

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Walter Blevins · Vista, California

In the article, the author refers to a study that was "well-researched but...atrociously written". It's too bad that this article with the information contained in it is also atrociously written.

Like · Reply ·  23 · 23 hrs



Gordon Blacketer · Claypool, Arizona

How so. Saying it does not make it so. You need to take the time to argue your point and stop the stupid rhetoric. We are tired of it. Write your own essay debunking the article with solid and supportable arguement or sit down andshut up.

Like · Reply ·  24 · 23 hrs



Mike Turn

Gordon Blacketer : Is this all you know how to say? However, you saying what you say, doesn't make it so, although you seem to think it does.

Like · Reply ·  8 · 22 hrs



Mike Smith

Spoken like a true oligarch Walter.

Like · Reply ·  6 · 22 hrs

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Mitchell Duerfeldt · Drake University

Jimmy.Love ya man. You sit on the right hand of truth. Reading some of the past "comments" below, its pretty clear how Corporate America has been able to drive the political agendas in this country. There really are a bunch of uneducated right-wing nut jobs in the country. Very sad.

Like · Reply ·  22 · 22 hrs



Chris Lowell · Meisterschule Stuttgart

Steven George Andruchow all the noble American proletarian cares about is getting high, playing Candy Crush and getting tattoos anymore. It irritates them to have to work, and they're demanding higher wages, without it they won't feel motivated to put down their smart phones even to visit the restroom. That those with money have no real interest offering handouts to such people should be clear, and that the proles attempts at blackmailing the mean old rich people by downloading the newest phone app just doesn't work

Like · Reply ·  1 · 3 hrs

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