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

Eric Zuesse

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On July 28th, 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 aftethought), 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 14 April 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).