

INDEPENDENT MINDSET

by

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Preface

I drive a cab for a living. Twelve hours a night, all over Springfield, Missouri. Rich neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods, the hospital at 3 a.m., the bar crowd at closing time. You want to know what America thinks? Don't watch cable news. Drive a cab. Everybody talks in a cab. Republicans, Democrats, people who gave up on both a long time ago — they all end up in my back seat, and they all tell me the same thing in different words: *the system is rigged, and nobody in Washington works for people like me.*

They're right.

I wrote this book because I'm tired of watching good people get played. Tired of watching working folks fight each other over whatever outrage the news cooked up this week while both parties cash checks from the same donors. Tired of being told my only choices are red or blue when I know most of this country lives somewhere in between — or outside the whole rotten frame.

This isn't a Republican book. It isn't a Democrat book. If you're looking for somebody to tell you your side is the good guys, put this down now, because both sides are getting it in these pages. I hold them to the same standard: what did you promise working people, and what did you deliver? The receipts are in here. Look them up yourself if you don't believe me.

What this *is*, is a book for the 99 percent. The people who get up and go to work. The people who pay the taxes, fight the wars, keep the lights on, and get nothing but contempt from the political class in return. It's for the independents — the biggest group of voters in America, the ones both parties are scared to death of — and for anybody who's ever felt politically homeless.

I didn't write this with hate. I don't hate my neighbors, and I don't want you hating yours. The anger in this book is aimed where it belongs: at the money, the machine, and the men and women who sold out. What I want is lawful, peaceful, democratic change — the kind the Founders actually designed the system for, before the parties captured it.

Read it. Check the facts. Argue with it. Then think for yourself. That's the whole point.

That's the independent mindset.

— Alexander J.S. Heidenreich

Chapter 1: The Two-Party Trap

The Game Was Over Before You Got Here

Here's a fact that should stop you cold.

Right now, more Americans call themselves independent than belong to either political party. A record 45 percent of U.S. adults identified as political independents in 2025, according to Gallup — the highest number they've ever measured. Republicans and Democrats each claimed just 27 percent. Read that again: the single largest political group in America isn't red and isn't blue. It's the people who want nothing to do with either of them.

And yet — and here's the part that ought to make your blood boil — those 45 percent have almost no representation in Washington. Nearly every seat in Congress, nearly every governor's mansion, nearly every statehouse is held by a Republican or a Democrat. The group that outnumbers both parties combined is, for all practical purposes, shut out of power.

How does that happen? How do you get a country where the majority of people don't want either party, but either party is all anyone ever gets?

It happens because the game was over before you got here. The trap was built, spring-loaded, and waiting long before you ever cast your first ballot. And it wasn't built by accident, and it wasn't built by one party. It was built by both of them, working together, and they both keep it oiled and running to this day.

I'm going to show you exactly how it works. There are four locks on the trap, and once you see them, you can never unsee them.

Lock one: the ballot maze — laws, written by the two major parties, that make it brutally hard and ruinously expensive for anyone outside the club to even get their name on the ballot.

Lock two: the debate stage — seized from an independent civic organization and handed to a commission run by the two parties themselves, with a polling rule designed so no outsider can ever clear it.

Lock three: the maps — both parties drawing their own district lines so politicians get to choose their voters instead of the other way around.

Lock four: the math — a winner-take-all voting system that throws away every vote cast for anyone who doesn't finish first, punishing independents for even showing up.

And once those four locks are in place, the machine runs a fifth trick on your mind: it convinces you that voting for anyone outside the two parties is "throwing your vote away." That part isn't even a law. It's just psychology, hammered into you every election cycle by the same people who built the trap. And it works — because the trap makes it true. The locks manufacture the very conditions that let them call your vote "wasted."

Now, I want to be clear about something before we go any further, because this matters. This chapter is not going to pick on one party. I know the temptation. You're probably mad at one of them right now — maybe both. Good. But if you walk away from this chapter thinking "it's all the Republicans' fault" or "it's all the Democrats' fault," then you've missed the whole point, and honestly, the machine has already won. Because blaming one party is how the trap keeps you inside it. The red team points at the blue team, the blue team points at the red team, and meanwhile both of them are standing on the same trapdoor holding the same levers.

Every lock I'm about to show you was built, maintained, or enthusiastically exploited by both parties. Every single one. That's not a coincidence. That's the trap.

Lock One: The Ballot Maze

Let's start with the most basic question in democracy: how does a person get their name on the ballot?

If you're a Republican or a Democrat, the answer is: you don't have to do much of anything. In every state in this country, the two major parties get automatic ballot access. Their candidates are placed on the ballot by law, no signatures required, because the law rewards parties for how they performed in the last election. The winners of yesterday get a free pass today. It's the political equivalent of the casino comping the high rollers' rooms while everyone else pays full price at the door.

If you're anyone else — an independent, a Libertarian, a Green, a brand-new party — the answer is: you run a gauntlet. Fifty different gauntlets, actually, because every state has its own rules, its own deadlines, its own signature requirements, and its own little traps. And who wrote those rules? As Reuters put it in a January 2024 investigation, a "patchwork of U.S. laws designed by Republicans and Democrats, the dominant parties which control statehouses nationwide." Not designed by some neutral referee. Designed by the two teams that already won.

Let me show you what the gauntlet looks like in practice, because the numbers are staggering.

In California, an independent candidate for president must collect roughly 219,000 valid signatures — more than any other state — and they get just 105 days to do it, in a window that starts in April. Think about what that means. You need an army of paid petition-gatherers, working full time, for three and a half months, at a cost that runs into the millions of dollars, just to get your name printed on the ballot. Before you've bought a single ad. Before you've hired a single staffer. Before a single voter has heard a word you've said.

In Texas, an independent needs 113,151 signatures in just 70 days — and here's the kicker — anyone who voted in either party's presidential primary is disqualified from signing. So you can't just go stand outside a busy polling place. The state has pre-shrunk your pool of eligible signers, and the clock is ticking.

In Florida, an independent needs 145,040 signatures to get on the presidential ballot.

In New York, the petition requirement was tripled in 2020 — tripled — to 45,000 signatures, including at least 500 signatures in half of the state's 26 congressional districts, all collected in a six-week window. That 2020 change, pushed through by then-Governor Andrew Cuomo, kicked the Libertarian, Green, and Independence parties clean off the New York ballot by rewriting the definition of a qualified party. Let that sink in: one governor, one law, three parties gone. That's not democracy in action. That's a bouncer at the door deciding who gets in.

In North Carolina, the two-tier system tells the whole story in one comparison: to get a new party on the ballot takes a little over 13,000 signatures, but to run as an independent candidate takes more than 83,000. Same ballot, same election, six times the burden — because you had the nerve to run without a party label.

In Arizona, an independent needs about 43,000 signatures. In Indiana, an independent needs 36,944 signatures — two percent of the vote for secretary of state — tied with Wyoming for the highest percentage requirement in the country. In West Virginia, an independent needs 7,948 signatures and has to register in each of the state's 55 counties where they want to collect. In Maine, a new minor party has to collect 5,000 signatures from residents willing to switch their party registration — and when the No Labels organization tried it, Maine's Democratic secretary of state sent letters to everyone who signed, warning them they'd switched parties. About 800 voters rescinded after getting that letter. Imagine that: the government itself sending you a letter that says, "Are you sure you want to do this?" just because you signed a petition for a new party.

Now multiply all of that by fifty states, each with different deadlines, different forms, different rules about who can sign and who can collect and when the clock starts and stops. Running for president as an independent in America requires a legal team in every state, a petition operation in every state, and a war chest big enough to fund all of it before the campaign even begins.

And here's the part that tells you everything about who the system serves: even the workarounds prove the point. In 2024, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Cornel West didn't even try to run as independents in some states — they created their own brand-new political parties, the We the People party and the Justice for All Party, because the law made it easier to invent an entire party from scratch than to run as one man with his own name. Read that sentence again. It was less work to start a new political party than to run as an independent. That's how hostile the maze is.

And getting on the ballot is only half the war. The other half is defending it in court — because the two parties don't just build the maze. They hire lawyers to patrol it.

Watch what happened to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in 2024. He did the work. He collected the signatures. He filed the petitions. And then a New York judge threw him clean off the state's ballot — not for lack of signatures, but because of the address on his paperwork. Judge Christina Ryba ruled that the address Kennedy listed on his nominating petition "was not Kennedy's bona fide and legitimate residence, but merely a 'sham' address that he assumed for the purpose of maintaining his voter registration and furthering his own political aspirations." The court found he'd been "borrowing addresses from friends and relatives" while actually living in California.

Now, maybe the judge was right about where the man sleeps. That's not the point. The point is the machine. An independent candidate climbs one of the steepest petition mountains in the country, and his reward is a courtroom fight over his mailing address. Kennedy's answer was to accuse the Democrats of "showing contempt for democracy" — saying they weren't "confident they can win at the ballot box, so they are trying to stop voters from having a choice." You don't have to be a Kennedy fan to recognize the pattern, because it runs every single cycle: both parties' legal teams fan out across the country challenging outsiders' petitions. Signatures get struck by the hundreds over technicalities. Filing deadlines get litigated down to the minute. Candidates who already spent millions collecting signatures have to spend millions more defending them in front of judges. The ballot maze doesn't just have high walls. It has guards — and the guards bill by the hour to the two parties that built the walls.

And the maze has spawned its own industry. Because the signature thresholds are so punishing, there's a whole professional business of petition gathering — firms that hire clipboard crews at a per-signature price, working state by state, deadline by deadline. Only candidates with serious money can afford them, which means the ballot-access laws don't just filter out the unserious. They filter out the underfunded — which, in a country where the two parties vacuum up nearly all the donor money, means almost everyone outside the club. The law sets the price of admission, the market collects it, and the parties that wrote the law never have to lift a finger. It's the perfect racket: the barrier looks neutral — the same signature count for everybody — but a "neutral" wall that only millionaires can climb isn't neutral at all.

The defenders of this system will tell you these rules exist to keep the ballot from becoming a circus — to stop every crank and publicity-seeker from cluttering up your voting booth. And look, there's a grain of truth in that. Nobody wants a ballot with four hundred names on it. But be honest with yourself: do you really believe California needs 219,000 signatures to keep the cranks out? Do you believe the difference between a serious candidate and a clown is precisely 219,000 signatures gathered in exactly 105 days? No. Those numbers aren't about order. They're about price. They set the admission fee so high that only the two established parties — and the occasional billionaire — can afford to play.

Here's the cab-driver version: imagine two taxi companies in town. They go to city hall together and get a law passed that says their cabs get licensed automatically, but any new cab company has to collect 200,000 signatures in three months just to apply for a license. Then they look you in the eye and say, "Hey, it's a free market. Anyone can compete." That's the ballot maze. It's a free market the way a rigged carnival game is fair.

And it's only lock number one.

Lock Two: The Debate Stage Belongs to Them

If the ballot maze keeps outsiders from getting their names printed, the debate stage keeps them from getting their faces seen. And this lock has the most revealing origin story of them all, because we know exactly who built it, when, and why — and they weren't shy about it.

Before 1988, presidential debates in America were run by the League of Women Voters. The League was a genuine civic organization — nonpartisan, independent of both parties — and it ran the debates as a

public service. But the two major parties didn't like it. The League insisted on real independence: it wouldn't let the campaigns dictate the format, the moderators, the questions, or who got invited. In 1988, the League looked at the demands the Bush and Dukakis campaigns were making — the backstage memoranda, the control over everything — and walked away. The League said the campaigns' demands would "perpetuate a fraud on the American voter," and it pulled out of the debates entirely rather than lend its name to a staged show.

So what happened next? The Republican and Democratic parties created their own debate commission. In 1987, the two parties jointly founded the Commission on Presidential Debates — the CPD — and handed it the keys to the most important stage in American democracy. Understand what that means: the debates weren't taken over by the government, or by journalists, or by some neutral body. They were taken over by the two teams that play the game. The referees work for the home teams.

And who runs this commission? Its longtime co-chairs were Frank Fahrenkopf, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee, and Michael McCurry, who was President Bill Clinton's press secretary. That's the bipartisan leadership of American democracy's debate stage: the former head of the Republican Party and the former spokesman for a Democratic president. They call it "bipartisan." Notice the word. Not nonpartisan. Bipartisan. As in: both of the parties that already run everything. Everyone else need not apply.

Now, for the first few cycles, the CPD didn't even need a formal rule to keep outsiders out. It just did it — with one glaring exception. In 1992, Ross Perot, the Texas billionaire running as an independent, got onto the debate stage. Why? Not because the commission wanted him there. Because the George H.W. Bush campaign demanded his inclusion — Bush's people thought Perot would split the anti-incumbent vote and hurt Clinton — and the Clinton campaign went along. The commission itself objected. As Clinton's own campaign chairman later explained, the CPD was "worried about the precedent of third-party candidates always being included." But the campaigns had cut their deal, so Perot got his podium.

And what happened when Perot got on that stage? It became the most-watched presidential debate in American history. Perot spoke directly to tens of millions of voters, and on Election Day he won about 19 percent of the popular vote — the strongest independent showing in modern American history. Nineteen percent. Nearly one voter in five looked at the Republican and the Democrat, looked at the independent, and chose the independent.

The two parties learned their lesson. In 1996, Perot ran again — and this time, neither party wanted him back. The CPD shut him out, even though 76 percent of American voters said he should be included. Seventy-six percent. More than three out of four voters wanted to hear from the man who'd won nearly a fifth of the vote four years earlier, and the commission said no.

Banning Perot was so obviously, nakedly political that the commission needed cover. So for the 2000 election, the CPD adopted what it called neutral, objective criteria for debate entry. A candidate had to be constitutionally eligible, had to be on the ballot in enough states to theoretically win 270 electoral votes, and — here's the lock — had to average at least 15 percent in five national polls hand-picked by the

commission itself.

The 15 percent rule. Memorize that number, because it's the whole game.

Think about what it demands. To get on the debate stage, you need 15 percent in national polls. But to get 15 percent in national polls, you need name recognition. To get name recognition, you need media coverage. And to get media coverage, you need... to be on the debate stage. It's a perfect circle. A locked room with the key inside. As the Chicago Tribune's editorial board put it when Libertarian Gary Johnson was shut out in 2016, it's nearly impossible to earn the support of 15 percent of the electorate if you don't have regular access to television — or to the debates themselves. The rule demands that you already be famous before you're allowed to become famous.

And the commission gets to hand-pick the five polls. Not any five polls — their five polls. Polls that often don't even include the third-party candidate's name in the first place. You can't poll at 15 percent in a survey that doesn't list you as an option.

The results speak for themselves. Applied retroactively, the 15 percent rule would have excluded every third-party or independent presidential candidate of the television era except Ross Perot in 1992. Every one. And since the rule was adopted in 2000, it has kept out every outsider, every cycle: Ralph Nader, Pat Buchanan, Bob Barr, Gary Johnson — who was on the ballot in 48 states in 2012 and still couldn't get a podium — Jill Stein, and on and on. An organization created and staffed by the Democratic and Republican parties set a bar so high that only Democrats and Republicans can clear it, and then called it fair.

Outsiders have fought back in court. The Libertarian and Green parties, joined by the group Level the Playing Field, sued the CPD over the 15 percent rule, arguing it was designed to protect the two major parties from competition. FairVote filed a brief supporting them, arguing the threshold doesn't exist to create an orderly debate — it exists to keep out unwanted competition. The courts haven't broken the lock. Not yet.

But here's the twist that proves the trap is bigger than any one commission. In 2024, the CPD didn't even get to run the debates. The Republican National Committee had voted back in April 2022 to bar its nominees from CPD debates entirely. Then in May 2024, the Biden and Trump campaigns cut their own private deal: two debates, one on CNN on June 27 and one on ABC on September 10, bypassing the commission completely. The CPD, which had already booked its venues and announced its dates — three presidential debates in September and October, plus a vice-presidential debate — was left standing at the altar. On June 24, 2024, it "regrettably" released its host sites from their contracts.

So the gatekeeper got gated out. Did that open the door for outsiders? Of course not. CNN set its own rules: 15 percent in four separate national polls, plus ballot access in states worth 270 electoral votes. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., running as an independent, hit 15 percent in three qualifying polls — one short — and CNN confirmed him on the ballot in only six states worth 89 electoral votes. He was out. A Puck News/Echelon Insights poll found that 50 percent of voters wanted to see Kennedy in the debate. Half the country wanted a third podium. They got two.

That's the real lesson of 2024. The trap doesn't need the Commission on Presidential Debates anymore. Two campaigns and a cable network can lock the door just as effectively as any commission. The 15 percent rule survived the death of the organization that invented it, because the rule was never really about debates. It was about making sure you never hear a third voice.

Let me put it in cab-driver terms. Imagine the two biggest taxi companies in town hold a big public forum every four years — "Meet Your Drivers!" — and they invite the whole town. But the forum is organized by a committee made up of the two companies' executives. And the rule for getting a microphone is that you must already be as famous as the two big companies. The little independent driver who's been serving his neighborhood for twenty years? Sorry, pal. No microphone for you. And when the town finally gets sick of the committee and the two companies decide to just hold their own forum without it — the little driver still doesn't get a microphone. Because the microphone was never the point. The point was the two companies talking to the town while everyone else watches.

That's lock number two. You can't get on the ballot without a fortune, and you can't get on the stage without already being famous, and you can't get famous without getting on the stage.

Lock Three: They Pick Their Voters

Here's a sentence that should offend every American who hears it: in most elections in this country, the politicians choose their voters. Not the other way around.

That's what gerrymandering is. Every ten years, after the census, the states redraw the lines of their congressional and legislative districts. And in most states, the people holding the pen are the politicians themselves — the state legislators, the governors, the party operatives. So they draw the lines to protect themselves. They pack their opponents' voters into a few districts they'll lose badly, and they spread their own voters across the rest so they'll win comfortably. Political scientists call the two moves "packing" and "cracking," but you don't need the jargon. The plain-English version is: they rig the map so the election is over before anyone votes.

And before you ask — yes, both parties do it. This is one of the locks where the bipartisan guilt is easiest to see, because each party does it wherever it holds the pen, and each party screams bloody murder wherever the other one holds the pen.

Let me give you the freshest example first, because it happened just months ago and it shows you exactly how brazen this has gotten. In the summer of 2025, at President Trump's urging, the Texas legislature redrew its congressional map in the middle of the decade — something that's supposed to happen once every ten years, not whenever the party in power gets nervous. The new map targeted five Democratic-held House seats, aiming to flip them Republican ahead of the 2026 midterms. It was so aggressive that more than 50 Democratic state lawmakers literally fled the state to deny the legislature a quorum and block the vote. They left Texas. That's how far outside normal this was — elected officials fleeing the state to stop a vote on a map.

The Democrats came back, the Republicans passed the map anyway on a party-line vote, and Governor Greg Abbott signed it into law on August 29, 2025. A federal court blocked it that November, ruling it likely discriminated against minority voters. Then in December 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court voted 6-3 to let Texas use the map anyway, and in April 2026 the Court cleared it for the 2026 elections. The map could take the Texas delegation from 25 Republicans and 13 Democrats to as many as 30 Republicans and 8 Democrats — not because Texas voters changed their minds, but because someone redrew the lines.

Now — and this is the part that matters for this book — the Democrats didn't respond by demanding fair maps. They responded with their own gerrymander. California, the biggest Democratic-run state, answered Texas with Proposition 50, approved by voters in November 2025, which sidelined the state's independent redistricting commission and installed a Democratic-drawn map designed to flip up to five Republican-held seats. Tit for tat. Then the dominoes fell: Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Alabama, Tennessee, and Florida — where the governor signed a map adding four Republican seats — all launched their own mid-decade redraws. Indiana's legislature killed a Trump-backed map 31-19 in December 2025, but the attempt alone tells you the fever had spread nationwide.

So there you have it. The two parties, redrawing the country's congressional maps mid-decade like kids trading baseball cards, each one grabbing seats, each one pointing at the other and crying foul. And if you're an independent voter watching this? Your district just got carved up by one party or the other, your vote just got packed or cracked, and nobody — nobody — drew a single line with you in mind.

The courts could stop this. They choose not to. In 2019, in a case called *Rucho v. Common Cause*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that partisan gerrymandering — drawing maps specifically to help one party beat the other — is a political question that federal courts won't touch. Read that again. The highest court in the land looked at politicians rigging elections through map-drawing and said: not our problem. Federal judges can strike down a map for discriminating by race, but if a legislature says "oh no, we weren't discriminating by race, we were just discriminating by party" — which is what South Carolina's legislature essentially argued when it moved Black voters out of a competitive district — the federal courthouse door is closed. In fact, that's exactly what happened in *Alexander v. South Carolina NAACP*, where the Court's majority accepted the state's claim that it had moved voters for partisan reasons, not racial ones, and let the map stand. The message to every map-rigger in America: just say it's about party, and you're home free.

There have been a couple of rulings that cut the other way, and I want to mention them honestly, because the full picture matters. In *Allen v. Milligan* in 2023, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that Alabama had to draw an additional congressional district where Black voters could elect their preferred candidate, under the Voting Rights Act. And in *Moore v. Harper*, also in 2023, the Court rejected the so-called "independent state legislature" theory — the wild idea that state legislatures could draw federal election maps with zero oversight from state courts or state constitutions. Both good outcomes. But notice what they are: they police racial discrimination and they preserve a role for state courts. Neither one touches the core business of partisan gerrymandering. Neither one stops a red legislature from cracking blue voters or a blue legislature from packing red ones. The machine's favorite trick rolls on, untouched.

Here's what it means for you, the independent voter, the independent candidate. Gerrymandering doesn't just waste your vote on Election Day. It wastes your candidacy before Election Day. When a district is drawn to be safely Republican or safely Democratic, the only election that matters is the party primary — the small, hardcore, party-loyal slice of voters who pick the nominee. The general election is a coronation. An independent candidate in a gerrymandered district isn't running against an opponent; they're running against arithmetic. The district was engineered so that a Republican wins or a Democrat wins, and the engineers didn't leave a door for anyone else.

And it gets worse, because in that safe district, the real election isn't in November — it's the primary. Win the primary and November is a formality, a coronation with extra steps. So who does the representative actually answer to? Not the whole district. Not the independents, not the other party's voters, not the folks who stayed home. A narrow slice of the most partisan voters in one party. That's the entire audience that matters.

Think about what that does to a human being. If your only real threat is losing a primary to someone more extreme than you, you don't drift toward the middle — you sprint toward the edge. You perform for the base. You pick fights for the cameras. Compromise becomes a liability and independence becomes a death sentence. The gerrymander doesn't just lock out third parties and independents. It radicalizes the two parties from the inside out, because it makes the most partisan voters the only voters who count. Then the parties turn around and blame "polarization" on the culture, on social media, on everybody except the map-drawers. The map is the polarization machine. They built it, they maintain it, and they cash the checks it produces.

And here's the deepest cut: gerrymandering feeds the other locks. Safe districts mean safe incumbents. Safe incumbents mean the parties never have to compete for your vote, never have to earn it, never have to listen to you. Why would they? The map already decided. Your district was drawn so your opinion doesn't matter. And then the parties turn around and tell you that voting independent is "throwing your vote away" — in a district they designed to make every vote but theirs meaningless. The arsonist is selling you fire insurance.

The cab-driver version: imagine the two big taxi companies get to draw the service zones for the whole city. Company Red draws the zones so its cabs always get the airport runs. Company Blue draws the zones so its cabs always get the downtown runs. The independent driver gets the zones nobody wants, split three ways, with the boundaries drawn right through his best streets. Then both companies run ads saying, "Why would you call an independent? They never get the good fares." Well, of course they don't. You drew the map.

That's lock number three. They don't just compete for your vote. They decide in advance whether your vote is allowed to matter.

Lock Four: Winner Takes All, and You Take Nothing

The first three locks are built by people. This one is built into the math itself — which makes it the cruelest lock of all, because most voters don't even know it's there.

Here's how elections work in America. In almost every race that matters, whoever gets the most votes wins — and everybody else gets nothing. Not a share of the prize proportional to their votes. Nothing. Come in second with 49.9 percent of the vote and you might as well have gotten three votes. Political scientists call this "first past the post," like a horse race: it doesn't matter if you lose by a nose or by ten lengths. Second place pays the same as last.

Nowhere is this more brutal than the presidency. Forty-eight states plus Washington, D.C. award their electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis: win the state by a single vote and you take every single one of its electors. Only Maine and Nebraska do it differently, splitting electors by congressional district. Everywhere else, the runner-up's votes are thrown in the trash.

Remember Ross Perot? Nineteen percent of the national popular vote in 1992 — nearly one in five Americans. You know how many electoral votes that bought him? Zero. Not one. Nineteen percent of the country voted for the man, and the system translated that into exactly the same number of electors as the candidate who got half of one percent. That's not a rounding error. That's the machine telling nearly one voter in five that their ballot was worthless.

Political scientists have a name for what happens next. It's called Duverger's law, and you don't need a degree to understand it: when elections work this way — most votes wins, loser gets nothing — voters learn, fast, that voting for a third candidate is dangerous. If your favorite can't win outright, your vote might accidentally help your least favorite beat your second choice. So you abandon your favorite and vote defensively. Do that for a few cycles and the whole country sorts itself into two camps — not because everyone loves the two parties, but because the math punishes anyone who steps outside them. The two-party system isn't the will of the people. It's the output of an equation.

And the equation gets worse the further down the ballot you go. Congress? Winner-take-all districts. Governor? Winner-take-all statewide. State legislature? Winner-take-all districts. At every level, the same meat grinder: finish first or disappear.

Now, is it a conspiracy that America votes this way? No — it's older than the parties themselves. But here's what is worth your anger: the two parties know exactly what this math does, they benefit from it enormously, and they fight like hell to keep it. When reformers propose ranked-choice voting — where you rank your candidates and your vote transfers to your second choice if your first can't win, eliminating the whole "spoiler" problem — the party establishments in both parties resist it. When states consider proportional systems, the parties circle the wagons. The math is the moat around their castle, and they have no intention of draining it.

Look at what's happening with ranked-choice voting right now — it's the clearest window into how the machine fights back against the math.

Alaska adopted it in 2020, by a whisper — 50.6 to 49.5 percent — pairing open top-four primaries, where every candidate runs together regardless of party, with ranked-choice general elections. And it worked the way reformers said it would: voters got more real choices, and the spoiler fear that keeps everyone hostage started to fade. So the establishment tried to kill it. In 2024, Alaska voters faced Ballot

Measure 2, an initiative to repeal the whole system and drag the state back to closed party primaries. It failed — by 737 votes out of more than 321,000 cast. 160,973 to 160,230. Half of one percent. The narrowest ballot-measure result in Alaska's history. The people who wanted a fuller, fairer ballot had to fight for their lives just to keep it.

And Alaska wasn't alone. In 2024, voters in seven states weighed ranked-choice measures, and the pattern told you everything about who's afraid of it. Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Oregon all rejected proposals to adopt it. Missouri went further than all of them: voters there approved Amendment 7, which didn't just reject ranked-choice voting — it banned it outright and locked in the old party-primary system by law.

So across most of the country, the one reform that would kill the spoiler problem and free voters to vote their actual conscience can't even get a hearing — and in the one state where it exists, the machine spends millions trying to rip it out by the roots.

Why are they so scared of it? Because ranked-choice voting breaks the hostage situation. If you can rank your true favorite first and your safe choice second, the "wasted vote" threat evaporates. The fear the parties harvest every two years stops working. And a system that can't frighten you into voting for it is a system that has to earn your vote — which is exactly what the two parties have spent decades making sure they never have to do. The moat isn't just the math anymore. It's the war against changing the math.

Because the math does something priceless for them: it turns every independent voter into a hostage. Every election, the message is the same: "Sure, vote your conscience — and watch the candidate you hate most win because you split the vote." It doesn't matter whether it's true in your particular race. The fear is the point. The math manufactures the fear, and the parties harvest it, every two years, like clockwork.

Which brings us to the final trick — the one they play on your mind.

The "Wasted Vote" Lie

You've heard it a thousand times. "A vote for a third party is a wasted vote." "Don't throw your vote away." "This is not the year." Every election cycle, both parties' loyalists, their pundits, their pollsters, and their media friends drum it into you: voting outside the two parties is foolish, selfish, dangerous.

Let me tell you the story they always tell to prove it — and then let me tell you the parts they leave out.

The year is 2000. The election comes down to Florida. George W. Bush beats Al Gore there by 537 votes out of nearly six million cast — one of the closest results in American history. Green Party candidate Ralph Nader wins 97,488 votes in Florida and 2.74 percent nationally. The story, as the Democratic establishment has told it for a quarter century: Nader spoiled the election. Nader's voters were really Gore voters. Nader handed the presidency to Bush.

Now here's what the storytellers leave out.

First: more than 300,000 registered Democrats in Florida voted for George W. Bush. Three hundred thousand. Nader's entire Florida vote wouldn't have mattered if a fraction of those Democrats had voted for

their own party's nominee. Second: Gore lost his own home state of Tennessee — and its 11 electoral votes. Win Tennessee and Florida doesn't matter. Third: exit polling suggested that a large share of Nader's voters — by some analyses about half — would simply have stayed home if Nader hadn't been on the ballot. They weren't stolen Gore votes. They were people who only voted because someone they believed in was running. Fourth: there were ten candidates on the Florida ballot who got more votes than the 537-vote margin. Ten. Blaming Nader alone is a choice, not a fact.

I'm not telling you Nader didn't matter. In a race that close, everything matters — the butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County mattered, the Supreme Court stopping the recount mattered, Gore's campaign decisions mattered. What I'm telling you is that the "spoiler" story is a weapon, not an analysis. It's deployed every cycle, against every outsider, by whichever major party feels threatened. In 2016 it was Jill Stein and Gary Johnson. In 2024 it was RFK Jr. and Cornel West — both parties' campaigns openly fretted about which side the independents would "spoil." The spoiler accusation is the two-party system's immune response: the moment an outsider appears, the antibodies swarm.

And here's the ugly truth about the "wasted vote" line: it's only true because the trap makes it true. Your vote for an independent is "wasted" because the ballot maze kept better independents from running, because the debate stage kept you from hearing them, because the gerrymandered map decided your district in advance, and because the winner-take-all math throws away every vote that doesn't finish first. The system creates the waste and then mocks you for it. The casino rigs the game and then calls you a sucker for losing.

Think about how insane this is as a principle. In what other part of life do we accept this logic? If you don't like the two restaurants in town, is your money "wasted" when you drive to a third? If you don't like either candidate, is your vote "wasted" when you choose someone better? The "wasted vote" idea only makes sense if you accept that your vote belongs to one of the two parties by default — that voting your actual conscience is a deviation, a theft, a spoiling. But your vote doesn't belong to them. It never did. They just need you to believe it does.

And notice who benefits from the psychology. Every voter terrified of "wasting" their vote is a voter who stays inside the trap. The fear doesn't need to be logical. It just needs to be loud, and every election year, both parties' machines make it deafening. The pollsters publish the horse-race numbers. The pundits shake their heads at the "longshot." Your uncle posts the meme. And the independent candidate — who might actually represent what you believe — starves for lack of the one thing the system denies them: a fair hearing.

And notice the beautiful double game they play with it. The same parties that built the winner-take-all math — the math that creates the spoiler problem in the first place — are the ones who show up every cycle waving the spoiler accusation like a bloody shirt. They manufacture the fear, they harvest the fear, and then they point at the fear as proof that the system is natural and inevitable. It's like a protection racket: "Nice vote you got there. Shame if something happened to it."

The trick works because it's aimed at your decency. Most voters aren't cynical — they genuinely don't want to accidentally help the candidate they like least. The machine takes that decent instinct and turns it

into a leash. And the leash only ever pulls one direction: toward the two parties. Nobody ever warns you that voting for the Democrat might "waste" your vote, or that voting for the Republican might "spoil" the race. The warning only ever points outward, at the exits. Funny how that works.

Here's what I want you to take from this. The "wasted vote" isn't a fact about your ballot. It's a spell cast by a system that needs your fear. Break the spell and the whole trap starts to wobble — because a trap only works on people who believe they can't escape.

It's Not Broken. It's Fixed.

Let's step back and look at the whole machine.

Forty-five percent of Americans call themselves independent — the largest political group in the country, bigger than either party. Sixty-two percent say the two parties do such a poor job that America needs a third major party. And yet the presidency, the Congress, the governor's mansions, the statehouses — nearly all of it, red or blue, blue or red, forever.

That is not a coincidence. That is not the will of the people. That is the output of a trap with four locks:

One: ballot-access laws, written by the two parties, that make it ruinously expensive and brutally difficult for outsiders to even get on the ballot — 219,000 signatures in California, 145,040 in Florida, 113,151 in 70 days in Texas — while Republicans and Democrats walk on free.

Two: a debate stage seized from the independent League of Women Voters and handed to a commission founded by the two parties, run by a former Republican Party chairman and a former Democratic White House press secretary, with a 15 percent polling rule designed so that no outsider can ever clear it — a rule that, applied retroactively, would have excluded every third-party candidate of the television era except Ross Perot.

Three: gerrymandered maps, drawn by politicians in both parties, that let them choose their voters instead of the other way around — mid-decade redraws in Texas and California, 6-3 Supreme Court decisions, and a 2019 ruling that says federal courts won't even hear partisan gerrymandering cases.

Four: winner-take-all math that throws away every vote cast for anyone who doesn't finish first — the equation that turned Perot's 19 percent into zero electoral votes and teaches every voter that stepping outside the two parties is dangerous.

And over it all, the psychological lock: the "wasted vote" lie, hammered into you every cycle by the very machine that manufactures the waste.

Now here's the thing I need you to understand before we go further in this book. The two parties fight each other bitterly — on television, on the debate stage, on social media, in the halls of Congress. The fighting is real. The hatred is real. But on one thing, and one thing only, they are in perfect agreement: the trap stays. Neither party will ever dismantle the ballot maze. Neither party will ever open the debate stage. Neither party will ever give up gerrymandering where it holds the pen. Neither party will ever volunteer to change the winner-take-all math that keeps them both in business.

They will fight about everything except the system that guarantees they never have to fight anyone else.

That's why this book exists. That's why independence — real independence, not a third party playing by the two parties' rules, but a movement of the 99 percent refusing the trap entirely — is the only way out. You can't vote your way out of a trap using the trap's own machinery. You have to see it first. Now you've seen it.

But seeing the trap is only the beginning. Because locks like these don't stay oiled by themselves. They run on money — oceans of it, flowing in from lobbyists, super PACs, and campaign funds, from the 1 percent to the politicians who do their bidding. The trap is the cage. The money is the food that keeps the animals inside it fed and obedient.

One more thing before we move on, because I want you to carry it with you through the rest of this book. Every lock in this chapter has a maintenance crew, and the crew is bipartisan. When Texas Republicans redraw a map mid-decade, California Democrats answer with their own map. When Democratic-aligned lawyers challenge an outsider's petitions in New York, Republican legislatures are writing the petition laws that made the challenge possible. The parties don't take turns being the villain — they take turns holding the flashlight while the other one digs. That's why voting one of them out never fixes it. You can't fire the trap by hiring the other trap-keeper.

In the next chapter, we follow the money.

Chapter 2: Follow the Money

Every town has a guy who knows where the bodies are buried. In Washington, that guy isn't one guy — it's an industry. Roughly thirteen thousand of them, last anyone counted. They have nicer suits than you, better teeth than you, and one job: to make sure the laws that get written are the laws their clients paid for.

I'm a cab driver. I drive people around for a living, and I can tell you exactly who runs this country after fifteen minutes of honest conversation: it's whoever's paying for the ride. This chapter is about the fare. The biggest business in Washington isn't lawmaking. It's the business of buying the lawmakers.

The Biggest Business in Washington Nobody Voted For

Let's start with a number, because this one is public record and nobody disputes it: in 2024, special interests spent a record **\$4.4 billion** on federal lobbying. That's not campaign donations. That's not super PACs — we'll get to those in the next chapter. That's just the disclosed, on-the-books money paid to professional influence-peddlers to bend Congress and the federal agencies. Four point four billion dollars. In one year. To lobby.

OpenSecrets, the nonpartisan outfit that tracks this stuff better than anyone, found that spending has climbed every year since 2016. Since 2015, the running total is nearly **\$37 billion**. Every single quarter of 2023 and 2024, the meter crossed a billion dollars. Read that again: a billion dollars a quarter, every quarter, just to whisper in the government's ear.

Now the headcount. There are about **13,000 registered federal lobbyists** in Washington. Do the math against 535 members of Congress and you get roughly **two dozen lobbyists for every single member of the House and Senate**. When your congressman walks to a committee hearing, he's walking past a small army of people whose full-time job is to make sure he votes the way their clients want. You? You've got one vote, every two years, and a phone line that goes to an intern who tallies your call on a spreadsheet.

And here's the part that should make your blood pressure spike: the 13,000 are just the ones who bothered to register. The law that governs this — the Lobbying Disclosure Act — has a definition of "lobbyist" narrow enough to drive a truck through. So thousands more do the exact same work under different job titles: "strategic adviser," "consultant," "government affairs counselor." They take the meetings, they write the memos, they make the introductions — they just don't file the paperwork. The real influence industry is bigger than the official number, maybe a lot bigger.

To give you a sense of who the biggest fish are: in 2024, the single biggest lobbying spender in America was the National Association of Realtors, which dropped nearly **\$86.4 million** — up two-thirds from the year before — largely because it was fighting over the rules governing how real estate agents get paid. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce spent \$23.4 million in the first quarter of 2024 alone. These aren't ideological warriors. They're not fighting for your freedom. They're protecting revenue streams, and they spend whatever it takes.

And then there's the newest crowd at the trough: Big Tech. The communications and electronics sector spent \$585.7 million on federal lobbying in 2024 — and unlike the old industries, the individual companies stand out like skyscrapers. Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, spent \$24.43 million. Amazon spent \$19.14 million. Microsoft spent \$10.35 million. Apple spent \$7.82 million. Meta's lobbyists were swarming Capitol Hill over bills about kids' online safety and data privacy — in fact, Meta ramped up to a record \$7.6 million in the first quarter of 2024 alone, right as CEO Mark Zuckerberg was being hauled before the Senate to answer for the company's failures to protect children from online exploitation. Nothing says "we take this seriously" like spending record millions to make sure the resulting laws don't hurt.

A watchdog group called Issue One added it up: six social media companies — Alphabet, ByteDance, Meta, Microsoft, Snap, and X — combined to spend \$61.5 million on lobbying in 2024, up nearly 13 percent from the year before, employing nearly 300 lobbyists between them. That's roughly one lobbyist for every two members of Congress — just from the social media industry. And watch ByteDance, TikTok's parent company: it spent \$270,000 on lobbying in 2019. By 2024, as Congress debated banning the app, it was spending \$10.4 million. That's the pattern in miniature. A company gets big, the government notices, and the company buys itself a seat at the table — permanently.

The tech money doesn't lean the way the old money leans. It goes everywhere, to everyone, because tech companies need favors from whichever party holds the gavel this week — and both parties are happy to oblige, as long as the checks keep coming.

Both parties will tell you they're going to clean this up. Both parties cash the checks while they say it. Keep that in mind, because it's the theme of this whole book.

The Revolving Door: Congress as a Temp Agency for K Street

Now let me show you the part of the machine that never gets fixed, because the people who could fix it are the ones cashing in on it.

When members of Congress leave office — voted out, termed out, retired, resigned in disgrace — a stunning number of them walk straight into lobbying jobs. OpenSecrets tracked this and found that **176 former members of Congress took influence-industry jobs in a single decade**. An academic study that followed members from 1976 to 2012 found that by 2012, **half of all former House members and 60 percent of former senators** had become registered lobbyists. Public Citizen, the consumer watchdog group, found in 2019 that nearly **two-thirds of former members of Congress** had moved into jobs at lobbying firms, consulting shops, trade groups, or business associations that exist to shape federal policy.

Let that sink in. You serve a few terms "representing the people," and then you sell everything you learned about how the government works to the highest corporate bidder. It's legal. It's normal. It's the career plan.

The examples are not hard to find, because nobody even bothers to hide it:

- **Eric Cantor**, the former House Majority Leader from Virginia, walked out of Congress and into a seven-figure job at the financial firm Moelis & Company.
- **Joe Crowley**, the New York Democrat who lost his primary to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, went to work for the lobbying giant Squire Patton Boggs.
- **Lamar Smith**, the Texas Republican, spent years in Congress pushing to open up a copper and gold mine in a remote part of Alaska. Then he retired, joined the law firm Akin Gump, and started lobbying *for that same mining project*.
- **Ed Royce**, the California Republican who chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee — and who once read Saudi talking points on the House floor — became a policy director at Brownstein Hyatt, a firm that lobbies for Saudi Arabia.
- **Jon Kyl**, the Arizona Republican, left his lobbying job to fill John McCain's Senate seat for four months after McCain died, then went right back to his lobbying firm with a freshly polished set of Senate contacts.

But if you want to see the revolving door at its absolute ugliest — the case that shows what happens when nobody's even pretending anymore — you have to meet Jack Abramoff.

Abramoff was a Republican super-lobbyist in the 2000s, and his specialty was supposed to be representing Native American tribes with casino interests. Instead, he and his partner Michael Scanlon — a former aide to House Majority Leader Tom DeLay — conspired to bilk those tribal clients out of an estimated \$85 million in fees. Eighty-five million dollars, siphoned from some of the poorest communities in America. And here's the detail that tells you everything about how Washington works: Abramoff and Scanlon were secretly lobbying *against* their own clients — manufacturing threats to the tribes' casinos so the terrified tribes would pay millions more for "protection." They were selling the tribes the disease and the cure.

It all came crashing down. On January 3, 2006, Abramoff pleaded guilty to three felony counts — conspiracy, fraud, and tax evasion — admitted bribing public officials, and was ordered to pay at least \$25 million in restitution to the tribes he'd robbed, plus \$1.7 million to the IRS. That March he was sentenced to nearly six years in federal prison. His partner Scanlon had pleaded guilty the previous November to conspiring to bribe a member of Congress. Congressman Bob Ney of Ohio — who'd done Abramoff's bidding — pleaded guilty to conspiracy in September 2006 and went to prison. J. Steven Griles, the Deputy Secretary of the Interior — the top Bush administration official caught in the net — pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice in 2007.

And Abramoff didn't operate in a vacuum. He was the creature of something called the K Street Project — an explicit, organized campaign, launched after Republicans took Congress in 1994, to fuse the party and the lobbying industry into a single machine. Newt Gingrich deputized Tom DeLay to run it, with help from Grover Norquist, Dick Armey, and Senator Rick Santorum. The project pressured lobbying firms and trade associations to hire Republicans, donate to Republicans, and freeze out Democrats. Firms kept lists of their employees' party affiliations to prove their loyalty. In 1998, DeLay and Gingrich held up

an intellectual-property bill just to punish the electronics industry for hiring a former *Democratic* congressman. The message was unmistakable: K Street worked for the party, or it didn't work at all.

Now — before my Republican readers get comfortable — understand that the K Street Project was a Republican operation the way a thunderstorm is a weather event. It was about power, not principle. When Democrats held power, they built their own versions of the same donor-and-lobbyist machinery, with their own pipelines and their own favored firms. The names on the office doors changed. The merger of party and lobbyist didn't. Abramoff went to prison, DeLay got indicted in Texas and resigned in disgrace, Congress passed a round of "reforms" — and the lobbying totals kept climbing to new records under presidents of both parties. The scandal wasn't that the system broke. The scandal was that the system worked exactly as designed, and after the headlines faded, it went right back to work.

And notice something: a lot of them don't even register as lobbyists. They take titles like "adviser" or "strategist" and do influence work without the disclosure. OpenSecrets found that among departing members who joined the influence industry, 55 percent of House members registered as lobbyists compared to 40 percent of senators — but plenty of the rest are doing the same work under a different label. The smart ones learned that the title "lobbyist" is bad PR, so they just stopped using the title.

The law does have a fig leaf: a "cooling-off period" — one year for House members, two years for senators — before they can lobby their former colleagues. But read the fine print. The ban covers *lobbying*. It doesn't cover *advising*. It doesn't cover *consulting*. It doesn't cover *strategizing*. A former official can take a corporate job the day after leaving office, sit in the conference room, tell the company exactly how the agency thinks, introduce them to all their old friends, explain precisely where the loopholes are — and as long as they don't personally make the phone call to their old office, they're in the clear. It's like banning a bank robber from driving the getaway car but letting him plan the heist, draw the map, and ride shotgun.

And it's not just the members. It's the staff — the chiefs of staff, the legislative directors, the committee aides who actually write the bills. One study of senior congressional staffers found that **more than half** of those who left Congress took jobs in private political influence within a few years. These are the twenty-eight-year-olds making \$60,000 a year on the Hill, working eighty-hour weeks, who get offered \$300,000 to walk across the street and explain to a corporation how to get what they want from their old boss. Who could blame them for taking it? The system is designed to make the honest choice the expensive one.

Here's the question nobody in Washington wants to answer: if you know that voting the right way on the right bill could land you a million-dollar lobbying contract in two years, how "independent" is your judgment today? You don't need a bribe. You don't need an envelope of cash. You just need a memory of how the game works and a mortgage to pay. That's the genius of the revolving door. It doesn't buy votes one at a time. It buys the whole building.

How It Really Works: Dialing for Dollars

People imagine lobbying as some shadowy thing — a guy in a trench coat handing over a briefcase. Forget it. The real system is much dumber and much more depressing, and it happens in broad daylight.

Let me tell you about a typical day for a member of the House of Representatives. Back in 2013, somebody leaked a PowerPoint presentation that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee had prepared for incoming freshmen. One slide laid out the "model daily schedule," and it told new members to spend **four hours a day** on "call time." Call time means sitting in a cubicle and cold-calling rich people to ask for money.

Four hours a day. That's the *official recommendation from their own party*. Both parties run these call centers — windowless rooms near the Capitol where members of Congress from all over the country squeeze into cubicles, headsets on, and dial for dollars like telemarketers. One member described it as the worst-looking call-center setup he'd ever seen. And it never stops, because in the House, the candidate with more money wins roughly nine out of ten races. In the Senate, it's about eight out of ten. Money doesn't just talk in American politics. It *is* the election.

In July 2022, Representative Dean Phillips stood on the House floor and read the numbers into the Congressional Record: House members running for reelection had raised **\$207 million in three months** — an average of **\$3,400 per member, per day**. "Members of the House and Senate collectively are spending **10,000 hours per week** dialing for dollars or attending fundraising receptions," he said. "It is downright gross." Ten thousand hours a week. That's not governing. That's a full-time fundraising job with some legislating squeezed in on the side.

And here's the kicker the parties don't advertise: leadership in both parties assigns every member a dollar figure — a quota — that they're expected to raise for the party. Party dues. Raise your number, and you get better committee assignments, a shot at leadership, the party's protection. Miss your number, and you're on your own. The system doesn't just tolerate the money chase. It *requires* it. Your congressman isn't just allowed to spend half his working life begging rich people for cash — his career depends on it.

So now you understand the lobbyist's real product. It isn't information. It isn't persuasion. It's *access*, and access is priced by the hour.

Here's how the access market works. A lobbyist's client wants ten minutes with a committee chairman. The lobbyist — who used to be that chairman's chief of staff, naturally — calls up and says, "Hey, we're hosting a breakfast next Tuesday. Love for you to stop by." The breakfast is a fundraiser. The price of admission is a \$5,000 check to the chairman's campaign. The chairman shows up, shakes hands, hears the pitch. Nothing illegal happened. Nobody said "vote yes and here's your money." It's all perfectly legal, and it's all perfectly understood.

Lobbyists also do something even more valuable: they *bundle*. A bundler is someone who rounds up checks from a whole network of friends, colleagues, and clients and delivers them as one fat package. A lobbyist who can bundle half a million dollars for your reelection is worth more to you than any policy argument ever will be. And when that lobbyist's client has a bill they need killed — or a loophole they need opened — guess whose phone call gets returned first: the bundler's, or yours?

This is why I say both parties are in on it. The Democrats run the call centers. The Republicans run the call centers. The Democrats take the fundraisers. The Republicans take the fundraisers. The names on the

donor lists change a little — oil and gas money leans Republican, labor money leans Democrat — but the machine runs the same either way. The parties aren't opponents in this game. They're rival franchises of the same business.

Who Writes the Laws? (Hint: Not the Guy You Voted For)

Now we get to the part that really ought to embarrass everybody involved. Sometimes the lobbyists don't just influence the legislation. They literally write it. Word for word. And Congress passes it.

Exhibit A: Citigroup and the great derivatives giveaway.

After the 2008 financial crash — the one where Wall Street's gambling with exotic financial instruments called derivatives helped blow up the world economy — Congress passed the Dodd-Frank reform law in 2010. One piece of it was called the "push-out rule." The idea was simple: banks shouldn't be allowed to fund their riskiest derivatives trading with money that's insured by taxpayers through the FDIC. If a bank wants to gamble, fine — gamble with private money, not with deposits the government guarantees. It was a modest, sensible firewall between your savings and Wall Street's casino.

Wall Street hated it. So Citigroup's lobbyists did what lobbyists do: they wrote a bill to kill it.

In 2013, the House took up a measure called the Swaps Regulatory Improvement Act, which would have gutted the push-out rule. The New York Times and Mother Jones got hold of the emails between Citigroup's lobbyists and the lawmakers' offices. What they found was jaw-dropping: **70 of the bill's 85 lines reflected Citigroup's recommendations, and two full paragraphs were copied almost verbatim** — the lawmakers had changed two words, just to make them plural. A giant American bank had effectively ghostwritten a federal law regulating giant American banks, and the House passed it anyway, 292 to 122.

The bill died in the Senate that year. But lobbyists are patient, and they understand something most citizens don't: the must-pass spending bill at the end of the year is the perfect getaway car. In December 2014, Congress had to pass a \$1.1 trillion funding package to keep the government open — the so-called "CRomnibus." Representative Kevin Yoder of Kansas quietly lifted the Citigroup-written language and slipped it into the 1,600-page bill. Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat, stood on the Senate floor and blasted it as a "giveaway that was drafted by Citigroup lobbyists" that would "simply confirm the view of the American people that the system is rigged." Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent, called it an outrage. It passed anyway and was signed into law. The firewall came down. Taxpayers were back on the hook for Wall Street's derivatives bets — exactly what Dodd-Frank had tried to prevent.

And who made sure it happened? According to reporting at the time, JPMorgan Chase's CEO Jamie Dimon *personally* called members of Congress to lobby for it. When the CEO of one of the biggest banks on earth picks up the phone and calls your office, you take the call. When you pick up the phone and call your congressman's office, you get an intern. That's the whole story of American power in two phone calls.

Exhibit B: the copy-paste legislature.

If the Citigroup story is about federal law, the ALEC story is about your statehouse. The American Legislative Exchange Council — ALEC — is a group where corporate lobbyists and state legislators sit down together and write "model bills": pre-written, fill-in-the-blank legislation that lawmakers can introduce back home as if they wrote it themselves.

A two-year investigation by USA Today, the Arizona Republic, and the Center for Public Integrity found that from 2010 through 2018, state lawmakers introduced **nearly 2,900 bills based on ALEC templates**, in all fifty states. **More than 600 of them became law.** Across all the groups that produce model legislation, copies of these bills were introduced more than 10,000 times in eight years — what the investigators called "perhaps the largest unreported special-interest campaign in American politics."

And sometimes the copy-paste is so lazy it's funny, until you remember these are laws that govern your life. In 2014, the Missouri legislature passed a bill putting new hurdles in front of health-care "navigators" who helped people sign up for insurance. Democratic Governor Jay Nixon vetoed it, and in his veto message he pointed out that the bill had been copied verbatim from an ALEC model — *including a typo*. The ALEC original had cited the wrong federal law number, and Missouri's legislators dutifully copied the mistake right into their bill. As the governor wrote, they had "simply parroted the ALEC model act without alteration." Kansas legislators made the exact same error with the same bill. Nobody read it. Nobody wrote it. A corporate bill mill wrote it, and elected officials rubber-stamped it — errors and all.

This is the day-to-day reality of "representative government" in America. The people you voted for are, in an enormous number of cases, introducing legislation written by people you never voted for, paid for by companies you've never heard of, to serve interests that are not yours.

Big Pharma: The Untouchables

If there's one industry that has this game figured out better than anyone, it's the drug business.

The numbers are almost hard to believe. In 2024, the health sector as a whole spent **\$743.9 million** on federal lobbying — the biggest-spending sector in Washington, and the only one over \$700 million. The pharmaceuticals and health products industry alone spent **more than \$384.5 million**. The drug industry has been the top-spending lobbying industry in America **since 1999**, and from 1999 through 2024 it spent **over \$6.1 billion** — with a B — on federal lobbying. Six billion dollars over twenty-five years, just to make sure the laws come out right for them.

If you want the single most shameless revolving-door story in the whole corrupt catalog, here it is — and it stars a man who belonged to *both* parties, which tells you everything.

Billy Tauzin was a longtime Democratic congressman from Louisiana who switched to the Republican Party in 1994 when the GOP took the House — and was promptly rewarded with the chairmanship of the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee, which oversees the drug industry. In 2003, as chairman, Tauzin was a key architect of the Medicare prescription drug bill — the law that gave seniors drug coverage while *prohibiting* Medicare from negotiating lower prices and *banning* the importation of cheaper drugs from Canada. Democrats called it a giveaway to the drugmakers, and they weren't wrong.

The bill was rammed through in an unusual middle-of-the-night session under heavy pressure from the industry.

Then came the payoff. The day after Tauzin's term in Congress ended — January 2005 — he started work as president and CEO of PhRMA, the drug industry's most powerful trade group, at a salary outsiders estimated at \$2 million a year. He'd spent his chairmanship writing the industry's dream bill, and the industry hired him to run its lobbying operation. By 2010, his final year at PhRMA, he pulled in \$11.6 million — making him the highest-paid health-care lobbyist in America. And he wasn't alone through that door: within three years of the bill's passage, at least 15 members of Congress, congressional staffers, and administration officials who'd worked on it had left government for the pharmaceutical industry.

Tauzin's story is the revolving door with the mask off. He started as a Democrat, finished as a Republican, and served the drug companies the entire time. The party label was a costume. The donor was the constant.

Four of the ten biggest lobbying spenders in all of Washington in 2024 were health-industry players: the drug manufacturers' trade group PhRMA, the American Hospital Association, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and the American Medical Association. They don't agree on everything, but they agree on the important thing: the system must keep working the way it works.

An expert quoted by OpenSecrets put it bluntly: "Since 1950, the pharmaceutical companies' lobby has been the most powerful. They have won almost every issue." *Almost every issue.* For seventy-five years. Through Democratic presidents and Republican presidents, through Democratic Congresses and Republican Congresses. The parties change. The winning doesn't.

What does winning look like? It looks like Americans paying the highest prescription drug prices in the developed world while the industry posts some of the fattest profit margins in the economy. It looks like decades of Congress refusing to let Medicare — the biggest drug buyer in the country — negotiate prices the way every other wealthy nation does. Every other big buyer negotiates. Your insurance company negotiates. The Veterans Administration negotiates. But Medicare, covering tens of millions of seniors, was legally forbidden from doing it, and every attempt to change that died in Congress for the better part of two decades. Ask yourself who benefits from that arrangement, and then look at the \$6.1 billion.

Now, to be fair — and this book is about fairness — the industry did finally lose one, and the story of how it happened tells you everything about how hard the fight is. In August 2022, President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act, which for the first time ever gave Medicare the power to negotiate the prices of some high-cost prescription drugs. The Congressional Budget Office estimated the negotiation program would save the government **nearly \$100 billion** in just the first six years the negotiated prices are in effect. That's \$100 billion that was going to flow from taxpayers to drug companies, and now won't.

And what did the industry do? Exactly what you'd expect. Drug companies sued to stop the law from being implemented, and their lobbyists went to work trying to carve out exemptions and delays for as many drugs as possible. They spent a quarter-century and billions of dollars to keep this from happening, lost once, and immediately started trying to claw it back. That's not a conspiracy theory. That's the business

model.

Notice, too, that the drug money doesn't pick a party — it picks *winners*. The industry gives to Democrats and Republicans alike, to committee chairs and ranking members, to anyone in a position to help or hurt. The point was never ideology. The point is coverage. When you spend \$384 million a year, you don't bet on one team. You buy the whole league.

Oil and Gas: Drilling Holes in the Rules

The oil and gas industry doesn't spend as much as pharma, but it spends plenty — and it spends it with a very specific kind of focus.

In 2024, the oil and gas industry spent **\$154.5 million** on federal lobbying, fielding **743 registered lobbyists** working for 209 clients. Here's a number worth sitting with: **62.6 percent** of those lobbyists were revolving-door hires — former government officials now lobbying their old colleagues. Nearly two out of three.

The biggest spender was the trade group American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers, which laid out **\$27.65 million** — a huge jump from prior years. Koch Inc spent \$11.05 million. Occidental Petroleum spent \$9.51 million. Chevron, \$9.08 million. ConocoPhillips, \$8.35 million. Shell, \$7.56 million. Exxon Mobil, \$6.82 million. The American Petroleum Institute, the industry's main trade association, spent \$6.25 million.

Why the surge? OpenSecrets reported that the spending spike in 2024 came as the Environmental Protection Agency rolled out "some of its strongest-ever regulations to reduce fossil fuel emissions." That's the pattern, and once you see it, you can't unsee it: the industry doesn't lobby hardest when times are good. It lobbies hardest when the government threatens to make it pay for the damage it does. Regulation goes up, lobbying goes up. Every time.

What does the money buy? It buys delay. It buys exemptions. It buys the slow, grinding work of making sure that climate rules get watered down in committee, that drilling permits keep flowing, that enforcement stays underfunded, that every serious attempt to make polluters pay gets tied up in "further study" until the political moment passes. Nobody has to bribe anybody. You just need 743 lobbyists, most of whom used to work for the people they're now lobbying, showing up every single day with campaign checks, fundraiser invitations, and draft language — and eventually, the regulations come out looking like Swiss cheese.

The oil money leans Republican — in the 2024 cycle, the industry's political contributions went overwhelmingly to the GOP — but don't kid yourself that Democrats are clean on this. The industry spreads money to Democrats in oil states, to committee members of both parties, to anyone who might cast a deciding vote. Chevron's political spending in 2024 went to both sides. That's not bipartisanship. That's hedging.

Defense: The Permanent War Dividend

There's an old saying in Washington that the defense budget is the one thing both parties can always agree on. That's not because both parties love the troops — though they'll both tell you that at the parade. It's because the defense budget is the biggest pile of money in the federal government, and everybody's donors want a shovel.

Let's look at what the weapons makers spend to protect their cut. In 2024, the defense aerospace industry alone spent **\$61.45 million** on federal lobbying, with 408 registered lobbyists — **61 percent** of them revolving-door hires. RTX (the company formerly known as Raytheon) spent \$13.51 million. Lockheed Martin spent \$12.52 million. Northrop Grumman spent \$8.44 million. And remember, that's just the aerospace slice; the full defense industry spends considerably more across all its categories.

Now look at what that \$61 million protects. According to the Congressional Research Service, in fiscal year 2024 the Department of Defense **obligated \$445 billion on defense contracts** — more than every other federal agency combined. Four hundred and forty-five billion dollars, flowing to private companies. Five companies — Lockheed Martin, RTX, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics — collected **30 percent** of all of it. A 2025 report from the Quincy Institute and Brown University's Costs of War project found that from 2020 through 2024, private arms firms received **\$2.4 trillion** in Pentagon money — roughly 54 percent of the department's discretionary spending — with the top five contractors alone taking **\$771 billion**.

Let me put that in perspective. The defense industry spends about \$60 million a year on lobbying to influence the division of a pie worth hundreds of billions. That's not an expense. That's the greatest return on investment in the history of capitalism. For every dollar the weapons makers spend on lobbyists, they get back thousands in contracts — contracts awarded by the same government their former executives, former generals, and former committee staffers now lobby.

This is the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned about in 1961, except it's bigger, richer, and more deeply wired into the system than he ever imagined. The Pentagon's top officials retire into defense contractor boardrooms. Defense contractors' executives get appointed to run the Pentagon. The staffers who write the defense authorization bill go to work for the companies the bill funds. It's a closed loop — a human conveyor belt moving in both directions — and the product it manufactures, year after year, is the one budget that never gets cut.

And here's what makes it bipartisan in the most cynical way: defense plants are spread across all fifty states, in red districts and blue districts alike. When a congressman of either party fights for a weapons program, he's not just fighting for "national security." He's fighting for jobs in his district, for a contractor that employs his constituents and donates to his campaign. The system is engineered so that cutting waste means cutting jobs *somewhere*, and the lobbyists make sure every member knows exactly where. It's genius, if you're the one getting paid. It's a disaster, if you're the taxpayer footing the bill.

Wall Street: They Write Their Own Report Cards

The finance industry doesn't just lobby the government. It practically is the government, on alternating years.

Start with the scale. In 2024, the combined finance, insurance, and real estate sector spent **\$636.4 million** on federal lobbying — up nearly \$34 million from the year before, and the second-biggest sector total in Washington. This is the sector that includes the banks, the investment firms, the insurance giants, and, as we saw, the National Association of Realtors, the single biggest lobbying spender in the country at \$86.4 million.

What does Wall Street want? The same thing it has always wanted: to keep the profits private and make the risks public. To gamble with house money and send the bill to the taxpayers when the bets go bad. And the record shows it gets what it wants with remarkable consistency.

You already know the Citigroup story from earlier in this chapter — the bank that ghostwrote the law gutting the derivatives firewall, slipped it into a must-pass spending bill in December 2014, and got it signed into law over the objections of senators from both sides of the aisle. But step back and look at the pattern it belongs to.

After the 2008 crash — a catastrophe that wiped out trillions in household wealth, destroyed millions of jobs, and was caused in large part by reckless behavior in the financial sector — Congress passed Dodd-Frank, the most significant financial reform in generations. And then the industry spent the next decade-plus taking it apart, piece by piece, rule by rule, exemption by exemption. Not in big dramatic repeals that would make the news, but in the quiet, technical, boring work that lobbyists specialize in: a paragraph changed here, a deadline extended there, a definition narrowed in a rulemaking comment, a provision slipped into a 1,600-page spending bill at midnight.

That's the thing most people miss about lobbying. The big fights — the ones on cable news — are theater. The real action is in the fine print, in the amendments nobody reads, in the regulatory proceedings nobody covers. The finance lobby doesn't need to win the argument on television. It needs to win the comma fight in subsection (c)(2)(B) on page 847. And it does, over and over, because it's the only side that shows up with lawyers, draft language, and campaign checks while the public is watching the show.

Both parties have been enthusiastic participants. A Democratic president signed the bill gutting the derivatives firewall. Republican Congresses spent years trying to repeal Dodd-Frank outright. Democratic administrations staffed the Treasury Department and the regulatory agencies with veterans of Goldman Sachs and Citigroup; Republican administrations did the same with veterans of other Wall Street firms. The names on the office doors change. The résumés don't. When people say the system is rigged, this is what they mean — not a conspiracy in a smoky room, but a personnel pipeline so well-oiled that the regulators and the regulated are, half the time, literally the same people at different points in their careers.

The Asymmetry: You Can't Buy What They're Selling

Here's the part of the story that doesn't need a single statistic, because you already know it's true from living your life.

You cannot afford a lobbyist.

Not you, not your neighbors, not your church, not your union local, not the parents at your kid's school. A top K Street firm bills hundreds or thousands of dollars an hour. A serious lobbying campaign — the kind that gets a provision written, a hearing scheduled, a regulation rewritten — costs hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. The National Association of Realtors spent \$86 million in one year to protect how its members get paid. What cause in your life has an \$86 million budget?

This is the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of American politics, and everything else in this chapter is just detail. The system doesn't formally exclude you. You have the *right* to petition your government — it's right there in the First Amendment. You can call your congressman's office. You can write a letter. You can even fly to Washington and stand in line for a town hall. What you can't do is what the lobbyist does: walk into the office because you used to work there, sit down with the member because you bundled \$200,000 for his campaign, hand him draft language his staff will paste into the bill, and then take him to a \$10,000-a-plate dinner where the real conversation happens.

Access in Washington is a market, and you're priced out of it. That's not a metaphor. It's a price list.

Think about what that means for the issues you care about. When the pharmaceutical lobby spends \$384 million a year and patients' groups spend a tiny fraction of that, which side's phone calls get returned? When the oil industry fields 743 lobbyists and the climate-concerned citizens of this country field... well, their votes, every couple of years... who do you think shapes the rule? It's not that your voice doesn't count. It's that in a system where influence is purchased by the hour, your voice is competing against a megaphone the size of a building, and the megaphone is plugged directly into the representative's reelection fund.

The defenders of the system will tell you lobbying is just "petitioning the government," a constitutional right, and that everybody does it — teachers' unions lobby, environmental groups lobby, the AARP lobbies. That's true, as far as it goes. But it's like saying that in a fistfight, both sides are allowed to use their fists — while one side shows up with a battalion. Yes, citizen groups lobby. They are outspent, outstaffed, and outgunned by orders of magnitude, and the revolving door barely revolves for them, because there's no million-dollar payday waiting on the other side for the staffer who helped the Sierra Club.

And don't let anyone tell you this is just about money — it's about *time*. A lobbyist's job is to be there every day: at the hearing, in the hallway, at the fundraiser, on the phone. Your job is to live your life. The lobbyist gets paid to show up; you have to take time off work to show up. That's not a fair fight, and it was never designed to be one. The system doesn't need to formally ban you from participating. It just needs to make participation a full-time, six-figure profession — and then act surprised that only professionals participate.

The result is a government that is exquisitely responsive — to the people who can pay for responsiveness. Everybody else gets the auto-reply.

Why Nobody in Washington Will Fix It

By now you're probably asking the obvious question: if everybody knows this is corrupt, why doesn't somebody stop it?

Here's the honest answer, and it's the ugliest sentence in this chapter: **the people with the power to close the revolving door are the people walking through it.**

A member of Congress makes \$174,000 a year — a good salary, but not a fortune, and it hasn't gone up since 2009. A former member turned lobbyist can make seven figures. We are asking human beings to vote to destroy their own future income. Some of them are saints. Most of them are not saints. The math does the rest.

Every few years, somebody introduces a bill to fix it, and every few years it dies quietly. Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders both put forward plans to ban former members of Congress from ever becoming lobbyists — Warren's would have covered presidents, cabinet secretaries, and federal judges too, and tried to close the "strategic adviser" loophole by redefining lobbying as *any* paid attempt to influence government. The experts who study this stuff said flat out that such a ban was unlikely to pass Congress. Of course it is. You're asking the foxes to vote to lock the henhouse.

And notice how the reform conversation always stays safely in the future tense. "We need to do something about the revolving door." "We need real lobbying reform." Both parties say it. Neither party does it. The Democrats had the White House and both chambers in 2009 and 2021. The Republicans had the White House and both chambers in 2017 and 2025. The revolving door spun merrily through all of it. The lobbying totals set new records under presidents of both parties. If either party actually wanted to kill this machine, it has had the power to do it. It never does, because the machine feeds both parties, and both parties know it.

This is the part where I need you to hear me clearly, because it's the whole point of this book: **the two-party system is not failing to fix corruption. The two-party system IS the corruption's business model.**

Think about it from the lobbyist's perspective. If there were a dozen competitive parties, or a real independent movement that could win seats, you'd have to buy influence all over the place — expensive, unpredictable, messy. But with two parties, the math is beautiful. You hire the former staffers of both parties. You give to both parties' committees. You bundle for incumbents in both parties. Whoever wins, you win. The parties fight each other on television about cultural issues — and we'll talk about that divide-and-conquer game in chapter seven — while the money flows to both sides of every fight that actually matters to a balance sheet. Drug prices, drilling permits, defense contracts, derivatives rules: on the issues where billions are at stake, the two parties are not opponents. They're co-owners.

That's why an independent movement terrifies this town more than any Democrat terrifies a Republican or vice versa. A Democrat who takes pharma money and a Republican who takes pharma money can yell at each other about everything else and still both cash the check. But an independent who doesn't take the money — who can't be bought because there's no party machine to feed and no K Street future to protect — breaks the business model. You can't lobby somebody who isn't for sale. You can't bundle for somebody who won't take the meeting. The whole \$4.4-billion-a-year industry depends on everyone in the room being a potential future employee. An independent who means it is the one thing the system can't process.

What This Means for the 99%

So let's bring this home. What does "follow the money" actually tell us?

It tells us that Washington runs on a currency most Americans will never hold. Thirteen thousand registered lobbyists, thousands more unregistered, \$4.4 billion a year in disclosed spending, \$37 billion since 2015 — and every dollar of it is spent for one purpose: to make sure the laws serve the people who paid for them.

It tells us that the revolving door isn't a bug in the system; it's the system's retirement plan. Half to two-thirds of former members of Congress go to work influencing the government they just left. The staffers follow. The generals follow. The regulators follow. And the "cooling-off periods" are a joke with a punchline written by the same lawyers who exploit them.

It tells us that lobbying isn't persuasion — it's a market for access, and ordinary citizens are priced out. Your congressman spends four hours a day on the phone begging rich people for money because his party demands it, his reelection depends on it, and the candidate with the most money wins nine times out of ten. In that world, the lobbyist with the bundled checks isn't a supplicant. He's the customer. You're the product being sold: your vote, your district, your trust, packaged and delivered to the highest bidder.

It tells us that the biggest industries in America — drugs, oil, weapons, Wall Street — don't just participate in this system. They *own* it. Pharma has been the top lobbying spender since 1999 and has "won almost every issue" for decades. Oil fields 743 lobbyists to fight every environmental rule. Defense contractors spend \$60 million to protect \$445 billion in contracts. The banks literally write their own regulations and get them passed. And when one of them loses once in a quarter-century — like pharma did on Medicare negotiation in 2022 — they sue, they lobby, and they start clawing it back the next morning.

And it tells us, finally, that neither party will save us from this, because neither party wants to be saved from it. The Democrats and the Republicans are not two answers to the corruption. They're two brand names for the same donor-service operation. The day either party gives up the \$4.4 billion river is the day I'll eat this chapter.

But here's the thing the lobbyists don't want you to know, and it's the reason this book exists: **they need you to stay home.** The whole machine depends on your cynicism. It depends on you believing that it's all rigged so there's no point in trying — because the moment enough ordinary Americans decide to

back candidates who can't be bought, the math changes. A lobbyist can outspend you. A lobbyist can out-lawyer you. A lobbyist can outlast you in a committee markup. What a lobbyist cannot do is outvote you — not if you show up, and not if the candidate you show up for doesn't owe K Street a dime.

The money is real. The corruption is real. But it's not invincible. It's just expensive — and the one thing the 1% can't buy, no matter how many billions they spend, is the one thing the 99% have for free: each other.

In the next chapter, we'll follow the money one step further — into the shadows. Because everything you've read about in this chapter is the *disclosed* money, the money they have to report. There's another river of cash in American politics that nobody has to report at all. It's called dark money, and it's where the really interesting things happen.

Chapter 3: Super PACs and Dark Money

I'm a cab driver. So let me tell you the way I'd tell you if you climbed into my back seat and asked me why nothing ever changes in Washington, no matter who wins.

Our elections are auctions.

Oh, they don't call it that. Washington never calls anything by its real name. They've got prettier words — "independent expenditures," "issue advocacy," "social welfare organizations." The machine always dresses its theft up in a tuxedo. But strip the fancy words off and what's left is dead simple: the candidate with the most money wins more often than not, the money comes from fewer and fewer hands, and the rest of us — the 99% — are standing in the back of the room watching the bidding climb higher than anything we'll ever touch.

This chapter is about how the auction got built. Not by accident. Not by some villain in a smoky back room. It got built piece by piece, right out in the open — two court decisions and one tax loophole that together handed America's elections to a handful of billionaires. And it was all done with the Supreme Court's blessing, printed up in legal opinions you can read yourself.

Nobody explains this stuff straight. Everybody either screams about it or shrugs at it. I'm going to do neither. I'm going to walk you through it, piece by piece, with the real numbers — every one of them checked against the records — and then I'm going to show you what it does to a country when the people who pick the winners aren't the voters.

And fair warning up front: this isn't a Republican problem or a Democrat problem. Both parties drink from this trough. Both parties helped build it. If you're looking for a chapter that lets your team off the hook, you picked up the wrong book.

It Used to Be Illegal

Here's what most people don't know: for most of modern American history, it was against the law for a corporation to spend its own money to influence a federal election. Labor unions, too. This wasn't some radical idea — it was settled law for generations.

After Watergate, Congress passed the Federal Election Campaign Act, and in 1976 the Supreme Court decided a case called *Buckley v. Valeo*. That decision drew a line that's worth understanding, because everything since has been about erasing it. The Court said you could limit how much money a person gives directly to a candidate — because a giant check handed straight to a politician looks an awful lot like a bribe. But it also said spending money on politics is a form of speech, which made spending much harder to limit.

Then in 2002, Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act — McCain-Feingold, named for the Republican and Democrat who sponsored it, which tells you something about how bipartisan the concern used to be. One of its big provisions said corporations and unions couldn't run "electioneering communications" — broadcast ads that named a federal candidate — within 30 days of a primary or 60

days of a general election. The idea was simple: you shouldn't be able to buy the last word before people vote.

The corporate ban goes back further than most people realize — more than a century. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, signed the Tillman Act, the first federal campaign finance law in American history. It prohibited corporations from contributing money to federal candidates, after investigations found corporations had poured huge sums into Roosevelt's own 1904 campaign in exchange for influence. Think about that: a Republican president, more than a hundred years ago, looked at corporate money in elections and said, this has to stop. Congress agreed. The ban on corporate election spending stood, in one form or another, for over a century — through Democratic and Republican administrations alike — until the Supreme Court struck it down in 2010. The country that banned corporate election money in 1907 is the same country that unleashed it in 2010. The difference isn't the Constitution. The difference is who was sitting on the Court.

That was the law of the land. And then came a movie about Hillary Clinton.

The Movie About Hillary

In 2008, a conservative nonprofit group called Citizens United made a documentary-style film critical of Hillary Clinton, who was running for the Democratic presidential nomination. They wanted to show it on cable video-on-demand within 30 days of the Democratic primaries. The Federal Election Commission said no — McCain-Feingold banned exactly that kind of thing.

Citizens United sued. And the Supreme Court could have answered the small question — is this one movie journalism or a campaign ad? — and moved on. Instead, on January 21, 2010, in a 5-4 decision written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, the Court swung a wrecking ball.

Here's what Citizens United v. FEC actually said, stripped of the legal fog:

- The government cannot ban political spending by corporations or unions just because of who the speaker is. Political spending is speech, and the First Amendment protects it.
- So corporations and labor unions can now spend unlimited amounts of their own money on ads supporting or opposing candidates — as long as the spending is "independent," meaning not coordinated with the candidate's campaign.
- The Court threw out its own earlier rulings that had said otherwise — *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce* from 1990, and part of *McConnell v. FEC* from 2003.

And here's what it did NOT say, because this matters:

- It did not let corporations give money directly to candidates. That is still illegal. A corporation still cannot write a check to a candidate's campaign.
- It did not eliminate disclosure. The Court upheld the rules that say political ads have to disclose who paid for them.

A lot of people will tell you Citizens United "legalized bribery." It didn't. What it did was more subtle and, in the long run, more dangerous: it said unlimited money could flow into elections through outside groups, and it left the front door — the ban on direct contributions — locked while blowing the back wall clean off the house.

But here's the thing most people miss. Citizens United, by itself, didn't create the machine. It said corporations and unions could spend unlimited money on independent ads. But it didn't create the bank accounts to receive that money. That was a different case — one almost nobody talks about — decided two months later.

The Case Nobody Mentions

On March 26, 2010, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals decided a case called *SpeechNow.org v. FEC*. Unanimous decision. The group behind it was a small outfit of activists led by a man named David Keating. They wanted to pool their money together to run political ads — independent ads, no coordination with any candidate. But the old law capped individual contributions to political committees at \$5,000 a year.

The court looked at that and said, in essence: wait a minute. If this group never gives money to candidates and never coordinates with candidates, then there's no risk of a quid pro quo — no bribe, no payoff. And if there's no corruption risk, the government has no business limiting how much people can chip in. Down went the \$5,000 cap.

That decision created the "independent expenditure-only committee." You know it by its street name: the super PAC.

Get the division of labor straight, because almost everyone gets it wrong:

- **Citizens United** said corporations and unions can spend unlimited money on independent election ads.
- **SpeechNow.org** said individuals can pool unlimited money into committees that spend on independent election ads.

Citizens United opened the door. SpeechNow built the vault. Two months apart. One-two punch. And American elections were never the same.

Then They Raised the Ceiling Again

As if that weren't enough, the Court came back for more. On April 2, 2014, in *McCutcheon v. FEC* — another 5-4 decision — the Supreme Court struck down the aggregate limit on individual contributions.

Before *McCutcheon*, there was a cap on the total amount one person could give across all federal candidates, parties, and political committees in a two-year cycle: \$123,200. That's a lot of money, but it was a ceiling. *McCutcheon* removed it. Now a billionaire can write the maximum legal check to every single candidate and party committee in the country — hundreds of them — and nobody can say "you've

given enough."

The individual per-candidate limits stayed in place. But the overall ceiling? Gone.

So in the span of four years, the Supreme Court dismantled the three main walls that had kept big money at arm's length: corporate and union independent spending, contributions to outside committees, and total individual giving. Everything that followed — the billions, the dark money, the donor class — flows from those three decisions like water through a broken dam.

The Theory and the Reality

Before we go further, I want to be fair to the other side — because if you don't understand why the Court did this, you don't really understand the fight.

Justice Kennedy's majority opinion wasn't the work of a corrupt man taking orders from billionaires. It was a theory, and on paper, it's elegant. It goes like this:

First, independent spending can't corrupt, because there's no quid pro quo. A bribe requires a deal — money for a favor. If the spender and the candidate never coordinate, there's no deal, so there's no corruption. The government's only legitimate reason to limit political money is preventing that kind of corruption, so without it, the limits have to fall.

Second, disclosure fixes everything else. The Court upheld the disclosure rules — the "paid for by" lines, the FEC filings. Kennedy's logic was that sunlight lets voters judge for themselves. If a corporation funds an ad, you'll know, and you can weigh it accordingly.

Third, more speech is always better. The government doesn't get to decide that we've had "enough" political speech, or ration who gets to speak. In the majority's view, telling a corporation it can't run an ad is no different from telling a newspaper it can't run an editorial.

Justice John Paul Stevens, writing the dissent, called the ruling "a rejection of the common sense of the American people." His argument was the cab driver's argument: corporations are not people, money is not speech in any sense your grandmother would recognize, and corruption isn't just envelopes of cash in parking garages. It's the subtle stuff — the access, the gratitude, the unspoken understanding. Stevens saw what was coming.

Well, we've now run the experiment for fifteen years. Let's grade the theory against the reality.

Premise one: independence prevents corruption. Reality: independence is a legal fiction. The same operatives run the campaigns and the super PACs. The coordination rules go largely unenforced. Candidates publicly telegraph their messaging needs, and their "independent" allies just happen to deliver. There may be no provable quid pro quo, but the influence is everywhere — in the access, in the shaped platforms, in the fights that never get fought. Stevens was right: the common sense of the American people saw this coming.

Premise two: disclosure lets voters judge. Reality: disclosure has been gutted. The Court upheld it, but Congress couldn't pass the DISCLOSE Act to strengthen it, and the 501(c)(4) pipeline drives a truck through what's left. Nearly \$1.9 billion in dark money in a single cycle. Over a billion dollars flowing into super PACs from shell companies and nonprofits that don't name their donors. You can't judge what you can't see, and the system is designed — deliberately, legally — so you can't see it.

Premise three: more speech is better. Reality: this one's half true. There is more political speech. But it's not a town hall — it's a megaphone auction. When six people write checks of \$100 million or more and your \$25 donation is a rounding error, "more speech" just means more speech *by the people who can afford the megaphones*. The First Amendment protects everyone's right to speak. It was never meant to guarantee that the richest voices drown out all the others. But that's what happened.

The theory was elegant. The reality is the auction. And now you know exactly how the auction got built, piece by piece. So let's talk about the machine it created.

So What Is a Super PAC, Exactly?

Let me break it down plain, because the lawyers love to hide this behind jargon.

A super PAC is a political committee that can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money — from individuals, from corporations, from unions — with one iron rule: it cannot give money directly to a candidate, and it cannot coordinate with a candidate's campaign. It spends "independently." That's the deal. Unlimited money in, no coordination allowed, and in exchange the committee has to disclose its donors to the Federal Election Commission.

A traditional PAC, by contrast, can only take \$5,000 per person per year — but it can give directly to candidates. The super PAC traded the right to donate directly for the right to raise without limits.

Now, about that word "independent." It's doing an enormous amount of heavy lifting, and I want you to understand exactly how heavy.

The law says the super PAC can't coordinate with the campaign. But it does not say the super PAC can't be run by the candidate's best friend, former campaign manager, or college roommate. It does not say the super PAC can't hire the same ad makers, the same pollsters, the same consultants. It does not say the candidate can't go on television and publicly announce exactly what message he'd like to see aired — after which his super PAC just happens to air exactly that message.

Here's how it works in practice: a candidate's former campaign manager quits on a Friday and starts running the candidate's super PAC on Monday. The "independence" is a legal fiction — a piece of paper that says these two operations, run by the same people, sharing the same donors, fighting for the same candidate, are totally separate entities that never talk. You and I both know better. So does everyone in Washington. But the law is the law, and the law says: as long as there's no provable, direct coordination on specific spending, it's all perfectly legal.

And enforcement? The laws that are supposed to keep super PACs from collaborating with candidates have gone largely unenforced, in the words of Daniel Weiner of the Brennan Center for Justice. The cop on the beat is handcuffed. The Federal Election Commission deadlocks constantly, and everyone in the game knows it. So the "no coordination" rule is less a wall and more a suggestion.

The other thing to know is that super PACs come in flavors. The most common is the single-candidate super PAC — essentially a shadow campaign. When a presidential candidate runs, there is almost always a super PAC with a patriotic-sounding name doing the dirty work the official campaign can't be seen doing: the attack ads, the opposition research dumps, the scorched-earth stuff. The campaign keeps its hands clean and its message positive; the super PAC burns the opponent's house down. Everybody knows whose house it is. Everybody pretends not to.

Then there are the party leadership super PACs — the big Senate and House operations, like the Senate Leadership Fund on the Republican side and the Senate Majority PAC on the Democratic side. In 2020, the Senate Leadership Fund alone spent \$273.3 million. These aren't scrappy little citizen groups. They're the party machines wearing a different hat, vacuuming up unlimited checks and carpet-bombing battleground states.

And then there are the pop-up super PACs with names designed to tell you absolutely nothing: "Concerned Taxpayers of America." "Citizens for a Working America." "We Love USA." (And yes, comedian Stephen Colbert once ran one called "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" — a joke that turned out to be the most honest name in the business.)

One more twist worth knowing: there's also a creature called the hybrid PAC, which keeps two bank accounts — one traditional, one super. But the super PAC is the one that changed everything, so let's talk about what it did to the numbers.

The Money Explodes

I'm going to give you the numbers now. Every one of these comes from OpenSecrets, the nonpartisan group that tracks campaign money using the FEC's own filings. These aren't estimates. These are the receipts.

Total outside spending — that's money spent by groups other than the candidates' own campaigns and the parties, mostly super PACs — by election cycle:

- **2010** (the first super PAC cycle): about **\$310 million**. There were 81 super PACs.
- **2012** (the first full presidential cycle after Citizens United): about **\$1.04 billion**. Super PACs: 1,261.
- **2014**: about **\$567 million**.
- **2016**: about **\$1.41 billion**. Super PACs: 2,376.
- **2018**: about **\$1.09 billion**.
- **2020**: about **\$2.91 billion**.

- **2022:** about **\$2.03 billion**.
- **2024:** a record **\$4.5 billion**. Super PACs: 2,502. They raised **\$5.1 billion** and spent roughly **\$2.7 billion**.

Read that again. Outside spending went from \$310 million to \$4.5 billion in fourteen years. That's more than a fourteenfold increase. The number of super PACs went from 81 to over 2,500.

And that's just the outside money. The total cost of the 2024 federal election was projected by OpenSecrets at **\$15.9 billion** — surpassing the previous record of \$15.1 billion set in 2020. Fifteen point nine billion dollars. To elect a president and a Congress. In one cycle.

The 2024 presidential race alone was the most expensive election in American history, even adjusted for inflation. Outside groups focused on the presidential race raised a combined **\$2.25 billion** — groups supporting Donald Trump pulled in \$989 million, groups supporting Kamala Harris \$850 million. More than **\$2 billion** in outside spending went into that one race.

Now, I want to be fair here, because this book is not about picking a team. In 2020, the outside money favored the Democrat: groups supporting Joe Biden spent \$687.3 million, while groups supporting Donald Trump spent \$369.6 million. In 2024, the top five mega-donors to outside groups all backed Republicans. The money sloshes back and forth. The point is not which party got more in which year. The point is that every single cycle, the ocean gets bigger, and ordinary people get a smaller and smaller share of the boat.

Here's another number that should stop you cold. In 2020, Michael Bloomberg — one man — spent **\$1 billion of his own money** on his own presidential primary campaign in the span of about a month before dropping out. He and fellow billionaire Tom Steyer together spent over **\$1.4 billion** self-financing their primary runs. One billion dollars. From one man's bank account. Spent in thirty days. And it didn't even win him the nomination.

That's the scale we're talking about. Your \$25 donation is a rounding error in an ocean of billion-dollar checks.

The Donor Class

So who writes these checks? Every cycle, OpenSecrets publishes a list of the biggest individual donors in federal politics. Let me show you the 2024 list, because it reads like the guest list at a party you and I will never be invited to.

The biggest political donor of the 2024 cycle was **Elon Musk**, who gave more than **\$291 million** to Republican candidates, PACs, and outside groups. The bulk of it — \$238.5 million — went to America PAC, a super PAC he founded himself. One man. Nearly three hundred million dollars. In one election.

He wasn't alone. Six donors or donor families gave **\$100 million or more** in 2024, all supporting Republican candidates and causes:

- **Timothy Mellon**, a banking heir, gave roughly **\$197 million** — including \$25 million to the main super PAC backing independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr., before Kennedy dropped out

and endorsed Trump.

- **Miriam Adelson**, the casino magnate, gave over **\$100 million**.
- **Richard and Elizabeth Uihlein**, shipping-supply billionaires, gave over **\$100 million**.
- **Kenneth Griffin**, the hedge fund CEO, gave over **\$100 million**.
- **Jeffrey Yass and his wife Janine**, trading-firm billionaires, gave over **\$100 million**.

Behind them: hedge fund CEO **Paul Singer** at \$66.8 million. And on the Democratic side, the biggest names were **Michael Bloomberg** at \$64 million and **Dustin Moskovitz**, the Facebook co-founder, at \$51 million.

Notice something? Six people wrote checks of a hundred million dollars or more. Six. In a country of 340 million people, six individuals each spent more on one election than most Americans will earn in a hundred lifetimes.

And here's the part that should bother you no matter which party you like: the Democrats' biggest mega-donor of recent years, **George Soros**, didn't even crack the top 100 individual donors in 2024 — after being the top donor in 2022 with about **\$128 million**. But his money didn't disappear. It just went underground. The Soros-funded 501(c)(4) nonprofit Fund for Policy Reform gave **\$60 million** to the super PAC Democracy PAC, which spread it among left-leaning groups. The name on the check changed. The influence didn't.

And here's the trend underneath all of it — the one that should worry you most. The biggest checks in American politics are getting *more* secret, not less. Twenty years ago, a mega-donor wrote a check to a party committee and his name went into a public filing. Today, the smartest money goes through the 501(c)(4), the donor-advised fund, the shell LLC — through vehicles designed from the ground up to break the chain between the dollar and the donor. The \$1.6 billion Seid donation. The \$17 million mystery checks to the Judicial Crisis Network. The four anonymous donors behind two-thirds of the Sixteen Thirty Fund's revenue. Anonymity isn't a side effect of the system anymore. It's the product. The donor class figured out that disclosed influence attracts scrutiny, and undisclosed influence attracts nothing at all — so they bought the invisibility, and both parties were happy to sell it to them.

That's the donor class. A few dozen people, maybe a hundred, who can each write a check that outweighs the combined donations of an entire congressional district. They don't all agree with each other — Musk and Soros are on opposite ends of the planet politically. But they agree on one thing: the system should stay exactly the way it is, because it's working beautifully for them.

And it's not just individuals anymore — it's whole industries buying their own regulators. The newest player is crypto. In 2024, a super PAC network called Fairshake — funded by cryptocurrency companies Coinbase and Ripple and the venture firm Andreessen Horowitz — raised over \$200 million and spent more than \$133 million backing pro-crypto candidates. It ran three affiliated super PACs: Fairshake itself, plus Defend American Jobs, which spent in Republican primaries, and Protect Progress, which spent in Democratic primaries. Same industry, both parties' primaries, one coordinated wallet. By June 2024, Fairshake had backed the winning candidate in 33 of the 35 primary races it entered. Its biggest scalp was

Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio — the chairman of the Senate Banking Committee and a crypto skeptic — against whom the network spent over \$40 million to help elect Bernie Moreno. A watchdog group, Public Citizen, put it plainly: the crypto sector's political spending is a business strategy for "combatting enforcement crackdowns and designing a regulatory system that meets the industry's specifications." Translation: an industry under investigation spent nine figures to elect the people who will write its regulations. The 1907 Congress banned corporate money from elections to stop exactly this. The 2024 version just files it with the FEC. The industry calls it participation. The rest of us should call it what it is: a purchase order on the law.

And both parties serve them. Both parties court them. Both parties are terrified of offending them. Which brings us to the darkest corner of this whole machine — the money you can't even see.

Dark Money: The Invisible Hand

A super PAC has to disclose its donors. That's the law. So if you're a billionaire who wants to move a hundred million dollars into an election without your name anywhere near it, what do you do?

You use a 501(c)(4).

Let me explain this one carefully, because it's the most important trick in the book and the least understood. A 501(c)(4) is a "social welfare" nonprofit under the tax code. Churches are 501(c)(3)s. These are (c)(4)s — civic leagues, advocacy groups, organizations that are supposed to exist for the "social welfare" of the community. The IRS lets them engage in unlimited lobbying and *some* political campaign activity, as long as politics isn't the organization's "primary" activity. In practice, that's been read as: you can spend up to roughly half your money on politics and still call yourself a social welfare group.

Here's the magic part: **a 501(c)(4) does not have to disclose its donors.** Not to the public, not to the FEC, not to you. It files a tax return that shows total revenue in the aggregate, and the donor names are blacked out. You can see that \$200 million came in. You cannot see from whom.

Now watch the pipeline:

1. A billionaire writes a \$100 million check to "Americans for a Brighter Tomorrow" — a 501(c)(4) with a website and a patriotic logo.
2. "Americans for a Brighter Tomorrow" writes a \$100 million check to a super PAC.
3. The super PAC files with the FEC and discloses its donor: "Americans for a Brighter Tomorrow."
4. The billionaire's name appears nowhere. The public sees a nonprofit's name. The trail ends.

This is not a loophole in the sense of an accident. It is a machine, built for exactly this purpose, and both parties use it at industrial scale. The super PAC's filing is technically honest — it really did get the money from that nonprofit. The nonprofit's donors are technically private — that's what the tax code says. Put the two together and you have perfectly legal, completely anonymous, unlimited election spending. The lawyers call it a "layered system of secrecy." I call it money laundering with a permission slip.

How big is it? The Brennan Center for Justice put the number at **\$1.9 billion** in dark money spent on 2024 federal races — a record. More than **\$1.3 billion** of that flowed through super PACs. Let that sink in: nearly two billion dollars spent to influence who runs this country, and the public has no legal right to know whose money it was.

And here's the part that will surprise people who think dark money is a Republican thing: in 2024, dark money groups boosting Democrats spent about **\$1.2 billion**, while groups boosting Republicans spent about **\$664 million**. The Democrats outspent the Republicans in dark money nearly two to one. Since the 2018 midterms, liberal outside groups have outspent conservative outside groups in every single cycle. The party that gives the most speeches about getting money out of politics is, right now, the party that benefits most from keeping it hidden. Remember that the next time you hear a lecture.

Let me give you the names, because these groups have names and they should be known:

- **Future Forward USA Action**, the main dark money group behind Joe Biden and then Kamala Harris, poured more than **\$304 million** into ads and into its closely tied super PAC, Future Forward USA. One group. One out of every six dark-money dollars in the entire 2024 election came through that single nonprofit. Three hundred and four million dollars, and the donors are secret.
- **Securing American Greatness**, a pro-Trump dark money group incorporated in March 2024, spent more than **\$81 million** — about \$67 million of which went straight into super PACs.
- **Building America's Future**, another pro-Trump 501(c)(4), put more than **\$35 million** into super PACs — including money spent on ads that falsely suggested the Harris campaign supported divisive policies.

Both sides. Same machine. Different jerseys.

Now let me show you what dark money actually *buys* — because it's not just elections. It's the referees themselves.

Meet the Judicial Crisis Network. It's a 501(c)(4) "social welfare" nonprofit — the same dark-money vehicle I just described — and for the better part of a decade, its business was reshaping the United States Supreme Court. The numbers, taken from its own tax filings and read into the Congressional Record, are staggering. The group spent \$7 million on ads to block President Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland in 2016. It pledged \$10 million to push through Neil Gorsuch in 2017. It spent \$10 million more to muscle through Brett Kavanaugh in 2018. It pledged another \$10 million for Amy Coney Barrett. Four Supreme Court seats. Tens of millions in anonymous money.

And where did the money come from? From ghosts. In a single tax year, the group received a \$21.5 million contribution from one anonymous donor. Then a \$17.9 million check from another anonymous donor. Then \$17.1 million. Then \$15.9 million. Nobody knows who wrote them — that's the whole point of the vehicle. One of its biggest funders was the Wellspring Committee, another secretive nonprofit, which funneled more than \$54.2 million into the Judicial Crisis Network between 2010 and 2018. Behind much of this network stands Leonard Leo, the former Federalist Society executive who served as President

Trump's adviser on judicial nominations — the man who helped select the justices and then directed the dark-money campaigns to confirm them.

Stop and think about what that means. The highest court in the land — the body that gets the final word on abortion, on voting rights, on corporate power, on the dark-money rules themselves — was shaped by tens of millions of dollars from donors whose names you will never know, funneled through nonprofits that exist for no other purpose. You didn't vote for those donors. You don't know what business they have before the Court. But their money helped pick the judges who will rule on your rights for the next thirty years. If that doesn't chill you, check your pulse.

And the Judicial Crisis Network is only one node in the network. In 2022, the country learned about the largest known donation to a politically-focused nonprofit in American history: \$1.6 billion. The donor was Barre Seid, a secretive Chicago manufacturing magnate. He didn't write a check — he donated 100 percent of his company, Tripp Lite, to a brand-new nonprofit called the Marble Freedom Trust, run by Leonard Leo. The trust then sold the company to an Irish conglomerate for \$1.65 billion and kept every penny. The transaction was structured so that both Seid and the nonprofit appear to have avoided taxes on the sale — sidestepping as much as \$400 million in capital gains taxes, according to analysts. One man. One donation. \$1.6 billion in untraceable political firepower, handed to one operative's network. A few years later, roughly \$1 billion of it was still left to spend.

Now — because this book holds both parties to the same standard — the left has its own version, and it's just as secretive. It's called the Sixteen Thirty Fund, managed by a for-profit consulting firm called Arabella Advisors, and Politico calls it "the left's preeminent dark money hub." In 2024 alone, the Sixteen Thirty Fund spent about \$311 million funding progressive causes — abortion access, expanded voting rights, climate campaigns — more than double what it spent the year before. Cumulatively, the network has poured over \$1 billion into American politics. And its donors? Anonymous. Tax filings showed that four anonymous donors accounted for nearly two-thirds of its revenue in a single recent year. Four people you'll never meet, funding a political machine you'll never see, to shape elections you'll vote in.

So there it is: the right has its billion-dollar ghost network, the left has its billion-dollar ghost network, and both of them operate through the same 501(c)(4) pipeline that the IRS refuses to police. The jerseys are different. The machine is identical.

There's one more layer to the secrecy, and it has a name: Donors Trust. It's what's called a donor-advised fund — a charity that exists largely to pass money from wealthy donors to activist groups while keeping the donors' names hidden. One U.S. senator, laying all of this out on the Senate floor, called it "an identity laundering machine" whose purpose is to hide who funds what "so that the Court doesn't know and the public doesn't know." Money goes in from a billionaire, money comes out to a super PAC or a "social welfare" group, and the name on the public filing is Donors Trust. The human being behind it is invisible. It's the car wash at the end of the street where every dirty dollar comes out clean.

And it's getting worse, fast. OpenSecrets tracked how much money super PACs received from shell companies and dark money groups: less than **\$71.7 million** in 2016. Then **\$653 million** in 2020. Then **\$617 million** in 2022. Then over **\$1 billion** in 2024. The anonymous money flowing into the disclosed

system has grown roughly fourteenfold in eight years.

There's one more trick: the shell company. A donor can set up a limited liability company with an innocent name — it takes an afternoon and a filing fee — and route the money through it. The FEC filing shows the LLC's name. The human being behind the LLC is invisible. It's the same laundering trick, one layer thinner.

Now, you might ask: where's the IRS in all this? The IRS is supposed to police the 501(c)(4)s — to make sure politics really isn't their "primary activity." Here's the answer, and it's damning: a ProPublica investigation found that since 2015, thousands of complaints have poured in — from citizens, watchdog groups, IRS agents, government officials — saying these nonprofits are abusing the rules. And in all that time, the IRS has not stripped a *single* organization of its tax-exempt status for breaking the political spending rules. Not one. Thousands of complaints. Zero consequences.

The referee left the stadium years ago. The players know it. The game goes on.

The Auction

So let's put it all together and look at what this does to a country. Because the numbers are abstract until you feel what they mean.

It means elections run like auctions. The candidates aren't really campaigning to voters — not primarily. They're campaigning to the donor class. A presidential candidate in the modern era spends an enormous share of his or her time in rooms with rich people, on the phone with rich people, flying to fundraisers hosted by rich people. This isn't speculation; it's the daily schedule of every serious candidate in America. The official campaign has legal contribution limits, so the real action — the unlimited money — flows through the super PACs. And the super PACs are funded by a few dozen people who can each write a check bigger than your neighborhood's combined income for a decade.

Think about what that does to a candidate's brain. You don't have to be corrupt. You don't have to take a bribe in a parking garage. All you have to do is *know* — the way you know the sun rises — that your political survival depends on keeping a handful of billionaires happy. So you shape your message. You trim your platform. You decide which fights are worth having and which ones might upset the people writing the seven-figure checks. The donor never has to ask for anything. The candidate already knows.

That's the real corruption, and it's the kind the Supreme Court said doesn't count. The Court's theory is that only a direct quid pro quo — a literal bribe — justifies limiting political money. But anyone who's ever worked for a living knows that influence doesn't work that way. Influence is quieter than that. It's the senator who just happens to see the world the same way as the industry that funds his super PAC. It's the congressman who just happens to lose interest in a reform bill after a dark money group spends \$20 million attacking its supporters. No envelopes of cash. No smoking gun. Just a system where the people with the money get heard and the people without it get a form letter.

And here's the cruelest part: the auction has a cover charge that locks out almost everyone. Running for Congress now costs millions. Running for Senate costs tens of millions. A working person — a teacher, a

nurse, a cab driver — cannot self-fund, cannot tap a billionaire network, and cannot compete with a super PAC carpet-bombing the airwaves against them. The system doesn't just favor the rich candidates. It favors the candidates the rich *choose*. The 99% don't get to bid. We get to watch.

And the auction doesn't end on Election Day — that's when the winners start paying off the bidders. Every administration, red or blue, stocks its agencies and advisory boards with veterans of the industries being regulated. The crypto executives who funded Fairshake get a seat at the table when crypto rules get written. The drug lobbyists who funded the campaigns get their exemptions carved into the health bills. The donors don't need to make a single phone call after the election, because the people answering the phones already know who paid for the building. That's the part the Supreme Court's theory can't see: corruption isn't always a transaction. Sometimes it's just a room full of people who all understand, without a word being spoken, whose interests come first — and it isn't yours.

This is why nothing changes. It's not that the voters are stupid. It's not that the candidates are all evil. It's that the selection process — the invisible primary, the money primary — happens before a single vote is cast, and it happens in rooms we will never enter. By the time you get your ballot, the auction is over. You're just ratifying the winner.

The One Counterweight

Now, I promised you straight talk, so here's the honest counterpoint: the 99% do have one weapon in this fight, and it's real. Small-dollar fundraising.

ActBlue — the Democratic Party's online donation platform — processed more than **\$3.8 billion** in donations in 2024. WinRed, the Republican counterpart, brought in less than half of that. When Joe Biden dropped out of the race in July 2024 and endorsed Kamala Harris, her campaign raised **\$81 million in 24 hours** — mostly small donations flooding in online. By the end of that month, she'd pulled in \$200 million, and her July total hit \$310 million. Millions of ordinary people, giving \$25 and \$50 at a time, moving sums that used to require a ballroom full of billionaires.

Don't let anyone tell you small money doesn't matter. It built the modern Democratic fundraising machine, and the Republicans built WinRed specifically to copy it. The small-dollar revolution is the single biggest check on the donor class in American politics, and both parties know it.

But — and you knew there was a but coming — it has limits, and the donor class knows those too.

First, it's outgunned. ActBlue's \$3.8 billion sounds enormous until you remember the total election cost \$15.9 billion, and the outside groups alone spent \$4.2 billion. Small dollars are the infantry; the donor class has the air force.

Second, the small-dollar machine is under attack. Republicans in the House and several state attorneys general have launched investigations into ActBlue — citing allegations of fraud and foreign money that campaign finance experts have called flimsy and politically motivated. Whether the allegations hold up or not, the message is clear: the one fundraising tool that lets regular people compete at scale is a target. Nobody investigates the billionaire's super PAC with the same enthusiasm.

Third — and this is the one that matters for this book — the small-dollar machine belongs to the two parties. ActBlue is Democratic infrastructure. WinRed is Republican infrastructure. If you're an independent candidate, you don't get either one. You don't have the donor class, and you don't have the party's small-dollar army. You're starting from zero, in a system where zero gets you nothing.

Which is exactly why the system never gets fixed. Because the only people with the power to change it are the people it's working for.

Why It Never Gets Fixed

If this system is so obviously broken, why doesn't anyone fix it? That's the question I get in the cab, and it's a good one. The answer is simple and ugly: **the people who would have to fix it are the people who benefit from it.**

And it's not like nobody tried. Once — just once — Congress came close.

After Citizens United, Democrats drafted the DISCLOSE Act — "Democracy Is Strengthened by Casting Light On Spending in Elections." It was modest stuff. It would have required corporations, unions, and super PACs to disclose their big donors and name them in their ads. Remember: the Supreme Court itself had upheld disclosure in Citizens United. This bill was asking for something the Court had already said was constitutional.

The House passed it on June 24, 2010, by a vote of 219 to 206. Then it went to the Senate, where it needed 60 votes to break a filibuster. On July 27, 2010, the cloture vote failed 57 to 41. They tried again on September 23: 59 to 39 — one vote short. A second version in 2012 met the same fate. Every time, a Republican filibuster killed it. Every time, the Democrats were a few votes short of the 60 they needed.

The politics of it were pure Washington. Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, stood on the Senate floor in 2012 and declared that dark money was "a problem that doesn't exist." The 2012 Republican Party platform opposed the DISCLOSE Act by name. Meanwhile, the Democrats — desperate for votes — carved an exemption into the bill for big membership organizations like the NRA, which disgusted their own reform allies and bought them nothing. The bill died anyway.

Think about what that means. A bill to require *disclosure* — not limits, not bans, just telling the public who's paying for the ads — had majority support in the Senate and still couldn't pass. Fifty-nine senators wanted it. The filibuster said no. And the dark money kept flowing.

The Democrats give speeches about Citizens United and dark money — and then take \$1.2 billion in dark money to win. The Republicans talk about free speech and the First Amendment — and then take \$664 million in dark money to win. Neither party will disarm unilaterally, because unilateral disarmament in a money war is suicide. So they both keep the weapons loaded and keep giving speeches about how terrible the weapons are.

Congress has had more than fifteen years since Citizens United to pass new disclosure laws, to tighten the 501(c)(4) rules, to give the FEC real teeth. It hasn't. Not under Democratic majorities. Not under

Republican majorities. The reform bills die in committee, or get filibustered, or get vetoed — and then everyone goes back to raising money from the same billionaires.

The FEC, the agency that's supposed to police all of this, is a dead letter. Its enforcement actions crawl along for years and end in deadlocks. The coordination rules — the one thing standing between a super PAC and a candidate's campaign — go largely unenforced. The IRS won't touch the 501(c)(4)s. Every guardrail in the system has been knocked down, and nobody with the power to rebuild them has any interest in doing so.

And the courts? The current Supreme Court has shown no appetite for revisiting any of this. If anything, the direction of travel is toward *fewer* limits, not more. The people waiting for the courts to save them are waiting for a train that isn't coming.

So here we are. Fifteen years after Citizens United, the outside money has grown thirteenfold. The dark money has hit \$1.9 billion a cycle and climbing. Six people can outspend entire states. The donors are increasingly invisible. The enforcers are asleep. And both parties — the red team and the blue team, the ones who tell you the other side is the problem — are up to their necks in the same trough, feeding from the same hands.

This is the machine. This is what your vote is up against.

In the next chapter, we're going to look at the other side of the money — the campaign funds themselves, the official committees with their legal limits, and how the professionals have learned to game those, too. Because the super PACs are only half the story. The campaigns have their own bag of tricks, and the donor class plays both sides of the table.

But before we go there, sit with this for a minute. The next time someone tells you your vote is your voice, ask them: whose voice is louder — yours, or the \$291 million check? The answer to that question is the reason this book exists. And it's the reason the only way out is to build something the donor class can't buy.

Chapter 4: Campaign Funds

There's a trick I learned driving a cab. You can tell a lot about a city by what it costs to move around in it. A town where every fare is five bucks is a different place than a city where nobody gets in the car for less than fifty. Money sets the shape of everything.

Same thing in Washington. You can tell a lot about who runs Congress by what it costs to get into it. And the price of admission tells you exactly why nothing ever changes: the seat is sold before the voters ever cast a ballot. Not literally. Nobody hands over a suitcase of cash on the House floor. It's all legal, all disclosed, all filed with the Federal Election Commission in neat little columns. That's the genius of it. The auction is right out in the open, and everybody pretends it isn't an auction.

This chapter is about the auction itself. Not the super PACs and the dark money — that got its own chapter back in Chapter 3. This is about the campaign funds. The money candidates raise, the money they beg for on the phone four hours a day, the money the party committees collect and redistribute, the personal side accounts that fund the lifestyle, and the tiny trickle of small-dollar money that keeps the whole thing looking like a democracy.

By the time we're done, you'll understand the single most important fact in American politics: running for office costs so much money that only people who serve money can afford to run.

The Price Tag on a Seat

Let's start with the sticker price.

The nonpartisan watchdogs at OpenSecrets track what it actually costs to win a seat in Congress, cycle after cycle, from the campaign finance reports filed with the FEC. In the 2022 midterms, the average winning candidate for the U.S. House spent \$2,789,859. Call it \$2.8 million. The average winner in a Senate race spent \$26,525,065 — north of \$26 million. And that Senate figure covers the full six-year fundraising cycle, because senators start raising money for re-election practically before the moving boxes are unpacked in their offices.

The losers spent a lot too. The average runner-up in a House race spent \$803,773. In the Senate, the average loser spent \$13,518,978. Read that again: the average *loser* in a Senate race spent more than \$13 million. That's what it costs to show up and get beat.

Compare it to just a few years earlier. In 2018, the average winning House campaign spent \$2,056,494 and the average winning Senate campaign spent \$15,753,167. Four years later, those numbers had jumped to \$2.8 million and \$26.5 million. The price of a Senate seat went up by two-thirds in four years. No wonder ordinary people can't get in the room.

And those are just the *campaigns* — the money the candidates themselves raised and spent. Once you add in the outside groups, party committees, and everything else, the number explodes. OpenSecrets projected the 2024 federal election would cost \$15.9 billion, making it the most expensive election in American history in nominal dollars. Nearly sixteen billion dollars — to fill 535 seats in Congress and one

chair in the Oval Office. That's roughly \$30 million per federal office, if you want to do the sickening math.

The individual races are even more obscene. In 2024, the Ohio Senate race alone saw more than \$344 million in candidate fundraising and outside spending — and that was *three weeks before Election Day*, with more still pouring in. One Senate seat. One state. A third of a billion dollars. Ohio is not some exotic place; it's a normal state with normal problems — roads, jobs, hospitals, schools. But hundreds of millions of dollars rained down on it from donors all over the country, because control of the Senate runs through seats like that one.

Here's what the money people will tell you: "Money doesn't buy elections. Money can't make people vote for you." And there's a grain of truth in it. Spend twenty million in a deep-red district as a Democrat and you're still going to lose. Spend thirteen million against a popular incumbent and you're still going home broke. Money alone doesn't guarantee anything.

But here's what they leave out: money decides *who gets to compete*. Look at the 2022 numbers again. House winners spent \$2.8 million on average; losers spent \$803,000 — roughly a three-and-a-half-to-one edge for the winners. The Center for Responsive Politics, the research organization behind OpenSecrets, found that the candidate with more money wins the overwhelming majority of races — historically about nine out of ten House races and eight out of ten Senate races. It's not a perfect rule, but it's as close to a law of political physics as anything in American life: he who raises the most, rules.

And who raises the most? Incumbents. In 2022, 93.49 percent of House members who ran for re-election won, and every single senator who sought re-election won — a 100 percent re-election rate. Being in office is itself the biggest fundraising advantage there is: you have a donor list, a staff, a record of access to sell. A challenger starts at zero. An incumbent starts with millions and six years of practice dialing for dollars.

The Federal Election Commission's own numbers make the fortress visible in a different way. Look at median receipts for the 2024 cycle — the typical take, not the average skewed by the mega-races. The typical Democratic House incumbent pulled in \$1,923,742. The typical Democratic House challenger: \$75,213. On the Republican side, the typical incumbent raised \$1,996,681; the typical challenger, \$67,275. The incumbent out-raised the challenger by roughly twenty-five to one. In the Senate it was even starker: the median Democratic incumbent raised \$10,731,410 against a median challenger haul of \$39,728 — a gap of about 270 to one. Republican Senate incumbents: \$7,420,579 versus \$83,810 for challengers.

Think about what that means for a regular person considering a run. You're not just trying to raise a competitive amount. You're trying to raise it from a standing start against someone who starts with millions in the bank, a professional fundraising staff, and a decade of donor relationships. The FEC also counted how many challengers even got past the first rung: in the 2024 Senate cycle, only 16 Democratic challengers and 33 Republican challengers managed to raise at least \$100,000. Across the entire country. The moat isn't just wide. Almost nobody gets a boat.

And here's how fast the moat is widening — because it didn't used to be this bad. OpenSecrets has tracked what it cost to *win* a seat going back years, and the climb is steady. In 2010, the average winning House campaign spent \$1.4 million, and the average winning Senate campaign spent \$9.8 million. In 2012, it was \$1.5 million in the House and \$10.2 million in the Senate. By 2020, the winners were spending \$2.3 million in House races and \$19.3 million in Senate races. The price of a Senate seat roughly doubled in a decade. House challengers in 2022 spent about \$2.9 million on average just to compete, and OpenSecrets found the inflation-adjusted cost of winning has climbed about 4 percent *every single cycle* since 2000 — like clockwork, up and up, forever. And the hardest mountain of all is taking on an incumbent. Open-seat Senate races cost the winners about \$11.5 million on average; newcomers trying to knock off a sitting senator spent about \$21.5 million. Nearly twice as much to beat an incumbent as to take an open seat. The fortress charges double admission to storm it.

So here's the system, stripped of the civics-textbook language: it costs millions to win, the candidate with the most money almost always wins, and the people already in office raise the most money. Which means the price tag on the seat isn't just high. It's a fortress. And the moat around that fortress is made of cash.

The War Chest: Money as a Weapon

There's a number on the OpenSecrets election trends page that doesn't get enough attention: the average winner's end-of-year campaign balance. In the 2022 cycle, the average House winner was sitting on \$815,063 in cash *after the election was over*. The average Senate winner: \$3,387,764. Money left over. Not spent. Just parked.

The leaders of the pack were sitting on small fortunes. Adam Schiff, then a House member from California, ended 2022 with \$20,865,016 in his campaign account — more cash than most House candidates raise in an entire career, just sitting there. Tim Scott of South Carolina ended the cycle with \$21,778,423 in his Senate account. Over twenty-one million dollars. In the bank. After winning.

Now, why would a safely elected incumbent keep tens of millions of dollars in a campaign account? Part of it is ambition — a war chest like that is a down payment on a presidential run or a future Senate leadership fight. But the bigger reason is deterrence. A war chest is a weapon pointed at every potential challenger. Imagine you're a talented, principled person thinking about taking on an incumbent. You look up their FEC filings. They've got \$5 million, \$10 million, \$20 million in cash on hand — money they can spend the day you announce, before you've hired your first staffer. Most people do the rational thing: they don't run. The money doesn't have to be spent to work. It just has to be *there*.

This is how the fortress defends itself without firing a shot. The incumbent's re-election rate — 93.49 percent in the House in 2022, literally 100 percent in the Senate — isn't just about name recognition or gerrymandering, though both matter. It's about the pile of money sitting in the account, visible to everyone, whispering the same message to every would-be challenger: *don't bother*.

And the fundraising never stops. That's the part nobody tells you. The campaign doesn't end on Election Day — the next one's fundraising starts the morning after. A sitting senator with six years until

the next election is still raising money in year one, year two, year three, because the war chest has to be full *before* a challenger even thinks about running. The average Senate winner in 2022 finished with nearly \$3.4 million in the bank — money they didn't need, against opponents they'd already beaten, held in reserve for a fight that hasn't started yet. Multiply that by a hundred senators and 435 House members, all dialing for dollars every week of every year, and you start to understand the scale of the distraction. This is what the people who are supposed to be running the country do for a living: they raise money. The country gets the leftovers of their attention — whatever's left after the call time, the fundraisers, the donor retreats, the dues. You wonder why Washington feels like it never does anything? It's busy. Just not with your business.

And where does the war chest come from? Not from the voters back home. OpenSecrets found that in 2022, the average House winner took \$727,311 from PACs; the average Senate winner took \$2,407,752. That's the corporate and industry PAC money — the banks, the defense firms, the drug companies, the trade associations — flowing to the people already in power, year after year, building the pile higher. It's not a donation. It's a retainer. The check gets written, the incumbent stays in office, the war chest grows, the challengers stay home, and the cycle repeats. The money protects the seat, and the seat protects the money. Around and around it goes.

Who's Actually Paying the Bill

Now the question that matters: whose money is it?

There are about 260 million adults in the United States. When OpenSecrets dug into the donor rolls, they found that the top 1 percent of all donors — the wealthiest sliver of the donor pool — accounted for *50 percent of all the money raised* in the 2024 cycle. Half the money. From one percent of the people giving it.

Go smaller and it gets worse. The top 100 individual donors accounted for 16 percent of *all* fundraising. The top 10 donors alone gave \$599 million — 7 percent of every dollar raised in federal politics. Ten people. Seven percent of everything.

Now look at the other end. Every donor who gave under \$200 — the small folks, the twenty-buck donations, the people who actually have to look at their bank balance before giving — all of them combined accounted for just 16 percent of the money raised. The top 100 donors and the entire small-donor universe put together: a dead tie. One hundred people on one side of the scale, tens of millions of givers on the other, and the scale balances.

Issue One, the reform group founded by former members of Congress from both parties, put it another way: in one recent cycle, just 0.29 percent of Americans — fewer than one in three hundred adults — contributed more than \$200 to political campaigns. When members of Congress sit down to dial for dollars, they aren't calling you. They aren't calling your neighbors. They aren't even calling people in their own districts most of the time. They're calling the tiny fraction of the country rich enough to write checks that matter. And as Issue One's researchers point out, that sliver of the population has a very different set of worries than the average voter. You worry about rent. They worry about capital gains rates. Guess which

worry shapes the agenda.

The billionaires deserve their own paragraph, because they play in a league of their own. Americans for Tax Fairness studied the 2024 cycle and found that just 150 billionaire families had already spent nearly \$1.4 billion by the end of August — *before* the traditional fall spending blitz even started. On average, each of those families spent about \$9.2 million, which sounds like a lot until you realize it's about 0.06 percent of their wealth — the equivalent of \$120 for the median American family. Pocket change. And yet that pocket change gives those 150 families the political spending power of 11.5 million ordinary families combined.

That's not a metaphor. That's arithmetic. One hundred and fifty families cancel out eleven and a half million.

Now, both parties have their billionaires, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. In 2024, OpenSecrets reported that the top five megadonors of the cycle were *all* backing Republicans — the first time that had happened. But Democrats have their own roster of billionaire patrons, and they've had for decades. The money flows to whoever holds power. OpenSecrets' Sheila Krumholz said it plainly years ago: "Money follows power." When Democrats took Congress, the fundraising edge shifted to Democrats. When Republicans are rising, the money shifts back. The donor class isn't loyal to a party. It's loyal to leverage. And both parties' leadership knows it, which is why both parties govern with one eye on the donor spreadsheets.

And in 2024, the billionaire class stopped hiding behind initials and put its names on the scoreboard. OpenSecrets reported that Timothy Mellon, heir to the Mellon banking fortune, spent over \$165 million on the election — including \$125 million to MAGA Inc., the main pro-Trump super PAC. Elon Musk, the richest man on Earth, disclosed roughly \$277 million in political spending, about \$238.5 million of it to America PAC, the outfit he built to turn out Trump's voters. The Republican side also had hedge-fund billionaire Ken Griffin, who gave more than \$75 million to elect Republicans. Now the Democrats. Michael Bloomberg put \$50 million into Future Forward, the main super PAC backing Kamala Harris — on top of nearly \$20 million he'd already given for Biden's re-election. Bill Gates quietly put in \$50 million of his own toward Harris's effort. And George Soros's Fund for Policy Reform moved \$60 million into Democracy PAC in January 2024 alone. That's the whole picture, and don't let anybody crop it: the 2024 cycle's biggest megadonors were on the Republican side, but the Democrats had their own billionaire battalion writing eight-figure checks. Different jerseys, same owners' box. The donor class isn't partisan. It's just rich.

The working-class picture is the mirror image. The Brennan Center found that 2014 was the first year in American history when a majority of Congress was made up of millionaires. Members from working-class backgrounds? About 2 percent of Congress. Two percent. The people who drive trucks, pour concrete, clean buildings, and cook food make up the vast majority of this country and almost none of its legislature. That's not a coincidence. When a seat costs \$2.8 million and the donors are one percent of the country, the candidates are going to look like the donors. The system selects for it. It's not that working people can't run — it's that the price tag screens them out before the first debate is ever held.

The Telemarketer's Republic: Call Time

So how do you raise \$2.8 million when almost nobody in your district can afford to give it to you? You get on the phone.

This is the part of American politics that sounds like a conspiracy theory until you hear members of Congress describe it themselves, on camera, in their own words.

In 2016, former Representative Rick Nolan of Minnesota went on *60 Minutes* and told Norah O'Donnell that both parties expect their newly elected members to spend about 30 hours a week in the party call centers across the street from the Capitol — literally dialing for dollars. Thirty hours a week. Here's the exchange:

"Well, both parties have told newly elected members of the Congress that they should spend 30 hours a week in the Republican and Democratic call centers across the street from the Congress, dialing for dollars."

"Thirty hours a week?"

"Thirty hours is what they tell you you should spend. And it's discouraging good people from running for public office. I could give you names of people who've said, 'You know, I'd like to go to Washington and help fix problems, but I don't want to go to Washington and become a mid-level telemarketer, dialing for dollars, for crying out loud.'"

"Mid-level telemarketer." That's how a former congressman describes the job of a United States representative.

He wasn't exaggerating. Back in 2013, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee gave its incoming freshmen a PowerPoint with a "model daily schedule." The schedule allotted two hours a day for committee work and floor votes — the actual job of legislating — and *four hours a day* for "call time." Twice as much time begging for money as making laws. NPR got hold of the slide and reported that it's "not uncommon" for members to average three or four hours a day working as telemarketers, and that one lawmaker told their reporter that when a quarterly fundraising deadline approached, "he'd be there all day long."

Representative Peter DeFazio of Oregon described the call centers: "If you walked in there, you would say, 'Boy, this is the about the worst looking, most abusive looking call center situation I've seen in my life. These people don't have any workspace, the other person is virtually touching them.'"

Stacks of names in front of each lawmaker. Staff feeding them donor biographies. Cold calls, all day, asking strangers for money. Former Representative David Jolly, a Republican from Florida, told *60 Minutes* the party even provides a telemarketing script. The staffer puts a card in front of you: call John, he's married to Sally, his daughter Emma just graduated, he gave \$18,000 to candidates last year, he can give you \$1,000 if you ask. And then you dial.

Both parties have their own call rooms. Both parties run the same operation. This isn't a Democratic thing or a Republican thing. It's the system thing.

And the party committees don't just *encourage* this — they tax it. Members owe "dues" to their party's campaign committee, and the amount depends on how senior you are and what committee you sit on. Beto O'Rourke, during his time in Congress, described the scale at a South by Southwest event: a junior member on a minor committee might owe \$150,000 a year to the party. A senior member on one of the "money committees" — the committees that oversee the industries with the deepest pockets — could owe up to \$1,000,000 a year. A million dollars. Every year. Just to keep your standing in the party.

Think about what that means. A member of Congress isn't just fundraising for their own campaign. They're fundraising to pay tribute to the party machine, and the size of the tribute is tied to how powerful their committee seat is — which is tied to how much money the industries they regulate can donate. The whole structure is a feedback loop: donors fund members, members fund the party, the party rewards the members who raise the most, and everybody's attention stays fixed on the donor class instead of the voters.

The math of call time tells the whole story. If you need to raise \$2 million in a year and you only fundraise on weekdays, you have to pull in more than \$7,500 every single workday. You can't get there on \$25 donations — you'd need 300 donors a day, every day, forever. So you call the big fish. The \$1,000 check. The \$3,300 max-out. And federal law makes the max-out easy to track: in the 2024 cycle, an individual could give \$3,300 per election to a candidate — \$6,600 across a primary and general. Multi-candidate PACs could give \$5,000 per election. Individuals could give \$41,300 a year to a national party committee, and another \$123,900 a year to each of the party's special accounts for conventions, buildings, and legal fights.

And here's the kicker: the members hate it. Representative Steve Israel, a Democrat who ran the party's House campaign arm, compared call time to waterboarding. Rick Nolan and David Jolly blew the whistle on national television. The people with the most power to change the system are trapped in it, miserable, telling anyone who'll listen that the job is broken. But they keep doing it, because if they stop dialing, they stop existing. The fundraising is the job. The legislating is the side gig.

So when you wonder why Congress can't get anything done — why the bills sit, why the crises rot, why the same problems are still there every election — remember the model schedule. Two hours for the country's business. Four hours for the donor's business. That's not a legislature. That's a telemarketing operation with a gift shop.

The Party Money Machines

The party committees are the engines that keep the whole auction running: the DNC, the RNC, the DCCC and NRCC (House races), the DSCC and NRSC (Senate races). They raise money in bulk, they hand it out in targeted races, they run the polling and the ads and the get-out-the-vote operations. They are, in the coldest sense, money machines.

In the 2024 cycle, the Democratic Party's committees raised \$2.05 billion and spent \$2.04 billion. The Republican Party's committees raised \$1.43 billion and spent \$1.40 billion. Three and a half billion dollars, moving through party machinery in a single cycle. For scale: the DNC alone raised \$685.8 million; the RNC raised \$475.8 million. The House campaign arms — the DCCC and the NRCC — raised \$339.9

million and \$236.3 million respectively. The Senate arms — the DSCC and NRSC — raised \$275.5 million and \$296.5 million. Every one of these operations also carries debt: the DCCC owed \$20 million, the DSCC owed \$20 million, the NRCC owed \$15 million, the NRSC owed \$17 million. Even the money machines borrow money to make money.

Now, both parties say they're the party of the little guy. The Democrats say it about working people. The Republicans say it about the forgotten American. But look at where the money comes from. Corporate PACs — the political arms of corporations, trade associations, and industry groups — pour millions into both parties' committees. The same banks, the same defense contractors, the same pharmaceutical giants give to both sides, hedging their bets like a gambler playing both horses. Money follows power, remember. When control of Congress flips, the checks flip with it. That's not loyalty. That's an investment strategy.

Every few years a candidate makes a show of swearing off corporate PAC money. Around 70 candidates did it in one recent cycle — mostly Democrats, plus a few Republicans. Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Beto O'Rourke, and others took the pledge. It makes for great press releases. But OpenSecrets pointed out the fine print nobody reads: the pledges didn't mean returning corporate contributions, and they didn't mean rejecting super PAC support. And as OpenSecrets noted at the time, the announcements "didn't acknowledge the corporate dollars donated to party and leadership PACs that so often funnel into personal campaign accounts." You can refuse a corporate PAC check made out to your campaign while the same corporation's executives max out to your leadership PAC and your party committee — which then turns around and spends it on your race. The pledge is the performance. The money is the reality.

The party committees also serve as the enforcement arm of the two-party monopoly. This is the part that matters most for the 99 percent and for independents in particular. The DCCC and NRCC don't just fund their own incumbents — they actively work to crush primary challengers and keep outsiders off the ballot. A candidate who won't take the party line, who won't do the call time, who won't owe the dues, doesn't get the money, doesn't get the polling, doesn't get the field operation. And running without the party machine in a system where the average winner spends millions is like showing up to a gunfight with a stern letter. The parties don't have to rig the general election. They rig the pipeline. By the time you see the names on the ballot in November, the auction has already decided which names were allowed to be there.

This is why an independent run matters — and why it's so hard. The independent doesn't get a dime from the DCCC or the NRCC. No call center. No donor list. No party polling. The whole machine that makes a \$2.8 million campaign possible is a two-party machine, built by two parties, for two parties. Every dollar of party-committee money is a dollar that says: there are two teams, pick one, or sit down.

And just so you know what happens to people who try to play without a team — look at 2024. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. ran as an independent for president, and OpenSecrets found that the main super PAC backing him took \$25 million from Timothy Mellon — a Trump supporter. Kennedy dropped out on August 23 and endorsed Trump. That's the system working as designed: an independent campaign with real support gets absorbed back into one of the two machines, because the machines control the money, the

ballot access, and the oxygen. The two parties don't just compete with each other. They collaborate on keeping everybody else out.

This is the part that should make you furious, because it's aimed at you personally. The system isn't just expensive — it's *designed* to price out the working man and then call it democracy. A truck driver with a good heart and a head full of common sense doesn't have \$2.8 million. He doesn't have a call center, a donor list, or a leadership PAC. He has a job and a family and opinions that matter. The system looks at him and says: come back when you're rich. And then the people inside the fortress turn around and govern in the name of people like him, taking money from people nothing like him, and wonder why he doesn't trust them anymore.

The 99 percent were never invited to the auction. That isn't their failure. It's the auction's. A system that requires millions of dollars to participate isn't a democracy with a fundraising problem — it's an auction with a democracy problem. And auctions only work if the bidders keep showing up. The day the 99 percent decide to stop playing the money game and start playing the numbers game — 260 million adults against 150 billionaire families — the fortress falls. Not with violence. Not with hate. With votes, with organization, and with the one thing money has never been able to buy: each other.

Leadership PACs: The Second Pocket

Then there's the slush fund nobody talks about at the dinner table: the leadership PAC.

A leadership PAC is a political committee established by a candidate or officeholder — but *not* their actual campaign committee. The FEC first allowed them in 1978, back when they were supposed to help party leaders support their colleagues' campaigns. The idea was simple: a rising star raises some extra money and spreads it around to teammates, building goodwill for a future leadership bid. Harmless enough on paper.

In practice, as conservative writer Peter Schweizer put it, the leadership PAC has become for many members of Congress "a second personal bank account, or a second pocket from which politicians can pull money." Nearly every member of Congress has one. And here's the trick that makes them so valuable: federal law bans candidates from converting *campaign* funds to personal use. But that ban doesn't apply to leadership PAC money. The same expense that would be illegal from the campaign account is perfectly legal from the leadership PAC. It's a loophole you could drive a golf cart through — and they do. Literally.

In 2018, the watchdog groups Issue One and the Campaign Legal Center analyzed nearly 200,000 leadership PAC expenditure records going back to 2013. What they found was a catalog of luxury living on donors' dimes: \$871,000 in golf-related expenses. \$741,000 at St. Regis hotels and resorts. \$469,000 at Walt Disney theme parks, hotels, and restaurants. A South Dakota senator spent \$403,000 at the Greenbrier Sporting Club in West Virginia. A Missouri senator spent \$117,000 at the Disney Yacht Club Resort in Florida. An Ohio congressman spent \$64,000 on Broadway tickets in New York City. A Georgia congressman spent \$34,000 — the report's list goes on. The groups concluded that politicians had spent millions of dollars from leadership PAC funds in ways that "may have been unlawful if the spending came from their own campaign accounts."

And how much of leadership PAC money actually goes to helping other candidates — the thing the PACs were created for? OpenSecrets looked at the numbers ahead of the 2020 cycle: leadership PACs had combined to spend \$56.6 million, but less than 30 percent of it — just \$16.5 million — went to other federal candidates' campaigns. The rest went to consultants, fundraisers, travel, and closely linked firms. Vice President Mike Pence's leadership PAC, the Great America Committee, spent \$809,511 through the fall of 2019 — and made exactly *one* contribution to another candidate: \$2,500. More than half the PAC's spending went to fundraising and consulting, including over \$100,000 at Trump-owned properties and nearly \$130,000 to a consulting firm run by Pence's own senior political advisor.

Both parties do it. The Issue One report stressed that: "It is not just one party or lawmaker perpetuating this system." Republican or Democrat, the second pocket works the same way. Donors give money thinking they're supporting a cause or a candidate, and the money pays for the lifestyle of the political class — the golf, the resorts, the Broadway tickets, the consultants who happen to be the politician's friends.

Remember those contribution limits? An individual can give \$3,300 per election to a candidate. But they can give \$5,000 a year to a PAC. And there's no limit on what a leadership PAC can spend on "fundraising" and "consulting" — categories broad enough to cover almost anything. So a donor who has maxed out to the campaign can keep giving to the leader's PAC, and the leader can keep spending it. It's a second fundraising vehicle with softer rules and a bigger lifestyle attached. The auction doesn't end at the campaign. It extends into the country club.

Step back and look at what all the pockets add up to. The campaign account has hard limits — \$3,300 per person per election — but no limit on how much can be raised in total. The leadership PAC takes \$5,000 a year per donor with softer spending rules. The party committees take tens of thousands a year per donor into national and special accounts. And the super PAC takes *unlimited* money from anyone, as long as it doesn't "coordinate" with the candidate — a rule enforced with all the seriousness of a screen door on a submarine. Every pocket has a different limit, and the limits always add up to the same thing: if you've got the money, there's a legal pocket to put it in. The system isn't broken. It's built this way. Built by the people who benefit from it, maintained by the people who benefit from it, and explained to you by the people who benefit from it as if it were the weather — just something that happens, nobody's fault, can't be changed.

The Small-Dollar Exception

Now for the part of the story the parties love to tell: the small donor. The \$25 contribution. The grassroots. The proof that the system still belongs to the people.

And to be fair, something real happened. The internet changed fundraising. In 2024, ActBlue — the Democratic Party's online fundraising platform — processed more than \$3.5 billion in donations, and some reports put the figure above \$3.8 billion. When President Biden dropped out of the race and Kamala Harris took over the nomination, ActBlue pulled in over \$68 million in a *single day* — the biggest day in its history. On the Republican side, WinRed — built as the GOP's answer to ActBlue — raised less than half of ActBlue's total, but still moved an enormous river of small-dollar cash.

Go back one cycle and you can see how the small-dollar machine got built. From July through September of 2020 alone, ActBlue moved \$1.5 billion — one and a half billion dollars in three months — from more than 13 million users giving an average of about \$35 a pop. That's the good version of the story: ordinary people, small amounts, enormous scale. It's also the moment the party machines figured out that the small donor wasn't just a supporter with a credit card. He was a revenue stream. A \$35 donor you can email every week is worth more than a \$3,300 donor you can only ask once.

The small-dollar share of the money has grown. OpenSecrets found that for several presidential cycles, small donors giving under \$200 accounted for roughly 20 percent of all fundraising, with a notable spike in 2020. In 2024, about 28 percent of donations to Democratic federal candidates came from small donors, compared to 19 percent for Republicans. That's real money from real people — teachers, nurses, retirees, truck drivers — chipping in twenty or fifty bucks because they believe in something.

So does that mean the system works? Does the small donor break the donor class's grip?

No. And here's why.

First, the math still isn't close. Remember the headline number: all donors giving under \$200 combined for 16 percent of the money raised in 2024. The top 1 percent of donors provided 50 percent. Small donors are louder than they've ever been, and they're still outgunned more than three to one. A candidate who builds a campaign on \$25 donations is doing something admirable — and something that puts them at a permanent disadvantage against the candidate on the phone with billionaires four hours a day.

Second, the small-dollar money flows through party machines. ActBlue and WinRed aren't neutral pipes. They're the parties' own toll booths. ActBlue is the Democratic fundraising infrastructure; WinRed is the Republican one. When you give \$25 through ActBlue, your money goes to the candidate — minus the platform's cut — but your *data* goes into the machine. Your email address, your giving history, your zip code: all of it feeds the party's donor lists, which get rented, shared, and sold across the ecosystem. You're not just a donor. You're inventory. And the platforms themselves have become political powers: ActBlue has faced congressional investigations, an executive order calling for its prosecution, and internal chaos — not because it's a charity, but because it controls a multi-billion-dollar spigot that the entire Democratic Party depends on.

Third, the grassroots gold rush attracted predators. When billions of dollars started flowing through online donation platforms, the scammers followed. The Bulwark's Sam Stein documented a wave of scammy fundraising emails and text messages soliciting donations to various political action committees through ActBlue — groups with official-sounding names that spent most of the money on "fundraising," meaning the organizers' own pockets. "Most of the money ended up in the pockets of PAC organizers," Stein reported. The small donor thinks they're saving democracy; the money is buying somebody's second house.

And the Republicans' platform has its own rot. In congressional testimony, Democratic members cited WinRed complaints from the party's own donors: an 81-year-old in Fort Worth who said WinRed siphoned

\$11,000 from his account without authorization; an 82-year-old woman who lost more than \$350,000 of her life savings through WinRed charges she didn't understand; a Colorado woman whose \$100 donation was converted into recurring weekly \$100 charges she never approved. Maybe every one of those complaints has an explanation. But the pattern is the same on both sides: the machines are built to extract, not to serve. The small donor is a resource to be harvested — by the party, by the platform, and by the parasites clinging to both.

Fourth — and this is the deepest point — small-dollar fundraising *proves the rule* rather than breaking it. Why do candidates who raise millions from small donors still spend four hours a day calling rich people? Because the small money is slow, expensive to raise, and unpredictable. The big money is fast. When the quarterly deadline hits and the party wants its dues, the candidate doesn't send a million emails hoping for \$25 apiece. They call the max-out donors. The grassroots money is the story the campaign tells the press. The big-donor money is the money that pays the bills.

There's a final irony here. The small-dollar revolution was supposed to free candidates from the donor class. Instead, it freed the *parties* from having to persuade anyone. ActBlue lets the DNC raise billions without a single persuasive argument — just outrage emails and countdown timers. WinRed does the same for the GOP. The platforms turned politics into e-commerce: urgency, scarcity, one-click checkout. And the product being sold isn't change. It's the feeling of doing something, sold back to the people for \$25 a month, recurring.

So yes — give your \$25 if it matters to you. But don't mistake the checkout page for power. The power is still in the call center, in the max-out check, in the party dues and the leadership PAC and the second pocket. The small donor built a beautiful new door into the building. The donor class still owns the building.

What the Money Really Buys

Let's put the whole machine on the table, all in one place, because the pieces only make sense together.

It costs \$2.8 million to win a House seat and \$26.5 million to win a Senate seat, on average. The candidate with more money wins the overwhelming majority of the time. Incumbents win more than nine times out of ten. To raise that kind of money, members of Congress spend up to 30 hours a week cold-calling donors — four hours a day on the phones versus two hours legislating — reading from scripts, working out of cramped party call centers that one congressman called the most abusive-looking call center he'd ever seen. They owe their party committees up to a million dollars a year in dues. The money they raise comes overwhelmingly from a fraction of a percent of Americans: the top 1 percent of donors supply half of all the cash, while everyone giving under \$200 combined supplies 16 percent. The party committees move billions — \$2.05 billion through Democratic committees in 2024, \$1.43 billion through Republican ones — rewarding loyalists, crushing outsiders, and keeping the pipeline to two names on the ballot. The leadership PACs give every member a second pocket with looser rules, funding golf trips and resort stays that would be illegal from a campaign account. And the small-dollar revolution, real as it is, flows through party-owned toll booths that harvest the donors as data and leave the power exactly where it

was.

Now ask the only question that matters: *what does the money buy?*

It buys the agenda. Not in the crude sense — nobody is handing a senator an envelope and dictating a vote, at least not usually. It works the way Issue One described it: when every hour of fundraising is an hour spent talking to the donor class, the donor class's concerns become the office's concerns. The member who spends four hours a day with people worried about carried interest and capital gains doesn't need to be bribed to care about carried interest and capital gains. They just do. That's where they live now. The voters are the people they visit on weekends. The donors are the people they talk to every day.

It buys the candidates, too. The price tag screens out the working class before the race starts — 2 percent of Congress, remember — and it screens out anyone who won't play the game. A candidate who refuses the call time can't raise the money. A candidate who refuses the party can't access the machine. A candidate who takes on the donor class gets a primary challenger funded by the donor class. The system doesn't need to be corrupt in the criminal sense. It's corrupt in the structural sense: the incentives point one way, and everybody follows the incentives.

And it buys permanence. The 2024 election cost \$15.9 billion — the most expensive in history — and what did the country get for it? The same two parties, the same donor class, the same call centers, the same dues, the same second pockets. The money doesn't just elect people. It elects the *system itself*, over and over, every two years, forever. Each cycle costs more than the last. Each cycle, the price of admission goes up. Each cycle, the door closes a little further on anyone who isn't already inside.

And where does all that cash go? A lot of it goes straight into your eyeballs. AdImpact, the firm that tracks political advertising, put 2024 political ad spending at a preliminary \$10.86 billion — up from \$8.47 billion in 2020. The presidential race alone burned \$3.06 billion on ads. NPR reported that by November 1, 2024, more than \$10.5 billion had already been spent on advertising — about \$5 billion from Democrats and \$4.1 billion from Republicans — with Pennsylvania alone soaking up more than \$1.2 billion. One state. Over a billion dollars in television ads, most of it paid for by people who will never set foot there, telling Pennsylvanians what to think. That's what the most expensive election in history buys: it buys you out of your own attention.

The super PACs are the other black hole. OpenSecrets found that outside spending on the 2024 elections hit a record \$4.5 billion — and more than half of it came from groups that don't fully disclose who funds them. Over a billion dollars flowed into super PACs from shell companies and dark-money nonprofits that don't have to tell you their names. The presidential race alone drew more than \$2 billion in outside spending — the most ever, even adjusted for inflation, nearly double the \$1.14 billion outside groups spent in 2020. In four years, outside spending on the presidential race nearly doubled. The auction isn't just rigged. It's accelerating.

Here's the part the two parties will never say out loud, because they both depend on it: the campaign finance system is the reason they never have to change. Republicans don't have to deliver for working people, because working people can't fund a campaign and the donor class can. Democrats don't have to

deliver for working people, for exactly the same reason. Both parties' leadership wakes up every morning, walks into the call center, and spends the day talking to the same small circle of wealthy Americans. Then they walk onto the House floor and vote. Whose interests do you think those votes reflect?

This is why the independent movement matters — and why the next chapters of this book exist. You cannot fix a system from inside the fundraising machine, because the machine is the system. The Republican con and the Democrat con, the divide-and-conquer, the whole theater of the two-party trap — all of it runs on this money. The campaign funds are the fuel. Cut the fuel, and the machine stops. Keep feeding it, and nothing changes, no matter who wins in November.

The 99 percent don't have \$2.8 million. They don't have 30 hours a week for call time. They don't have leadership PACs or party dues or max-out donors on speed dial. What they have is numbers — 260 million adults, and almost all of them locked out of the auction. That's not a weakness. That's the whole point. The money system works by keeping the many out and the few in. An independent movement works by doing the opposite: bringing the many in, until the few don't matter anymore.

The auction is rigged. But auctions only work if people keep bidding. The 99 percent were never invited to bid — and that's exactly why they can walk away from the whole thing, and build something the money can't buy.

Chapter 5: The Republican Con

The Pitch

Every few years, the Republican Party knocks on the working man's door with the same sales pitch. It goes like this: *We're the party of jobs. We're the party of small business. We believe in hard work, family values, and getting Washington off your back. Send us to the Capitol and we'll drain the swamp.*

It's a hell of a pitch. It sounds like something your grandfather would've said at the kitchen table. It sounds like America. And for decades, millions of good, hardworking people — plumbers, truck drivers, waitresses, mechanics, cab drivers like me — have believed it. They voted for it. They defended it at barbecues and in break rooms. They believed that this time, *this* Republican, would finally be the one to fight for them.

Here's what I need you to understand: I don't hate Republican voters. I don't think they're stupid. I was around enough of them to know they're mostly good people who want what everybody wants — a fair shot, a decent paycheck, a country that isn't rotting from the inside. That's exactly why the con works. The best cons don't target the gullible. They target the hopeful.

But the pitch and the product are two different things. When you look at what Republican leadership actually *does* — not what they say on cable news, not what they tweet, but what they vote for, what they sign, what happens to the money — you find a forty-year record of the same thing, over and over: cut taxes for the rich, cut rules for the donors, crush the workers' leverage, and send the bill to your kids.

This chapter is the receipts. Every number in it comes from a real place — the Tax Policy Center, the Congressional Budget Office, the Congressional Research Service, the Treasury Department, the Economic Policy Institute, the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Not memes. Not talk radio. Receipts.

Now, before we go any further: the next chapter is The Democrat Con, and it's just as ugly. Neither party gets a pass in this book. But right now, we're looking at the Republican operation, because the working people of this country deserve to see exactly how the trick is done.

Before we get to the taxes, let's start with the promises — because the Republican con doesn't begin with a bill. It begins with a man's word. In 1988, George H.W. Bush stood at the Republican convention and said the most famous six words in campaign history: "Read my lips: no new taxes." He won. Then in 1990, facing a growing deficit, he cut a budget deal with the Democratic Congress that raised taxes. The promise was broken, plain and simple — and Bush paid for it. He lost in 1992, and conservatives never forgave him.

Now, I'll give credit where it's due: years later, plenty of people — including Democrats — said the 1990 deal took real courage, because the deficit needed fixing and Bush put the country ahead of his re-election. In 2014 he was even given the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for it — the establishment patting him on the back for breaking his word to the voters. That tells you everything about how Washington grades these things: courage is when you break a promise to the people for the good of

the system. The voters graded it differently. They fired him. And the pattern was set for every Republican since: make the promise in the campaign, break it in office, and count on the voters to forget. They don't forget. They just stop believing.

The Tax Con, Part One: The Reagan Revolution That Started the Fire

Every story has a beginning, and this one starts in 1981, with Ronald Reagan and the biggest economic sales job in American history. The pitch was called "supply-side economics." The regular people in my neighborhood called it something simpler, something a guy named it at a bar one night: *trickle-down*. The idea was that if you cut taxes on rich people and big corporations, they'd invest the money, grow the economy, and the wealth would trickle down to everybody else. Give the money to the top, and the top will take care of the bottom.

It sounded good. Reagan was likable. He smiled. And Congress bought it.

The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 cut the top personal income tax rate from 70 percent to 50 percent. Read that again. Seventy to fifty. The richest people in the country got a twenty-percentage-point haircut on their tax rate, in one bill. The capital gains rate — the rate on money made from money, the kind of money rich people make — dropped from 28 percent to 20 percent. Five years later, the Tax Reform Act of 1986 cut the top rate again, from 50 percent down to 28 percent. (That one was supposed to be revenue-neutral — it closed some loopholes to pay for the cuts. The 1981 one wasn't.)

Now, the defenders of these cuts will tell you the 1980s economy boomed. And there was growth, no question. But here's what they don't put on the bumper sticker: the tax cuts didn't pay for themselves. Not even close. The Office of Tax Analysis at the Treasury Department estimated that the 1981 act lowered federal income tax revenue by 13 percent below what it would have been. The federal deficit hit a record \$221 billion in 1986. It came down to \$152 billion by 1989 as the economy grew — but it never went away. The surplus of the late '90s would come later, under a different president and a different set of tax policies, and the Republican Party would take credit for it anyway.

And while the tax cuts were flowing, the deregulation was quietly blowing up the banking system. The savings-and-loan crisis of the 1980s and early '90s — fueled by the same deregulatory fever that came with the Reagan revolution — ended with the Resolution Trust Corporation shutting down 747 failed thrifts holding more than \$407 billion in assets. The final bill to the American taxpayer: as much as \$124 billion, according to the Federal Reserve's own history of the crisis. The playbook was already visible: loosen the rules, let the big players gamble, and when the whole thing collapses, hand the bill to the working people. They'd run the same play again in 2008. They always run the same play.

That's the Reagan legacy in one paragraph: taxes cut, debt tripled, banks deregulated, taxpayers billed. And here's the part the history books leave out of the highlight reel — the people who paid for it weren't the ones who benefited from it. The top rate fell from 70 to 28. The debt went from under a trillion to \$2.85 trillion. The S&L cleanup cost \$124 billion. Add it up and the 1980s weren't a triumph of free markets. They were the first great American experiment in borrowing prosperity from the future and calling it growth. Every Republican administration since has run the same experiment, with the same results, and

told you it was the Democrats' fault. The receipts say otherwise.

And the national debt? When Reagan took office, it was \$997 billion — under a trillion. When he left, it was \$2.85 trillion. The national debt nearly *tripled* in eight years, under the president the party of fiscal conservatism worships as a saint. The man who ran on small government and balanced budgets added more to the national debt than every president before him combined.

But the most damning verdict on trickle-down doesn't come from a liberal think tank. It comes from the Congressional Research Service — the nonpartisan research arm of Congress itself. In a 2012 report, CRS economist Thomas Hungerford studied tax rates from 1945 to 2010 and found that reductions in the top tax rate were *uncorrelated* with saving, investment, or productivity growth. His words: "The reduction in the top tax rates appears to be uncorrelated with saving, investment, and productivity growth. The top tax rates appear to have little or no relation to the size of the economic pie. However, the top tax rate reductions appear to be associated with the increasing concentration of income at the top of the income distribution."

Translation: cutting rich people's taxes didn't grow the pie. It just gave a bigger slice of the pie to the people who already had the biggest slices.

The Reagan years set the template, and the Republican Party has run the same play every chance it's gotten since. Tax cuts for the wealthy. Deficits when it's their turn to spend. And lectures about fiscal responsibility the moment a Democrat is in the White House. It's a rhythm. Watch for it, because it never stops.

The Tax Con, Part Two: Bush's Trillion-Dollar Giveaway

In 2000, George W. Bush ran on a promise to cut taxes by \$1.6 trillion over ten years. He settled for \$1.35 trillion — the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001. The Joint Committee on Taxation, Congress's own nonpartisan scorekeeper, priced it at \$1.349 trillion in lost revenue over a decade. The rate cuts alone cost \$875 billion.

The sales pitch was the same as Reagan's: the surplus belonged to the people, and cutting taxes would grow the economy. Vice President Dick Cheney reportedly told Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill — who worried about future deficits — that "deficits don't matter." Remember that quote. The party of fiscal responsibility's own vice president said deficits don't matter, when it was *their* tax cut.

Two years later came the sequel: the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003. The Joint Committee on Taxation priced that one at another \$320 billion in lost revenue. Its centerpiece was a cut in the tax rate on dividends and capital gains — money made from money — down to 15 percent. If you were a working stiff earning wages, your top tax rate was 35 percent. If you were a rich guy living off stock dividends, your rate was 15 percent. The tax code literally charged the man who works less than half what it charged the man who invests. That's not a typo. That's the law the Republican Party passed.

Meanwhile, the national debt went from about \$5.8 trillion when Bush took office to about \$10.6 trillion when he left. It roughly doubled. Some of that was the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — wars that

were put on the credit card, kept off the official budget books, and never paid for with a dime of new taxes. In the history of this country, major wars had always been paid for with tax increases or war bonds. The Bush administration cut taxes *while* fighting two wars. That's like quitting your job and buying a boat in the same week, then bragging about your financial discipline.

By the time Bush left office, the economy was in free fall — the 2008 financial crisis, the worst collapse since the Great Depression. The party that had spent eight years cutting taxes for the wealthy and deregulating Wall Street (with plenty of Democratic help, which we'll get to in the next chapter) left behind an economy in ruins and a government \$10.6 trillion in the hole. Then they had the nerve to show up in 2009 and lecture the new president about spending.

The Tax Con, Part Three: The 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act

This is the big one. The crown jewel. The one they still brag about.

In December 2017, with Republican majorities in the House and Senate and Donald Trump in the White House, the party passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act — the biggest rewrite of the tax code in thirty years. The pitch was familiar: *this is a middle-class tax cut*. The White House Council of Economic Advisers said the corporate tax cut would "very conservatively" boost average household income by \$4,000 a year. Four thousand dollars, in your pocket, because we cut taxes for corporations. That was the promise, made on the record, by the administration's own economists.

Let's see what actually happened. And I'm going to name every source, because this is the part where people accuse you of making things up.

The Tax Policy Center — a joint project of the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution, as nonpartisan as it gets — ran the numbers on the law as passed. In 2018, the average tax cut was about \$1,600, or 2.2 percent of after-tax income. Sounds fine, until you break it down by who got what:

- If you were in the bottom fifth of earners — making less than about \$25,000 — your average tax cut was **\$60**. Sixty bucks. That was 0.4 percent of your after-tax income.
- If you were in the middle fifth — earning roughly \$49,000 to \$86,000, the actual middle of America — your average cut was about **\$900**. That was 1.6 percent of your income.
- If you were in the top 1 percent — earning more than about \$733,000 — your average tax cut was **\$51,000**. That's not a typo. Fifty-one thousand dollars. And it was 3.4 percent of your after-tax income — more than double the percentage the middle class got.

By 2025, the Tax Policy Center found the top 1 percent got an average cut of \$61,090, while the bottom 60 percent of households got an average cut of *less than \$500*. The top 1 percent saw their after-tax income rise 2.9 percent. The bottom fifth saw 0.4 percent.

And here's the kicker that nobody mentioned at the signing ceremony: the individual tax cuts were temporary. They were set to expire. The corporate tax cut — the one that slashed the rate from 35 percent to 21 percent — was *permanent*. The working man's crumbs had an expiration date. The corporations' feast

did not. By 2027, the Tax Policy Center found, the overall tax reduction would be just 0.2 percent of after-tax income, the top 1 percent would still be getting a cut worth 0.9 percent of their income, and **53 percent of all taxpayers would actually face a tax increase** compared to the old law — averaging about \$180 apiece.

The University of Pennsylvania's Wharton budget model looked at it from a different angle and found that in 2018, the top 1 percent captured **37 percent of the entire tax cut**. By 2027, they'd be capturing **53 percent** of it. More than half the "middle-class tax cut" was going to one out of every hundred households.

But wait — it gets worse, because the corporate cut is where the real money was, and that's where the trickle-down promise was supposed to prove itself. Remember: \$4,000 in every household's pocket. Wages rising. Investment booming.

The Congressional Research Service looked at the first year of the law and found "no indication of a surge in wages in 2018 either compared to history or relative to GDP growth" and that "ordinary workers had very little growth in wage rates." The much-hyped bonuses companies announced? They totaled \$4.4 billion. With 157 million American workers, that works out to **\$28 per worker**. The CRS calculated the bonuses were 2 to 3 percent of the corporate tax cut. Ninety-seven percent of it went somewhere else.

Where did it go? Stock buybacks. The CRS found corporations used the tax cut dollars "for a record-breaking amount of stock buybacks, with **\$1 trillion announced by the end of 2018**." A trillion dollars. Not in wages. Not in factories. Not in your paycheck. In buying back their own stock to pump up the share price — which enriches shareholders and executives, not workers.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that buybacks would exceed \$1 trillion in 2025 alone, according to Goldman Sachs. The windfall never stopped flowing upward.

And then came the study that should have ended the debate forever. In 2023, economists from the Joint Committee on Taxation and the Federal Reserve — not liberals, not activists, the government's own tax scorers and the central bank — studied the corporate tax cut using actual anonymized tax records. Their finding: workers below the 90th percentile of their company's pay scale — everyone earning under roughly \$114,000 — saw **zero** wage increase from the corporate tax cut. None. Zero percent of the gains reached them.

Here's how the gains were split: **49 percent went to the owners of the firms. 11 percent went to the top executives. 40 percent went to the highest-paid workers.** That accounts for all of it. The executives alone pocketed \$13.2 billion a year — a pay bump of roughly \$50,000 per executive. The median worker got nothing. The Brookings Institution and the Congressional Research Service reached the same conclusion: the corporate tax cut was a windfall for shareholders and executives, not workers.

So much for the \$4,000.

And one more thing about that bill. During the 2016 campaign, Trump had promised: "We will eliminate the carried interest deduction and other special interest loopholes." Carried interest is the tax break that lets hedge fund and private equity managers pay the 20 percent capital gains rate on their

earnings instead of the 37 percent income tax rate that a doctor or a plumber pays on wages. It's the single most famous loophole in the tax code — the one where billionaires pay a lower tax rate than their secretaries.

The 2017 tax bill didn't eliminate it. It survived, with only a minor tweak — extending the holding period from one year to three. And even that had a workaround: managers set up S corporations to dodge the new rule, and the IRS had to issue emergency regulations to stop it. When Senator Tammy Baldwin offered an amendment to actually close the loophole during the tax debate, Senate Republicans rejected it. PolitiFact rated Trump's carried-interest promise "Promise Broken." The Wall Street guys kept their special rate. You kept yours.

That, in one bill, is the Republican tax record: a middle-class sales pitch, a top-1-percent delivery, corporate cuts that are permanent while yours expire, a trillion dollars in stock buybacks, zero dollars in raises for nine out of ten workers, and the hedge fund loophole protected by the same people who promised to kill it.

Forty Years of Flat Paychecks

Now let's zoom out, because the tax bills are only half the story. The other half is what happened to your paycheck while all of this was going on.

After World War II, America had a deal: when the economy grew, workers shared in it. From 1948 to 1973, productivity and worker pay rose together, almost in lockstep. You worked harder, the company did better, and your paycheck reflected it. That was the American bargain.

Then, starting in the early 1970s — right around the time the modern Republican economic agenda took shape — the bargain broke. The Economic Policy Institute has tracked this for years, using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The numbers are staggering:

- From 1973 to 2013, the productivity of the American economy — the amount of output per hour worked — grew **74.4 percent**.
- In that same period, the hourly compensation of the typical American worker grew **9.2 percent**.

Read that again. The economy became nearly three-quarters more productive per hour. The typical worker got a raise of less than a tenth. From 1973 to 2014, productivity grew 72.2 percent while typical pay grew 9.2 percent. The median worker's compensation grew just 8.7 percent over *forty-one years* — about two-tenths of a percent per year. And since 2000, it's even more extreme: productivity up 21.6 percent, median worker compensation up 1.8 percent.

Where did the rest go? The Economic Policy Institute's accounting is blunt: of all the extra wealth American workers generated between the early 1970s and today, only about **15 percent** translated into higher wages and benefits for them. Since 2000, only **8 percent**. The other 85 to 92 percent went to corporate profits, executive pay, and shareholders.

This didn't happen by accident. It happened because of *policy choices*. The EPI puts it plainly: "policy choices made on behalf of those with the most income, wealth, and power have suppressed wage growth for the vast majority."

And one more number that tells the story better than any speech. The Economic Policy Institute found that from 1978 to 2021, CEO pay at America's largest companies shot up 1,460 percent — while the typical worker's compensation grew just 18.1 percent. The ratio of CEO pay to typical worker pay went from 20-to-1 in 1965 to 59-to-1 in 1989 to 399-to-1 in 2021. The executives' paychecks didn't stagnate. Nobody's productivity miracle passed *them* by. The flat paycheck wasn't an accident of the economy. It was a transfer — from the people who do the work to the people who own the work. And every Republican tax bill, every anti-union vote, every blocked wage hike was a signature on the transfer slip. Weakened unions. A minimum wage left to rot. Tax policy that rewards capital over labor. Trade deals written by corporations. Deregulation that gutted worker protections. Every one of these was a choice, and for forty years, the Republican Party was the driving force behind almost all of them.

I'm not saying Democrats are innocent — the next chapter will show you they're not. Bill Clinton signed the trade deals. Barack Obama didn't fix the labor laws when he had the chance. But on wages, on unions, on the minimum wage, the Republican Party hasn't just failed to help. It has actively, deliberately, and consistently fought against the working man's paycheck. The record is right there in the votes. Let's look at them.

The War on the Minimum Wage

The federal minimum wage in the United States is \$7.25 an hour. It has been \$7.25 since July 2009. That's not a typo. For over fifteen years — through a financial crisis, a pandemic, and the worst inflation in forty years — the party that calls itself the champion of the working man has made sure the lowest legal wage in America hasn't moved a single cent.

Let's do the math on what that means. At \$7.25 an hour, working full time — 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, no vacations, no sick days — you make \$15,080 a year. Before taxes. Try raising a kid on that. Try paying rent, keeping the lights on, and putting food on the table on fifteen grand a year. It can't be done. It hasn't been doable for a decade. The federal minimum wage is a poverty wage, and everybody in Washington knows it.

So what has the Republican Party done about it? Blocked every attempt to raise it. Every single one. Here's the record:

In April 2014, Senate Democrats brought up a bill to raise the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour — phased in, modest, supported by two-thirds of the public in a New York Times/CBS News poll. Senate Republicans filibustered it. The vote was 54 to 42 — a majority in favor — but it needed 60 to break the filibuster. All but one Republican voted to sustain the filibuster. The bill never even got a debate. Senator Mike Enzi of Wyoming said a 40 percent raise for the lowest-paid workers was too much for businesses to bear. Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado pointed out that full-time minimum-wage work paid "barely over \$15,000 a year" in "the greatest country in the world." The Republicans didn't care. Filibustered.

Dead.

In February 2021, with the pandemic raging and millions of essential workers risking their lives for poverty wages, Republicans passed an amendment — by voice vote — to *prohibit* any minimum wage increase during the pandemic. Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa sponsored it. The message was clear: even in a national emergency, even while grocery clerks and delivery drivers were keeping the country alive, raising their pay was off the table.

Then in March 2021, Senator Bernie Sanders offered an amendment to raise the wage to \$15 an hour, phased in over several years. It would have given a raise to 32 million workers — about 21 percent of the entire workforce, including nearly a third of Black workers and more than a quarter of Hispanic workers, according to the Pew Research Center's wage data cited in the debate. The amendment was voted down. **All 50 Senate Republicans** voted against it, joined by seven Democrats and one Independent. Every single Republican in the Senate, on the record, against a raise for 32 million working people.

Republicans always have the same excuse: it'll kill jobs. They said it in 2014. They said it in 2021, pointing to a Congressional Budget Office estimate that a \$15 wage could cost 1.4 million jobs. And look — I'm not going to pretend there's no debate among economists about the exact effects. There is. But here's what I notice: the party that says a \$15 minimum wage will destroy the economy had no problem passing a tax bill that gave 53 percent of its benefits to the top 1 percent. They never worry about "job-killing" when the money flows upward. The worry only appears when the money might flow downward.

And while Washington Republicans kept the federal wage frozen at \$7.25, states and cities had to do the job themselves. That's why your minimum wage is higher in California or New York or Seattle — not because of Congress, but *in spite of* it. The Republican Party's position, sustained for over a decade and a half, is that \$7.25 an hour is fine. That \$15,080 a year is a fair day's pay for a full day's work. Remember that the next time they tell you they're the party of the working man.

And here's the thing that ought to embarrass everybody in Washington, not just Republicans. While the federal wage sat frozen, the cost of everything a working person buys — rent, groceries, gas, insurance — kept climbing. A dollar doesn't buy what it bought in 2009. Every year the wage stays at \$7.25, every minimum-wage worker in America takes an automatic pay cut, signed by nobody and voted on by nobody. It just happens, quietly, while Congress argues about everything except the one number that would actually put money in working people's pockets. The Republicans blocked the raises. But the silence? That belongs to the whole town. And the whole town is what this book is about.

The War on Unions

If you want to know why wages stagnated while productivity soared, you don't need a PhD. You need to look at what happened to unions.

In 1983, 20.1 percent of American workers belonged to a union — one in five. By 2024, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it was 9.9 percent — one in ten. In the private sector, where most Americans work, it's down to 5.9 percent. The union has been nearly wiped out of the private American

workplace.

This matters because unions are the single most effective tool working people have ever had for getting a fair share. Union workers earn more, get better benefits, have safer workplaces — and their presence raises wages for *non-union* workers too, because employers have to compete. The decline of unions and the stagnation of wages aren't two separate stories. They're the same story. And the Republican Party has spent forty years writing it.

Start at the top: Ronald Reagan. In 1981, just months into his presidency, 13,000 federal air traffic controllers went on strike. Reagan didn't negotiate. He fired every single one of them — all 13,000 — and banned them from federal employment for life. The message to every employer in America was unmistakable: the President of the United States just broke a union, and if he can do it, so can you. Labor historians mark that moment as the starting gun for four decades of union-busting. Union membership, which had already started slipping, went into free fall.

Then came the state-level assaults. In 2011, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker signed Act 10, which stripped collective bargaining rights from most public employees — teachers, nurses, snowplow drivers, the people who keep the state running. It was the most aggressive anti-union law in generations, and it became the model. Other Republican governors copied it. Wisconsin's union membership rate fell by nearly 16 percentage points between 1985 and 2025, according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research — one of the steepest collapses in the nation.

Then came the courts. In 2018, the Supreme Court decided *Janus v. AFSCME* by a 5-4 vote — with the majority made up of Republican-appointed justices. The ruling said public-sector workers couldn't be required to pay union fees even when the union was legally required to represent them. It was a free-rider machine: get all the benefits of the union contract, pay nothing for it, watch the union starve. Within a few years, public-sector unions — the last stronghold of the labor movement — started bleeding members and money.

And in Congress, Republicans have blocked every attempt to level the playing field. The Protecting the Right to Organize Act — the PRO Act — is the most significant labor law reform proposed in decades. It would ban employers from permanently replacing striking workers, stop companies from misclassifying employees as contractors to dodge labor law, override state "right to work" laws that let workers freeload on union contracts, and actually penalize companies that illegally fire organizers. The House passed it twice: 224 to 194 in February 2020, and 225 to 206 in March 2021. Both times, it died in the Senate — in 2020 it never even got a hearing in the Republican-controlled chamber, and in 2021 it faced a guaranteed Republican filibuster.

Now here's the part that should make every Republican voter stop and think. The American people *don't want* unions to die. A 2025 Pew Research Center survey found that 60 percent of Americans say the decline of unions has been **bad for the country**, and 62 percent say it's been **bad for working people**. Majorities. Not close. The public knows unions are good for workers. The Republican Party knows it too — and it keeps killing them anyway, because unions fund Democrats and organize workers, and a disorganized workforce is a cheap workforce. That's the calculation. Your paycheck is the price.

The Deficit Two-Step

Now we come to the most shameless part of the whole operation: the deficit.

Listen to any Republican politician for five minutes and you'll hear about fiscal responsibility. Balanced budgets. Not burdening our grandchildren. The debt is a moral crisis, a threat to the republic, the end of America as we know it. They say this with a straight face, every time a Democrat is in the White House.

Then they get power, and they explode the debt. Every time. Let me walk you through it, with Treasury Department numbers:

Ronald Reagan, the patron saint of fiscal conservatism: debt went from \$997 billion to \$2.85 trillion. Nearly tripled.

George W. Bush: debt went from about \$5.8 trillion to about \$10.6 trillion. Roughly doubled — a 105 percent increase, the largest percentage increase of any modern two-term president.

Donald Trump: debt went from \$19.9 trillion in January 2017 to \$27.75 trillion in January 2021. That's \$7.8 trillion added in a single term — about a 40 percent increase. Now, to be fair — and this book is about fairness — a big chunk of that was the pandemic. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget estimates about \$3.6 trillion of it was COVID relief, most of it bipartisan emergency spending that had to happen. But even setting the pandemic aside, the pre-COVID Trump budgets were already running trillion-dollar deficits *during a strong economy* — something that had essentially never happened before. The 2017 tax cut, which the administration promised would pay for itself through growth, did what tax cuts always do: it lost revenue. The Congressional Budget Office and the Joint Committee on Taxation both said so, before and after.

And then there was the promise that makes the whole two-step look like a magic trick. On March 31, 2016, Donald Trump said the roughly \$19 trillion national debt could be eliminated — gone, zero, paid off — within eight years of his presidency. Eight years to erase \$19 trillion. What actually happened? ProPublica ran the numbers: the deficit hit nearly 4 percent of GDP in 2018 and 4.6 percent in 2019, *before* the pandemic ever showed up — trillion-dollar deficits during a strong economy, something that had essentially never happened in American history. And the Congressional Budget Office estimated the 2017 tax law alone would add about \$1.9 trillion to the debt over eleven years. So the man who promised to eliminate the debt in eight years signed the law that added nearly \$2 trillion to it. The debt didn't get eliminated. It went from \$19.9 trillion to \$27.75 trillion in four years. Promises are free. Debt is forever.

Here's the two-step, and once you see it you can't unsee it:

Step one: Republicans win power. They pass massive tax cuts tilted to the wealthy and corporations. They increase military spending. The deficit explodes.

Step two: Democrats win power. Republicans suddenly rediscover the deficit. They demand spending cuts — never to the military, never to the tax cuts, always to the programs working people rely on: food assistance, healthcare, education, infrastructure. They hold the debt ceiling hostage. They lecture the

country about "living within our means."

Then the cycle repeats. Tax cuts for the donor class on the Republican watch. Austerity lectures for everybody else on the Democratic watch. The debt goes up under both parties — because neither one will touch the real drivers — but only one party pretends to care about it, and only when the other guy is holding the pen.

Dick Cheney said the quiet part out loud back in 2002: "deficits don't matter." He was talking about Republican deficits, of course. Democratic deficits are a five-alarm fire. Republican deficits are just the cost of doing business. That's not fiscal conservatism. That's a con.

Deregulation for Donors

The last piece of the machine is deregulation — and this is where the "drain the swamp" pitch meets the reality of who actually runs the place.

"Drain the swamp" was one of the most effective slogans in modern political history. It meant: get the lobbyists and the insiders and the corrupt revolving-door operators out of Washington. Millions of people believed it. They believed a billionaire outsider would come in and clean house.

Here's what actually happened. On January 28, 2017 — eight days into the job — Trump signed an executive order imposing a five-year ban on his appointees lobbying their former agencies. He bragged about it: "It's a five-year ban," he said, noting the old rule was only two years and "full of loopholes." Fair enough. Good start.

Then, in one of his final acts in office, at around 1 a.m. on January 20, 2021 — hours before leaving — he quietly revoked it. One page. All his appointees, released from the ethics pledge, free to go lobby the agencies they'd just run. The Associated Press reported it. NPR reported it. The swamp, it turned out, had a drain that flowed in both directions.

And who was staffing those agencies in the meantime? The man Trump put in charge of the Environmental Protection Agency — the agency that regulates polluters — was Andrew Wheeler, a former *coal industry lobbyist*. The man he put in charge of the Interior Department — which oversees drilling, mining, and public lands — was David Bernhardt, a former *oil and gas lobbyist* who'd spent his career suing the very department he was appointed to lead. One count found at least 230 former or current registered lobbyists worked in the administration. The swamp wasn't drained. It was promoted.

Now, deregulation itself isn't automatically evil. Some regulations are dumb, and small businesses get buried in red tape. But look at *which* regulations got cut, and *who* benefited:

The banks. In May 2018, Trump signed the Economic Growth, Regulatory Relief, and Consumer Protection Act — the biggest rollback of banking rules since the 2008 crisis. It raised the threshold for strict federal oversight of banks from \$50 billion in assets to \$250 billion, exempting 25 of the 38 largest banks in the country from enhanced stress tests and scrutiny. The bill passed the House 258-159 and the Senate 67-31. (In the interest of honesty: 33 House Democrats and 17 Senate Democrats voted for it too.)

This is one of those places where the Democrat con overlaps — we'll get there in the next chapter.) But it was a Republican bill, pushed by a Republican Senate, signed by a Republican president, at the request of the banking industry.

And here's the part they don't advertise: the CEO of Silicon Valley Bank, Greg Becker, had personally lobbied Congress in 2015 to roll back those exact rules, calling them too burdensome. In 2023, Silicon Valley Bank collapsed in the second-largest bank failure in American history — a bank that would have faced stricter oversight under the old rules. The regulators didn't cause the failure — bad management did — but the bank had lobbied for the right to be less supervised, got it, and then failed. You can't make this stuff up.

The environment. A New York Times analysis, based on research from Harvard and Columbia law schools, counted **nearly 100 environmental rules officially reversed, revoked, or rolled back** — 98 completed, with another 14 in progress when the term ended. Clean air rules. Clean water rules. Limits on mercury pollution from power plants. Protections for more than half the nation's wetlands. Methane limits on oil and gas drilling. The coal ash rule governing toxic waste disposal. One by one, the rules that kept poisons out of working people's air and water were dismantled — not because the science changed, but because the industries that had to comply asked for it, and the former lobbyists running the agencies obliged.

Wall Street's tax tricks. We already covered carried interest — the hedge fund loophole that survived the "populist" tax bill. Add to that the estate tax, which the 2017 law gutted by doubling the exemption, so multi-million-dollar fortunes pass to heirs tax-free. The pattern is always the same: the rules that protect regular people get called "job-killing red tape," and the loopholes that enrich donors get called "pro-growth tax policy." Funny how that works.

This is what "deregulation" has meant in practice for forty years: not freeing the little guy from red tape, but freeing the big guy from accountability. The small business owner still drowns in paperwork. The multinational bank gets its stress tests waived. The family farmer still follows the rules. The oil company gets to write them. The swamp doesn't get drained. It gets a bigger office.

The Promises That Died in Their Own Senate

Now let's talk about the promises that didn't even make it past the Republicans' *own* Senate — because sometimes the con isn't what they pass. It's what they swear they'll do and then don't.

"Repeal and replace." For seven years, Republicans ran on killing Obamacare. They voted to repeal it dozens of times when Obama was there to veto it — safe, costless, great for fundraising. Then they won the House, the Senate, and the White House, and it was time to actually do it. On July 28, 2017, the Senate voted on the "skinny repeal" — and it failed, 49 to 51. Three Republicans voted no: John McCain, Susan Collins, and Lisa Murkowski. McCain's thumbs-down, in the middle of the night, killed the whole thing. Seven years of promises, total control of Washington, and they couldn't get 50 votes out of 52 Republicans. The repeal never happened. The fundraising emails about repeal never stopped.

Privatizing Social Security. In 2005, fresh off re-election, George W. Bush made it his big second-term mission: let workers divert part of their Social Security taxes into private investment accounts. The pitch was ownership and higher returns. The reality was a guaranteed bonanza for Wall Street firms that would manage trillions in new fees. It never even got a vote — the plan didn't have enough support in Congress, including from Republicans who didn't want to touch the third rail. The privatization died. The donors who would have feasted on it found other ways to get paid.

The wall Mexico would pay for. The most famous promise of 2016: a big, beautiful wall across the southern border, and Mexico would pay for it. What got built? A review of the first term found that about 47 miles of barriers went up where none had existed before — out of a 453-mile project with roughly \$15 billion in allocated funds. Most of the "new wall" was replacement fencing where old barriers already stood. And Mexico? Mexico never paid a dime. The American taxpayer paid. The promise wasn't just broken — it was inverted. You paid for the wall they said someone else would buy.

Bringing back coal. "We're going to put our miners back to work," Trump said, promising to end the "war on coal." The numbers tell the ending: coal employment stood at about 44,500 in 2020 — roughly 6,400 *fewer* jobs than when he took office. Now, fair is fair — the pandemic crushed energy demand in 2020, and coal was already losing to cheaper natural gas and automation. No president was going to reverse that with speeches. But that's exactly the point: the promise was never real. It was a costume the campaign wore in coal country, and the miners were the ones left wearing it when the cameras moved on.

Every one of these followed the same script. Big promise, big applause, big donations — and then the quiet part: repeal dies 49-51, privatization never gets a vote, the wall gets paid for by you, and coal country gets 6,400 fewer jobs. The pitch is the product. The product is the pitch. There is no third step.

The Receipts

Let's add it all up. This is the Republican record, measured in real votes and real dollars:

- **Taxes:** Three generations of tax cuts — 1981, 2001/2003, 2017 — each sold as relief for working people, each delivering the biggest share to the top. The 2017 law gave the top 1 percent an average cut of \$51,000 while the bottom fifth got \$60. The corporate cut was permanent; yours expired. Fifty-three percent of taxpayers were set to face a tax *increase* by 2027. (Tax Policy Center)
- **Wages:** Workers below the 90th percentile got *zero* raise from the corporate tax cut. Executives got \$13.2 billion a year. A trillion dollars went to stock buybacks. The \$4,000 household income promise never materialized. (Joint Committee on Taxation/Federal Reserve; Congressional Research Service)
- **Paychecks:** Productivity up 74 percent since 1973. Typical worker pay up 9 percent. The bargain broke, and policy broke it. (Economic Policy Institute)
- **Minimum wage:** \$7.25 since 2009. Every raise blocked — filibustered in 2014, voted down 50 Republicans strong in 2021. Thirty-two million workers denied a raise, on the record.

- **Unions:** Membership cut in half since 1983. Air traffic controllers fired. Collective bargaining stripped in Wisconsin. *Janus* rigged the rules at the Supreme Court. The PRO Act killed in the Senate. Sixty percent of Americans say the decline hurt the country. The party did it anyway. (Bureau of Labor Statistics; Pew Research Center)
- **Debt:** Nearly tripled under Reagan. Doubled under Bush. Up \$7.8 trillion under Trump. The party of fiscal responsibility has added more to the national debt than any political movement in human history — and then lectures everyone else about spending. (Treasury Department)
- **The swamp:** Ethics pledge revoked on the way out the door. A coal lobbyist ran the EPA. An oil lobbyist ran Interior. Nearly 100 environmental rules rolled back. Bank oversight gutted at the industry's request. The hedge fund loophole protected. (Associated Press; New York Times)
- **Medicare Part D:** The 2003 prescription drug benefit — passed by a Republican Congress and signed by a Republican president — came with an original Congressional Budget Office score showing it would add an estimated \$372.5 billion to the deficit over its first decade. And the law *banned* Medicare from negotiating drug prices — the one thing that would have held costs down. The drug companies got millions of new customers paid for by taxpayers, and taxpayers got the bill. (Congressional Budget Office)
- **The promises:** Repeal-and-replace died 49-51 in a Republican Senate. Social Security privatization never got a vote. The wall got 47 miles of new barrier for \$15 billion of your money, and Mexico never paid. Coal country lost 6,400 jobs. The debt that was going to be eliminated in eight years grew by \$7.8 trillion in four. Every promise kept its fundraising value. None of them kept its word.

Now, I want to say something to the Republican voters reading this, because I mean it: this chapter isn't about you. You're not the con. You're the *mark* — and I say that with respect, because the con was designed by professionals and aimed at your hopes, not your intelligence. You wanted jobs, and they gave you tax cuts for shareholders. You wanted the swamp drained, and they handed the agencies to the lobbyists. You wanted someone to fight for the working man, and they fought for the donor list. You deserved better than this. Everybody in the 99 percent did.

And to the Democrats reading this and feeling smug: sit down. Your chapter is next. The Democrats had the White House and Congress and did precious little to reverse any of this — and on trade, on Wall Street, on money in politics, they ran their own version of the same game. The two parties aren't opposites. They're business partners, running complementary cons on the same population. The Republicans' con is the one where they tell you they're fighting for you while they pick your pocket. The Democrats' con is the one where they tell you they *see* you while they pick your pocket.

That's next. But remember what you read here first — because the only way out of the trap is to see both jaws of it clearly. The Republican con runs on your hope. The first step to beating it is to stop hoping they'll change, and start demanding something new: a politics that answers to the 99 percent, not the donor class. That's what this book is about. That's what the independent mindset means.

No more marks. No more cons. Just the receipts — and the resolve to do something about them.

Chapter 6: The Democrat Con

Last chapter we talked about the Republican con — the party that tells working people it'll make them rich, then writes tax cuts for country clubs and calls it freedom. Now let's do the same job on the other side of the aisle, with the exact same standard. Fair is fair. If one party gets its record checked against its rhetoric, the other one does too. That's the whole point of this book: the system runs on two hustles, and you need to see both of them clearly.

So here's the Democrat con, in one sentence: it's the party that campaigns on being the champions of working people — then governs like a board of directors for everyone except working people.

Don't mistake what I'm saying. The pitch is real. Millions of decent, hardworking Americans vote Democratic because they genuinely believe in the pitch. Teachers, nurses, single moms, guys driving trucks, warehouse workers, union members, people who are drowning in medical bills — they hear a party say, "We see you. We'll fight for you." And then they watch, year after year, administration after administration, as the big promises die quietly and the donors cash out loudly.

This isn't a hate piece. There's no hate here. This is a receipts piece. The Democrats are held to their own words in this chapter. They wrote the checks. Let's see which ones cleared.

The Pitch

You know the pitch by heart, because you've heard it your whole life. The Democrats are the party of the little guy. They want healthcare for everyone. They want a living wage. They stand with unions. They fight for equality — equal pay, equal rights, equal opportunity. Republicans are the party of the rich; Democrats are the party of everyone else. That's the story. That's what gets said at every rally, every convention, every town hall in a church basement.

And it's a damn good story. I mean it. It's the story that built the New Deal coalition. It's the story that pulled working families out of the Depression and put food on tables. It's the story Franklin Roosevelt told, and it was true then. The question for this chapter is simple: is it true now?

Here's the test. You don't judge a political party by its speeches. You judge it by three things: where its money comes from, what it does when it has power, and who gets richer when it's done. Apply that test, and you'll find something most people don't want to admit: on money and power, the two parties are running the same operation in different jerseys.

The Democrats' donors tell you who the party really answers to. According to Federal Election Commission data compiled by OpenSecrets, the industries that lean hardest toward Democrats are lawyers and law firms, education, TV/movies/music, and the internet — the last of which gave roughly 95 percent of its federal campaign contributions to Democrats in the 2024 cycle. Securities and investment — Wall Street itself — splits its money nearly fifty-fifty between the two parties, and on some Senate committees it leans Democratic. Health professionals and the pharmaceutical industry routinely send the Democrats more than half their money, and sometimes a lot more. These aren't small-time donors. These are the most

lucrative industries in America. When the party of the little guy gets the bulk of its big money from Wall Street, Big Pharma, Big Law, and Big Tech, you're allowed to ask: who is the little guy here?

I'm going to give you the credit the Democrats have earned, because this chapter only works if it's honest. When Democrats have full power, they do pass some things that help people. The 2021 American Rescue Plan put \$1,400 checks in people's pockets and passed 50-49, with Democrats carrying it alone. The Affordable Care Act extended health coverage to tens of millions of people, and that's not nothing. Medicaid expansion under the ACA gave healthcare to people in dozens of states who had nothing. Those are real wins, and I won't pretend they didn't happen. But the pattern of this party isn't defined by its best moments. It's defined by what happens between them — and what happens when the promises are big and the donors are watching.

Healthcare: The Promise and the Product

Let's start where the Democrats are proudest: healthcare.

The promise was crystal clear. Running for president in 2008, Barack Obama told voters over and over — at least fifteen times on the campaign trail — that his plan would cut the cost of health insurance for the average family by \$2,500 a year. On February 27, 2008, he said it plainly: "If you've got health insurance, we're going to work with you to lower your premiums by \$2,500 per family per year." His economic adviser Jason Furman told the New York Times the campaign believed the \$2,500 in savings could be achieved "by the end of the first term, or be very close to it." This wasn't a vague aspiration. It was a number, a timeline, and a promise.

And then there was the other promise — the one everybody remembers. "If you like your health care plan, you can keep it." Obama said it over and over, to sell the law. When the cancellations started rolling in — insurers dropping plans that didn't meet the new standards — the promise collapsed so completely that PolitiFact named it the 2013 Lie of the Year, writing that the blanket promise was impossible to keep, and Obama himself had to apologize for it on national television. Now, to be fair: most people kept their coverage, and the plans that got cancelled were mostly the flimsy kind that didn't cover much anyway. But that's the thing about the Democrat con — the pitch is always cleaner than the product. The president of the United States looked into the camera and promised you could keep your plan, and then the fine print took it away. The apology was real. So was the damage.

What actually happened? Premiums didn't go down \$2,500. They went up — and kept going up. KFF Health News analyzed federal data and found that average monthly premiums for a family with employer-provided coverage nearly doubled over fifteen years, from just over \$1,000 in 2008 to almost \$2,000 in 2023 — more than twice the rate of inflation. Employees have had to absorb a growing share of that cost themselves.

And the plans themselves got skinnier. On the ACA's own exchanges, the cheapest "bronze" plans carried an average deductible of \$7,476 a year, up from \$5,113 in 2014, according to KFF. Weighted across all plans, deductibles rose about 55 percent since 2014. Think about what that means for a working family: you're paying more every month for insurance that doesn't even start paying until you've spent

seven grand out of your own pocket. For a lot of people, that's not health insurance. That's a bill you pay in case you get hit by a bus.

Now here's the part the party never mentions at the rallies: while premiums climbed and deductibles ballooned, the health insurance industry made out like bandits. In 2023, UnitedHealth Group reported \$22.4 billion in profit. CVS Health — which owns Aetna — earned \$8.3 billion. Elevance Health pulled in nearly \$6 billion, Cigna \$5.1 billion, Centene \$2.7 billion, Humana \$2.5 billion. By 2025, the seven largest for-profit insurers — UnitedHealth, CVS/Aetna, Cigna, Elevance, Humana, Centene, and Molina — collectively generated nearly \$1.7 trillion in revenue, up \$175 billion in a single year — while covering roughly 10 million fewer people than the year before. Let that sink in: more money, fewer people covered. That's not a healthcare system. That's a wealth extraction machine with a stethoscope around its neck.

The industry keeps consolidating, too. A Morningstar analysis projects that the six largest carriers will insure 56 percent of all Americans by 2034, up from 41 percent in 2014. When Obamacare was sold, the story was competition — the exchanges were supposed to be marketplaces where insurers competed to give you a better deal. A decade and a half later, the competition is evaporating and the giants are swallowing everything.

Why did the "Affordable" Care Act turn out this way? Because of what the law actually is — and what it was never allowed to be. The original vision included a public option: a government-run plan that would compete with private insurers and force them to lower prices. The public option was killed during Senate negotiations before the law ever passed. What survived was a mandate — a legal requirement that nearly every American buy a product from private insurance companies. The government didn't take on the insurance industry. It handed the insurance industry a customer base of tens of millions of people, by law.

Then there's Medicare Advantage, the privatized version of Medicare that insurers sell to seniors. MedPAC, the federal government's own nonpartisan advisory commission, has estimated that overpayments to these private insurers run roughly \$84 to \$88 billion a year — money paid out above what it would cost to cover the same seniors under traditional Medicare. Democrats built the ACA era's biggest healthcare program on a foundation of private insurers, and the private insurers have been feeding ever since.

The point isn't that nobody got helped. Millions got coverage who didn't have it, and that matters. The point is the shape of the deal: the party that promised to lower your costs built a system that raised them, and the corporations the system was supposed to discipline became its biggest winners. If a Republican had written a law that doubled family premiums and funneled \$1.7 trillion a year to private insurers, Democrats would call it a giveaway. The name on the law doesn't change what it is.

The Minimum Wage That Never Came

Next up: the minimum wage — the promise so old it's practically a family heirloom.

The federal minimum wage has been \$7.25 an hour since 2009. That's not a typo. A full-time worker at minimum wage makes \$15,080 a year before taxes — less than what it costs to rent a one-bedroom

apartment in most of America. The last increase was signed back in 2007, and it took effect in stages through 2009. Congress hasn't passed a raise since. Think about that: seventeen years, through two Democratic presidents, multiple Democratic Congresses, and the federal minimum wage hasn't moved a dime.

Joe Biden campaigned in 2020 on raising it to \$15 an hour. The Democrats had the House, the Senate, and the White House. Early in 2021, Bernie Sanders forced the issue with an amendment to the big COVID relief bill that would have raised the federal wage to \$15 over several years. On March 5, 2021, the Senate voted. It failed, 42 to 58. Fifty Republicans voted no — expected. But so did seven Democrats: Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, Jon Tester of Montana, Jeanne Shaheen and Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, Chris Coons and Tom Carper of Delaware, plus Angus King of Maine, the independent who caucuses with Democrats. Democrats had a 50-50 Senate and the tie-breaking vote of their own vice president, and they couldn't even hold their own caucus on the single most popular economic policy in the country.

Let that failure sit in your mind for a second, because it tells you everything about the Democrat con. A 2024 poll found that 86 percent of likely voters support raising the minimum wage — including 84 percent of Republicans. When your policy is so popular that the other team's voters want it too, and you still can't pass it while holding all the power, the problem isn't the other party. The problem is yours.

And notice who killed it. These weren't back-benchers from nowhere. Chris Coons was one of Joe Biden's closest allies in the Senate. Kyrsten Sinema literally gave a thumbs-down on the Senate floor — with a little curtsy — when she voted against the wage hike, and then went on to become a darling of the corporate lobbying circuit. Joe Manchin, the coal-country Democrat who single-handedly vetoed half his party's agenda, later admitted he wouldn't support it. Each of them had their reasons, and the reasons always sound the same: too fast, too risky, bad for business. The business of America is business — and the minimum wage is for the other people.

The party's response to this failure was to move on and hope you forgot. There was no second push. No use of the bully pulpit. No ultimatum. When the votes weren't there in March 2021, the \$15 wage quietly slid off the agenda, and the party went back to telling working people to vote harder next time. If you drive a cab, wash dishes, or stock shelves for a living, the Democratic Party's message on your wages is: wait. You've been waiting since 2009.

Here's the kicker. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that about 22.7 million workers earn wages at or near the federal minimum. These are overwhelmingly adults — not teenagers with summer jobs, but grown people trying to feed families. Every year the wage stays flat, inflation gives them an automatic pay cut. The Democrats know this. They say it in speeches. And then they govern like the people who pay the price don't exist.

Labor: The Union Photo-Op

If healthcare is where the Democrats make their promises and the minimum wage is where they let them die, labor is where they show up for the photo and leave before the fight.

Joe Biden called himself the most pro-union president in American history. He said it constantly. And to be fair, he said some of the right things — he backed striking workers rhetorically, he put union-friendly people on the National Labor Relations Board, and early in his term he recorded a video supporting Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama, who were trying to unionize. The video was genuinely unusual for a president. But videos don't organize unions. Laws do. And on laws, the record tells a different story.

The labor movement's number-one legislative priority was the PRO Act — the Protecting the Right to Organize Act. It would have made it harder for companies to bust unions, banned the permanent replacement of striking workers, and imposed real penalties on employers who break labor law. On March 9, 2021, the House passed it, 225 to 206, with five Republicans crossing over to vote yes. Then it went to the Senate — a Senate controlled by Democrats — and died. The party didn't have the votes to break a filibuster, and it never seriously tried to change the rules to get them. When Democrats held the House, the Senate, and the presidency all at once, labor's single biggest priority went into a drawer.

Then came the rail strike of 2022, and this is the one that really showed the party's hand. That fall, railroad workers were ready to walk out. They'd been working without a new contract for years. Their demand was painfully basic: paid sick days. These are people who operate massive freight trains, and they had zero guaranteed paid sick leave — the companies wouldn't even give them a single sick day they could count on. Four of the twelve rail unions had rejected the tentative deal the White House had brokered. A strike would have started on December 9.

Biden, the "most pro-union president," called on Congress to impose a contract on the workers and make the strike illegal. The House passed the imposed contract, and separately passed a sidecar bill adding seven paid sick days — that one passed the House 221 to 207 with Democrats nearly unanimous. But in the Senate, the sick-leave measure needed 60 votes to survive a filibuster. It got 52. Forty-three senators voted no. And one of the no votes was a Democrat: Joe Manchin of West Virginia, voting with the Republicans. Six Republicans — including Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, and Marco Rubio — voted yes for the sick days. A Democrat voted no. Let that roll around in your head.

The next day, Biden signed the imposed contract into law without the sick leave. The Senate had passed it 80 to 15. His own Labor Secretary had brokered the deal. He said he knew the bill didn't have the sick leave workers deserved, but "the fight isn't over." The fight was over. The unions called the vote "anti-American" and said Congress had prioritized "the corporate greed of rail carriers and CEOs over the needs" of the workers. Biden had forced workers back under a contract their own unions had rejected — and then spent the next two years being celebrated at union halls as labor's champion.

Here's the scoreboard after all of it. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2024, just 9.9 percent of American workers belonged to a union — a record low, down from 20.1 percent in 1983. In the private sector, where most people actually work, it's 5.9 percent. One in seventeen. The Democrats have been the party of labor for a century, and under their watch union density hit rock bottom. Union workers still out-earn non-union workers by a wide margin — BLS data show non-union workers earn about 85 percent of what union members make — so this isn't just a statistic. It's the difference between making it

and not making it, and it's disappearing.

The con here isn't complicated. The Democrats take union money, union endorsements, and union votes — then treat labor's priorities like they're optional. The Republicans at least tell unions to their face that they're the enemy. The Democrats smile for the picket-line photo, sign the law that ends the strike, and go home to the donors who funded both sides.

Wall Street's Favorite "Populists"

Nobody has done more to marry the Democratic Party to big money than the Clintons. Start with the banks.

After the Great Depression, America had a law called Glass-Steagall, passed in 1933, that kept commercial banks — the places holding your deposits — separate from investment banks — the places gambling on Wall Street. For more than six decades it worked. Banks failed rarely, and no financial panic endangered the system. Wall Street hated it, because it limited how much risk they could take with other people's money.

In 1999, President Bill Clinton killed it. He signed the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act — the Financial Services Modernization Act — on November 12, 1999. It repealed the core of Glass-Steagall and let commercial banks, investment banks, and insurance companies merge into giant financial supermarkets. It passed the Senate 90 to 8. Clinton's own Treasury Secretary, Robert Rubin, had pushed hard for it. And then — pure coincidence, I'm sure — Rubin walked out of the Treasury and straight into a top job at Citigroup, the very merger of Citicorp and Travelers that the new law had been written to bless. Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote in 2009 that by bringing "investment and commercial banks together, the investment bank culture came out on top," with a demand for high returns "that could be obtained only through high leverage and big risk-taking." Less than a decade later came the 2008 financial crisis — the biggest meltdown since 1929, the very crash Glass-Steagall had been built to prevent.

Robert Reich, who served as Clinton's own Labor Secretary, put it bluntly years later: on the fights between Wall Street and workers inside that administration, "they clearly won." He wrote that Clinton "struck a deal" to do "exactly what Wall Street wanted." When a Democratic president's own Labor Secretary says Wall Street ran the table, you don't need me to add anything.

Barack Obama's turn was different in style but similar in substance. He came in promising change after the crash — and then filled his economic team with Wall Street insiders. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner had been head of the New York Fed. Economic adviser Larry Summers had been Rubin's deputy and helped push the same deregulation. The bankers who blew up the economy got a bailout and kept their jobs; the millions of Americans who lost their homes got a foreclosure crisis. No senior Wall Street executive went to prison for the fraud that caused the crash. The message, sent by a Democratic administration: the system protects the system.

And the stimulus — the \$800 billion American Recovery Act that was supposed to save the economy — came with its own broken forecast. In January 2009, Obama's economic team, led by Christina Romer

and Jared Bernstein, predicted that with the stimulus, unemployment would stay below 8 percent. Without it, they said, it might hit 9. What actually happened? Unemployment blew past both numbers and hit 10 percent. Now, fair is fair — the recession turned out to be much worse than anybody's data showed at the time, and the economists who made the forecast said so themselves afterward. The hole was deeper than the measurements. But the pattern holds: the Democrats sold the recovery with a number, the number was wrong, and the people who paid for the mistake were the ones standing in the unemployment line. The forecasters kept their jobs. The forecast didn't keep its promise.

Then there was the help that was supposed to reach homeowners directly. The Home Affordable Modification Program — HAMP — was announced with a promise to help 3 to 4 million struggling homeowners get permanent mortgage modifications and stay in their houses. The banks got hundreds of billions overnight; the homeowners got a program. Years later, the special inspector general for the bank bailout reported that only about 865,000 homeowners had received permanent modifications through HAMP — and more than 306,000 of those had already redefaulted and lost the help. The program's own watchdog called it a failure. The Treasury Department wrote the checks to the banks in days. The homeowners waited years for modifications that mostly never came. Same crisis, same party in charge, two very different speeds of rescue.

Then there's the money itself, and nowhere is it more visible than the 2024 election. Kamala Harris didn't just outspend Donald Trump — she buried him. In August 2024 alone, the Harris campaign spent an average of \$7.5 million a day, compared to Trump's \$2.6 million a day — a three-to-one margin. Over the third quarter, the Harris operation spent \$826 million while Trump spent \$340 million. And where did that money come from? Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood — the richest industries in the richest country on earth. Finance titans like Bruce Karsh of Oaktree Capital lined up. Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz wrote checks. Oil trader Andy Hall. Ripple co-founder Christian Larsen. Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg each put \$50 million toward efforts supporting Harris.

Count the billionaires: according to Forbes-based tallies reported during the campaign, roughly 80 to 83 billionaires publicly backed Harris, versus about 50 to 52 for Trump. Read that again. The Democratic nominee — the candidate of the party of the little guy — had the support of roughly sixty percent more billionaires than the Republican. The party that runs ads about billionaires and greed raised more money, from more billionaires, than anyone else in American history. If you believe both parties are captured by the 1 percent, 2024 was your proof in a single number: the Democrats just cost more.

This is the standard Wall Street deal. The securities and investment industry doesn't bet on one party — it bets on both, splitting its contributions nearly evenly between Democrats and Republicans, and leaning Democratic on some Senate committees. The smart money buys access to whoever wins. And the smart money wins either way, because both parties keep the machine running: bailouts when the banks fail, tax structures that favor capital over wages, and a revolving door that spins so fast it could power a small city.

Silicon Valley and the Tech Aristocracy

If Wall Street is the Democrats' bank, Silicon Valley is their church. The tech industry's money flows to Democrats at rates that would embarrass a Soviet election. In the 2024 cycle, the "internet" industry — the tech giants — directed about 95.5 percent of its federal campaign contributions to Democrats. The electronics industry: roughly 88.8 percent. TV, movies, and music: over 90 percent. These are the industries that shape what you see, what you read, and what you think — and they are overwhelmingly, structurally Democratic.

That isn't just campaign money. It's access. Tech executives and investors have poured into Democratic administrations for two decades — writing the regulations for their own industries, then rotating back to the companies they regulated. When the Biden administration talked about reining in Big Tech, the enforcement was a show: a lot of press conferences, some lawsuits that settled, and the same five companies getting bigger. When Congress talked about antitrust, the bills died. The tech giants kept growing, kept buying competitors, kept harvesting data — and kept writing checks.

The crypto industry gave us the clearest picture of how this works now. In the 2024 cycle, crypto companies poured nearly \$190 million into elections — almost half of all corporate donations — mostly through a super PAC called Fairshake, funded by Coinbase, Ripple, and the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. Fairshake spent more than \$133 million supporting pro-crypto candidates. It ran two partisan affiliates: Defend American Jobs for Republican primaries, Protect Progress for Democratic ones. The crypto industry didn't pick a party. It picked politicians in both parties — spending over \$10 million to elect Democrats like Elissa Slotkin in Michigan and Ruben Gallego in Arizona, and \$40 million-plus to elect Republican Bernie Moreno in Ohio. That's the modern donor strategy: don't buy one team, buy the league. And the Democrats took the money gladly, because the party of reform has never once said no to a billionaire's check.

Look at the pattern across these industries and you see the real Democratic coalition: lawyers, tech, entertainment, education, Wall Street's friendly half, Big Pharma's friendly half. That's not a workers' party. That's a professionals' party — the party of the credentialed, the connected, the comfortable. The people who went to good schools, live in good zip codes, and think "working class" means the plumber they're kind to at Thanksgiving.

And that's the deeper con. The Democrats don't just take corporate money like Republicans do — they take it while running on the moral high ground, while lecturing everyone else about greed and fairness. A Republican donor buys a politician and gets a tax cut. A Democratic donor buys a politician and gets a tax cut plus a TED Talk about justice. The hypocrisy isn't a footnote. It's the product.

The Money Machine: Both Parties Feed at the Same Trough

Chapter 2 of this book is called "Follow the Money," and it lays out the whole donor ecosystem. Here in this chapter, I want to drive one point home with data, because this is where the Democrat con becomes undeniable: corporate and big-donor money doesn't just flow to Republicans. It flows to Democrats too — heavily, happily, and by design.

The Federal Election Commission data, compiled by the nonpartisan watchdog OpenSecrets, tells the story industry by industry. These aren't partisan estimates. These are the contribution records.

Start with lawyers and law firms — one of the richest industries in politics. On committee after committee, lawyers give Democrats between roughly 60 and 87 percent of their money. Education — the universities and the teachers' unions' orbit — gives Democrats 83 to 95 percent. TV, movies, and music: 75 to 92 percent Democratic. The internet industry: over 95 percent. Electronics manufacturing: 63 to 89 percent. Health professionals: anywhere from half to three-quarters. The pharmaceutical and health products industry: on the Senate committees that oversee health policy, pharma has given Democrats anywhere from about half to nearly 70 percent of its contributions. The insurers that profited from the ACA era lean Republican overall — but on health-focused committees they've split their money with Democrats too, because they always buy whoever regulates them.

Now look at it from the other side — the industries Republicans dominate: oil and gas gives the GOP 76 to 93 percent. Retired individuals lean Republican. Commercial banks lean Republican, about 60 to 66 percent. Misc manufacturing, agriculture, automotive — mostly Republican. The pattern is obvious: each party has its corporate wing. The Republicans' wing wears boots and hard hats; the Democrats' wing wears suits and Patagonia vests. Both wings get what they pay for.

The securities and investment industry — Wall Street — is the purest expression of the con, because it doesn't pick a side. On some committees it gives Republicans 62 percent; on others it gives Democrats 60 percent. The industry that blew up the economy in 2008 funds both parties roughly evenly, forever, because it has figured out the one thing the donors understand and the voters don't: it doesn't matter who wins the election if you own both candidates.

And the scale keeps climbing. In the 2024 cycle, total election spending was the most expensive in American history — and the Democrats were the biggest spenders in it. The Harris operation outspent Trump by hundreds of millions of dollars and still lost. That's the final insult in the money story: they took the biggest pile of corporate and billionaire money ever assembled behind a Democratic candidate, spent it, and still couldn't beat a guy most of their own donors despised. When the money stops working, the con stops paying — and that's exactly why the independents are rising, which is what Chapters 8 and 9 are about.

One more piece of the money machine deserves attention, because it shows how the game is played in the open. The crypto industry's Fairshake super PAC didn't just spend money — it spent it against anyone who crossed the industry, in either party's primaries. It spent over \$10 million to defeat Katie Porter, a Democrat, in California's Senate primary, because she was skeptical of crypto. It spent \$2 million helping George Latimer defeat incumbent Democrat Jamaal Bowman in New York. On the Republican side, it poured more than \$40 million into electing Bernie Moreno over Democrat Sherrod Brown in Ohio. The message to every member of Congress, Democrat or Republican, was unmistakable: cross us and we'll end your career; obey us and we'll fund it. That's not lobbying. That's a protection racket with a PAC filing. And the Democrats, who claim to oppose corporate bullying, cashed the checks and took the calls like everyone else.

Then there's the corruption that doesn't even bother with a PAC filing. In July 2024, Democratic Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey — the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, one of the most powerful jobs in Washington — was convicted on all 16 felony counts against him: bribery, fraud, and acting as a foreign agent, the first sitting U.S. senator ever convicted of that charge. FBI agents found gold bars and more than \$480,000 in cash stuffed in his home, bribes from businessmen and Egyptian interests in exchange for official favors — including a Mercedes-Benz for the family. He resigned from the Senate that August, and in January 2025 a federal judge sentenced him to 11 years in prison. Eleven years. The chairman of the committee that oversees American foreign policy, selling it for gold bars. The Democrats in the Senate called on him to resign — to their credit — but the stink doesn't wash off that easy. This is what the money culture produces when you follow it all the way down: not just soft corruption, not just access and influence, but a United States senator with gold bars in his closet.

And the rank-and-file aren't exactly starving either. A 2022 New York Times investigation found that from 2019 to 2021, 97 members of Congress — nearly one in five — reported stock trades by themselves or their families that overlapped with their committee assignments: buying and selling shares in companies their own committees regulated or investigated. More than 3,700 trades with potential conflicts, from both parties. The STOCK Act technically bans insider trading by members of Congress, but the enforcement is a joke — the penalty for hiding a trade is a \$200 fine, less than a speeding ticket in some states. So they keep trading. Republicans, Democrats, doesn't matter. The people who write the laws about the economy are day-trading the economy with information you and I will never have. When a 2023 poll found 86 percent of Americans want members of Congress banned from trading individual stocks — including huge majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and independents — Congress did what Congress does. It held hearings.

This is the same standard we applied to the Republicans in Chapter 5. When Republican donors write checks, Republicans deliver tax cuts and deregulation. When Democratic donors write checks, Democrats deliver — well, look at the record in this chapter and tell me who got delivered to. The insurers got a mandatory customer base. The banks got their deregulation from a Democratic president. Big Tech got four years of speeches and zero breakup. Crypto got candidates bought in both primaries. The minimum-wage workers got speeches. The rail workers got a forced contract. The union organizers got a dead bill. The money flows to both parties, and the people flow to neither. That's not a two-party system. That's a one-party system with two marketing departments.

Trade: The Deals Democrats Signed

If you want to understand why working-class voters stopped trusting Democrats, forget the speeches. Look at the trade deals.

NAFTA — the North American Free Trade Agreement — is the original wound. The idea started under Ronald Reagan and was negotiated by George H.W. Bush, so the Republicans own their share. But the man who pushed it across the finish line was Bill Clinton. He made ratification a central fight of his young presidency, waging what historians describe as an all-out campaign — arm-twisting, deal-making, the works. On November 17, 1993, the House approved NAFTA 234 to 200, and Clinton signed it that

December. Labor unions begged Democrats to kill it. They warned exactly what would happen: factories closing, jobs moving to Mexico, communities hollowed out. The professionals and the wealthy — the economists, the editorial boards, the donor class — were overwhelmingly in favor. Two hundred eighty-three professional economists signed a statement saying the treaty would be a net positive. The blue-collar workers said it would destroy their lives. The workers were right.

Then Clinton did it again — bigger. In 2000, he made permanent normal trade relations with China his main legislative priority in his final year in office. With heavy help from the Republican majority in Congress, he got it: the House passed it, the Senate followed, and China was on its way into the World Trade Organization. One widely cited study found that the US lost about 2 million jobs because of normalized trade with China, including 985,000 factory jobs. The number of American factories declined by 45,000 between 1997 and 2008. Entire regions of the industrial Midwest and South were devastated — the "China shock" that economists named and communities lived. Clinton's pitch had been that trade would strengthen reformers in China and bring prosperity home. The prosperity went to the corporations that outsourced. The reform never came. The factories never came back.

Barack Obama kept the tradition going. His administration negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership — the TPP — a massive trade deal with twelve Pacific Rim countries. Unions opposed it. The deal was signed in 2016 under Obama's presidency. Whatever its merits as foreign policy, American workers heard the same song they'd been hearing since 1993: your jobs are the price of our global strategy. When Donald Trump withdrew the US from the TPP days after taking office, millions of working people noticed — and a lot of them noticed that it was the Republican who killed the Democratic president's trade deal.

This is the wound that never healed, and the Democrats keep pretending it's a scratch. Thomas Frank, the historian who's written about the modern Democratic Party, tells a story that captures it: the economists were all certain NAFTA would create prosperity, and the uneducated blue-collar workers were certain it would destroy their towns — and the workers' predictions "turned out to be far closer to what eventually came to pass than did the rosy scenarios of all those economists and the Rhodes Scholar in the White House."

Here's what makes it a con and not just a policy disagreement: the Democrats are the party that claims to stand with workers against corporate power. But when corporate America wanted NAFTA, a Democratic president delivered it. When corporate America wanted China in the WTO, a Democratic president made it his legacy project. When the factories closed and the towns died, the party's message was: learn to code, go back to school, adapt. The party of the working man told working men their jobs were the cost of progress — and then acted surprised when those men stopped voting for them.

Student Debt: The Promise That Died in Court

Student loans are the purest modern example of the Democrat con, because the promise was so specific, the failure so visible, and the follow-through so partial.

The pitch was simple and powerful: elect Democrats, and they'll do something about the \$1.6 trillion in federal student loan debt crushing more than 45 million borrowers. In 2020, Joe Biden campaigned on

cancellation — he backed forgiving \$10,000 per borrower, and progressives pushed for \$50,000. Young voters, who turned out in force for him, heard a promise and voted on it.

In August 2022, Biden announced his plan: up to \$10,000 in forgiveness for borrowers earning under \$125,000, up to \$20,000 for Pell Grant recipients — an estimated \$430 billion in relief, the biggest executive debt cancellation in American history. Sixteen million borrowers were approved before the lawsuits landed. Then, on June 30, 2023, the Supreme Court struck the whole plan down, 6-3, ruling the administration had overstepped its authority. Chief Justice Roberts wrote that the HEROES Act — the law Biden's team had cited — didn't grant the power to cancel \$430 billion in loans. The promise died in a courtroom.

Now, to be fair — and this chapter is fair — Biden didn't walk away. His administration went back and fixed the existing forgiveness programs that had been broken for years, and the results were real: in total, the administration says it canceled about \$175 billion in debt for nearly 5 million borrowers through programs like Public Service Loan Forgiveness. The PSLF program alone erased \$74 billion for more than a million public workers — teachers, nurses, firefighters — up from just 7,000 approvals before Biden's fixes. A 2018 government report had found that 99 percent of PSLF applicants were being denied; the administration turned that around. That's a genuine accomplishment, and it helped real people.

But step back and look at the whole picture. Five million borrowers got relief. More than 40 million didn't. The total outstanding debt is still around \$1.6 to \$1.77 trillion. The headline promise — the one that won the votes — died 6-3. And here's the part nobody in the party wants to talk about: the student loan system itself is a government machine. The federal government originates these loans, sets the interest rates, profits off the interest, and makes the debt nearly impossible to discharge in bankruptcy — a rule Biden himself helped write as a senator, when he supported the 2005 bankruptcy bill that made private student loans almost impossible to shed. The party that created the trap, ran on escaping it, and then mostly delivered escape hatches for the already-credentialed.

The deeper problem is structural, and it applies to every promise in this chapter. The Democrats promised debt cancellation through executive action — a shortcut around Congress — because they knew Congress wouldn't pass it. When the shortcut got struck down, the fallback was programs that already existed. That's the pattern: big promise on the campaign trail, procedural trick in office, partial cleanup when the trick fails. The borrowers who voted on the promise were left holding the original bag.

The Equality Speech and the Payday Reality

The last piece of the pitch is equality — the Democrats' oldest and deepest claim. Equal rights, equal pay, equal justice, a level playing field for everyone. This is the moral core of the party's brand, and I want to handle it carefully, because on civil rights the Democrats do have a real historical record. The party of the 1960s civil rights legislation earned its moral authority. The question is what it did with it.

The pattern that defines the modern party is this: it speaks the language of equality fluently and delivers the economics of inequality. The rhetoric gets sharper every year while the outcomes barely move. The party will fight a culture-war battle to the death — the kind that costs donors nothing — and go quiet

when the fight involves money.

Take civil liberties. On January 22, 2009 — his second full day in office — Barack Obama signed an executive order requiring the Guantánamo Bay prison to close within one year. It was one of the clearest promises he ever made. Eight years later, he walked out of the White House and Guantánamo was still open, with 41 prisoners still inside. Now, to be fair, Congress — including plenty of Democrats — passed law after law blocking the transfer of detainees, and Obama signed those laws too. The opposition was real. But a promise is a promise, and the man who said "within one year" left office eight years later with the prison still running. It's still open today. Some promises die in Congress. This one died everywhere.

And while we're on civil liberties: the president who campaigned on transparency and whistleblower protection turned the 1917 Espionage Act — a law written to catch spies in World War I — into a weapon against leakers. Obama's Justice Department charged eight people under the Espionage Act for leaking to the press. That's more than all previous administrations *combined* — before 2009, the law had been used against government leakers exactly three times. The man who promised the most transparent administration in history prosecuted more whistleblowers than every president before him put together. The speeches were about sunlight. The subpoenas were about silence.

Take criminal justice. Bill Clinton signed the 1994 crime bill, the largest in American history, which poured money into prisons and helped fuel the era of mass incarceration that devastated Black communities — the very communities the party claims to champion. He also signed the 1996 welfare reform law, which ended the federal guarantee of cash assistance for poor families and pushed millions into low-wage work requirements. Both were Democratic presidents signing the laws; both were celebrated as pragmatic centrism. The party that marched for civil rights built the prison boom and gutted the safety net, then spent the next twenty years giving speeches about systemic injustice — as if the system weren't one they helped build.

Take pay. Democrats have run on "equal pay for equal work" for decades. They've controlled the presidency and Congress multiple times since the slogan was born. The wage gap narrowed, slowly, over generations — mostly through broader economic and cultural change, not through any single Democratic legislative triumph. When the party had the power to do the big economic things that actually close gaps — raise the wage floor, strengthen unions, break up monopolies, tax wealth like work — it did the small things and called them historic.

This is what I mean by the equality speech and the payday reality. The speeches are about dignity, justice, and fairness. The paydays go to the same people they always go to: the donors, the insurers, the banks, the tech giants, the law firms, the consultants. The party's equality agenda has become a list of things that cost its donors nothing — statements, symbols, representation in ads — while the economic agenda that would cost its donors something dies in committee. You can have all the diversity you want on the board of a company that's still paying its warehouse workers poverty wages. The Democrats will celebrate the board. The warehouse workers will keep waiting.

None of this is hate. It's arithmetic. When a party's words and its money point in opposite directions, believe the money. The Democrats' words point at justice. Their money — Wall Street's half, Silicon

Valley's 95 percent, Big Pharma's committees, the lawyers, the insurers — points at power. The money always wins.

Same Yardstick, Same Verdict

Let's bring it home.

In Chapter 5, we held the Republicans to their own words: the party of free markets and working people that delivered tax cuts for the rich, deregulation for the corporations, and culture-war theater for the base. Same yardstick here. The Democrats say they're the party of working people, healthcare, unions, and equality. The record says: premiums doubled while insurers posted record profits; the minimum wage sat at \$7.25 for seventeen years while the party held full power and still couldn't pass a raise; labor's top bill died in a Democratic Senate; a Democratic president forced rail workers under a contract their unions rejected; a Democratic president killed Glass-Steagall and handed Wall Street the keys; Democratic presidents signed NAFTA, China's WTO entry, and the TPP while factory towns died; the student-debt promise died 6-3 and the cleanup reached one borrower in nine; and the nominee of the working people's party was backed by eighty-odd billionaires and outspent the Republican three-to-one.

The con isn't that Democrats are evil. Most Democratic voters are good people who believe the pitch, and most Democratic politicians probably believe it too, at least at first. The con is structural. It's the same con the Republicans run, in a different costume.

And sometimes the con is personal — and it comes with a signature on White House stationery. On his last day in office, January 20, 2001, Bill Clinton pardoned Marc Rich — a fugitive billionaire who'd fled to Switzerland in 1983 rather than face charges in what was then the biggest tax-evasion case in American history, nearly \$48 million owed. Rich never stood trial. He never came home. He got a pardon. And in the years before it, Rich's ex-wife Denise had given more than \$1 million to the Democratic Party, \$450,000 to Clinton's presidential library fund, and over \$100,000 to Hillary Clinton's Senate campaign. Clinton's critics called it justice for sale. Even Jimmy Carter — a fellow Democrat — said the gifts were clearly a factor and called the whole thing disgraceful. Clinton himself later said the pardon wasn't worth the damage to his reputation. He's right about the damage. The pardon told every American that there's one justice system for the connected and another for everybody else — and the Democrats' president signed the proof.

Twenty-three years later, Joe Biden did his own version. He'd promised, repeatedly and on the record, that he would not pardon his son Hunter. Then on December 1, 2024, seven weeks before leaving office, he issued a full and unconditional pardon — covering not just the gun conviction a Delaware jury had handed down, not just the guilty plea on failing to pay \$1.4 million in taxes, but *any* federal offenses Hunter may have committed over a full decade, from January 2014 to December 2024. Biden said his son had been selectively and unfairly prosecuted. Maybe he believed it — a father protecting his son is human. But the promise was public, the reversal was total, and the message landed the same way the Marc Rich pardon did: the rules are for you, not for us. When both parties' presidents spend their final weeks in office pardoning their friends, their donors, and their families, the parties aren't opposites. They're co-authors.

Both parties take the money. Both parties deliver for the donors. Both parties give the voters speeches. The Republicans tell you the rich will save you; the Democrats tell you the government will save you. Either way, you don't get saved, and the same people get paid.

That's why this chapter exists — not to make you hate Democrats, and not to make you love Republicans. It's to free you from both. The moment you see that the two parties are running the same operation, you stop being a customer and start being a citizen. You stop waiting for one of them to keep its promises, and you start demanding a system where promises are kept — or you build something new, which is what the rest of this book is about.

The pitch to working people was the Democrats' greatest asset. It was also, in the end, their greatest lie — not because the words were wrong, but because the people saying them had already sold the ending. Chapter 7 will show you how they keep you from noticing: divide and conquer. But before that, remember the yardstick. Same standard, both parties, no exceptions. That's the independent mindset. And once you pick it up, you can't put it back down.

Chapter 7: Divide and Conquer

The Oldest Play in the Book

There's a saying that's been around since ancient Rome: *divide and conquer*. Split the people up, set them at each other's throats, and while they're busy fighting, you pick their pockets clean.

It worked two thousand years ago. It works today. The only thing that's changed is the scale — and the technology.

Here's the game, and once you see it, you can't unsee it.

You fight about the bathroom your kid can use at school. You fight about a flag. You fight about a statue. You fight about a book in the library, a slogan on a jersey, what somebody said on TV Tuesday night. You fight hard. You fight like it matters more than anything else in the world.

And while you're fighting — while your whole emotional life is wrapped up in hating the other team — both parties quietly pass the same nine-hundred-billion-dollar defense bill they pass every single year. Both parties take the same donor money from the same industries. Both parties let the same banks and the same fossil fuel companies write the same tax breaks into law.

That's the trick. The fight is the product. The money is the point.

I'm not asking you to trust me on this. I'm going to show you the receipts. Real numbers, real votes, real studies — all of it public record, all of it stuff neither party will ever mention when they're trying to make you angry at your neighbor.

But first, let me tell you what I see from the driver's seat.

What I See From the Driver's Seat

I drive a cab for a living. People get in my car and they talk. A guy heading to his shift at a warehouse, a nurse coming off a double, a retiree going to the doctor, a college kid with a busted car. Rich people, poor people, every color, every religion, city folks, country folks.

And you know what I've learned after all those rides? The same thing gets said in a hundred different ways:

"The people with money are doing just fine. It's the rest of us getting squeezed."

Nobody in my cab ever once — not one time in all these years — has climbed in and said, "Alex, what really matters to me is whether a corporation pays two percent less in taxes this quarter." Nobody. Not the Republican voter, not the Democratic voter, not the guy who doesn't vote at all.

What they talk about is rent going up. Groceries costing more every month. The electric bill. The medical bill they can't pay. Whether their kid can afford college or whether they're going to end up with a

mortgage worth of debt and a job that doesn't need a degree anyway. Whether the job at the plant is coming back or whether it's gone for good.

Regular Americans have the same basic list of worries, no matter who they vote for. That should tell you something. And it should make you ask one very simple question:

If most of us want the same basic things — a decent living, a fair shot, a future for our kids — then why are we at each other's throats?

The answer is: because somebody benefits from it. And it isn't you.

I had a fare a while back — a guy in a work shirt, hands still dirty from the shift, heading home to a neighborhood where the yards are small and the flags are big. Halfway through the ride he started in on the other side — the other team, ruining the country. I just listened. Then he got quiet, and he said the thing they always say: "I don't know how anybody's supposed to make it anymore." Same sentence I've heard from a nurse, a teacher, a kid bagging groceries. The anger at the other team is loud. The worry underneath it is the same in every back seat in America.

The Culture War Is a Business Model

Let's call it what it is. The culture war isn't a war. It's a business.

It works like this. Every day, somewhere in America, something happens that could be framed as an outrage. A local school board does something. A celebrity says something stupid. Somebody puts up a display or takes one down. And before the coffee's even done brewing, there are a dozen organizations — left and right — turning that one incident into a fundraising email with a big red DONATE button.

"THE RADICAL LEFT is coming for your children!" — donate now.

"MAGA EXTREMISTS are banning books!" — donate now.

You ever notice how the fundraising email always arrives before anybody has the full story? That's not an accident. Outrage doesn't need the full story. Outrage needs about three seconds and a scary headline.

And here's the part that should make you furious: the people writing those emails aren't furious. They're calm. They're sitting in an office, watching the click-through rates, watching the dollars come in. Your anger is their revenue. Your neighbor's anger is their revenue. The more divided the country gets, the richer these organizations get.

This is not a conspiracy theory. This is just how the incentives work. Let me show you how the machine operates, piece by piece.

Piece one: the algorithm. In 2024, a team of researchers published a study in the journal *Science* — one of the most respected scientific journals in the world — and what they found should change how you see every political post in your feed. They looked at more than a million links on Facebook and tens of thousands of posts on Twitter across multiple time periods. Their findings were blunt: misinformation evokes more outrage than trustworthy information, and outrage facilitates sharing. People were more

willing to share outrage-evoking content *without even reading it first*.

Read that again. The researchers — Killian McLoughlin and colleagues — found that algorithms likely amplify this problem because outrage drives engagement, and engagement is what the platforms sell. Even if you share a post to say "this is terrible," the algorithm reads it as engagement. It doesn't care about your intent. It cares that you're clicking, commenting, sharing — because that's what keeps you scrolling past the ads.

So here's what that means in plain English: the machine doesn't reward the truth. It rewards whatever makes you angriest. A calm, factual post about a bipartisan giveaway to oil companies? Nobody shares it. A clip designed to make you hate your neighbor? It goes everywhere.

The platforms aren't trying to tear the country apart because they hate America. They're doing it because anger is the most profitable emotion in the world. Calm people don't click. Calm people put the phone down and go live their lives. And a person living their life isn't generating ad revenue.

And notice the cruelest part of what those researchers found: it doesn't matter which side you're on. The algorithm doesn't sort your outrage into good outrage and bad outrage. Your furious share of the other side's post counts exactly the same as their furious share of yours. You think you're fighting them. The platform sees two customers — both engaged, both scrolling, both generating ad impressions. You are not the audience for the fight. You are the product being fought over, by both sides, for the same advertisers.

Piece two: the cable news slot. You ever notice that the angriest people on television are millionaires? The hosts shouting about the other side, night after night, year after year — they're not poor. They're not sitting in a warehouse wondering how they're going to cover rent. They're wealthy professionals doing a job, and the job is to keep you watching through the commercial break.

The business model is simple: pick a team, make the other team sound evil, keep the audience scared and angry, sell advertisements to that audience. It works on both sides. One network tells you the other side is destroying the country. The other network tells you the first network's audience is destroying the country. Both networks get rich. The country gets poorer — in money, in trust, and in the ability to sit in the same room together.

Let me put real numbers on it, because the scale of the business matters. Researchers who track the news industry for the Pew Research Center found that in 2022, Fox News alone took in nearly \$1.15 billion in advertising revenue. CNN took in about \$590 million. MSNBC about \$530 million. Add it up: the three big cable news networks sold roughly \$2.3 billion worth of ads in a single year — ads placed next to the shouting. And the money spikes when the country is most divided. In the 2020 election year, Fox cleared over a billion dollars in ad revenue and CNN cleared over \$840 million. One industry estimate found the three networks combined for more than \$207 million in national TV ad spending in a single month — September 2025.

Your anger is not a side effect of their business model. It is the product, sold by the hour to the highest bidder.

Piece three: the fundraising email. Political campaigns and advocacy groups learned years ago that fear and anger raise more money than hope. A message that says "together we can build a better future" raises a few dollars. A message that says "THEY are coming to destroy everything you love — give now before it's too late" raises a fortune.

That's why every minor controversy gets blown up into an existential crisis. Not because it's an existential crisis. Because a crisis opens wallets.

And the wallets open wide. In the 2020 election cycle, the Democrats' online fundraising platform ActBlue reported processing more than \$3.2 billion between January and November 2020 — small donations from more than thirteen million people, averaging about \$35 a pop — while the Republicans' platform WinRed processed about \$1.9 billion in the same stretch. ActBlue alone pulled in \$1.5 billion in a single quarter, July through September, as the fight over a Supreme Court vacancy hit fever pitch. Political reporters have a word for it: *fundraging*. Rage, converted directly into cash. Every terrifying subject line is tested. Every "THIS IS OUR LAST CHANCE" is measured. The consultants aren't guessing — they have the spreadsheets. And the spreadsheets say your fear is worth billions.

Now ask yourself: if the business model depends on keeping you angry at the other side, do the people running it have any reason to ever let you calm down? Do they have any reason to tell you what both sides quietly agree on?

Of course not. Calm consensus doesn't pay. Division pays.

The Twenty-Four-Hour Outrage Cycle

Let me walk you through how one of these manufactured firestorms actually plays out, because once you've seen the anatomy of it, you'll recognize it every single time. It happens the same way, week after week, like clockwork.

Hour zero: something happens. A local official says something dumb. A celebrity posts something provocative. A school board somewhere makes a decision. A ten-second clip surfaces. On its own, it means almost nothing. In a country of 340 million people, somebody is always saying something stupid somewhere. Always.

The clip machines move in. Within hours, both sides' media operations have clipped the most inflammatory fifteen seconds, stripped out the context, and added their own caption. The version you see is never the full picture — it's the version engineered to produce a reaction. If it confirms what you already believe about the other side, it feels like proof. That's not journalism. That's a product being assembled.

The pundit wave. By that evening, the millionaire hosts are performing their outrage. Each one is speaking to an audience that already agrees with them, which means the job isn't to inform anyone — it's to make the audience feel *seen*, feel *vindicated*, feel *angry*. The angrier the audience, the longer they watch. The longer they watch, the more ads sell. Everybody on that set understands the business. The viewers are the last ones to find out.

The fundraising emails go out. By the next morning, your inbox is full of them. Both sides. Red versions, blue versions, all of them hitting the same note: *This is the worst thing that's ever happened, and only your donation can stop it.* They don't wait for the full story because the full story would ruin the urgency. The money moves fastest in the first 48 hours of a controversy, and the consultants know it. That's not politics. That's a business with a sales cycle.

The algorithm does the rest. You share the post to say "can you believe this?" — and the algorithm reads your share as engagement. Your friend comments "this is disgusting" — the algorithm reads that as engagement. Somebody quote-posts it to argue — engagement. The study I mentioned earlier, the one published in *Science* in 2024, found exactly this: outrage facilitates sharing, and the algorithms amplify whatever drives engagement, regardless of whether it's true. The machine doesn't distinguish between your outrage and your opponent's outrage. It feeds on both.

The hangover. A week later, nobody remembers what actually happened. Nobody remembers the context, the correction, the part where it turned out to be exaggerated or flat-out wrong. But everybody remembers how *the other side behaved*. The details evaporate. The resentment stays. That's the real product of the cycle — not understanding, not solutions, just a fresh layer of contempt for your fellow Americans, ready to be built on next week.

And now here's the part you're supposed to miss. While that whole cycle was running — while you were arguing in comment sections and forwarding emails — what was happening quietly, off-camera, in the committees and the back rooms? Some committee marked up a bill that helps the banks. Some subsidy got extended. Some defense contract got renewed. Some regulation got watered down. No cameras. No outrage. No fundraising emails about *that*.

It's a magic trick. The waving hand is the culture war. The other hand is writing the checks.

Once you see the cycle — the clip, the pundits, the emails, the algorithm, the hangover — you'll start noticing something else: the controversies that dominate the news are almost always the ones that cost the donor class nothing. The controversies that would cost them real money — a fight over wages, over drug prices, over rent, over who pays taxes — somehow never make it through the cycle. They get a headline, maybe a day of coverage, and then they vanish. The machine has a filter. It lets through the fights that divide you and screens out the fights that would unite you.

That's not an accident. That's the business model protecting itself.

Let me give you the textbook case. 2017. The entire country was consumed — every single day — by the latest tweet, the latest scandal, the latest culture-war explosion. Statues, anthems, investigations, feuds: the outrage cycle ran at full speed for a full year. And that December, with America at peak distraction, Congress passed and the President signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act — a \$1.5 trillion tax package whose centerpiece was slashing the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 21 percent. Later, researchers from Congress's own Joint Committee on Taxation and the Federal Reserve studied the actual tax records and found that almost all of the benefit from that \$1.3 trillion corporate cut went to high-income shareholders and executives — workers below the 90th percentile of pay in their own firms saw no wage boost at all.

The biggest corporate tax cut in modern American history, and it sailed through while America was busy yelling at itself.

It wasn't a one-time thing. In December 2023 — right before the holidays, while the national conversation was consumed by the latest round of culture-war fights — Congress passed a record \$886 billion defense policy bill. The Senate voted 87 to 13. The House voted 310 to 118. The President signed it. Barely a ripple in the national conversation. The machine doesn't need you to agree with the quiet votes. It just needs you looking the other way while they happen.

What They Quietly Agree On

Here's the part neither party's fundraising machine wants you to think about too long. Because if you do, the whole show starts to look different.

While you're being told that the other side is the devil, both sides are quietly agreeing on the things the donors actually care about. Let me give you three real examples. These aren't opinions. These are votes, dollar amounts, public records.

Example one: defense spending. In December 2025, the President signed the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2026 — \$900.6 billion authorized for national defense. Nine hundred billion dollars. And here's the thing that should stop you in your tracks: it passed with wide bipartisan margins, and it was the *65th consecutive year* an NDAA has been enacted. Sixty-five years. Every president since Eisenhower. Every Congress, red or blue, has passed the defense bill. It's the one thing in Washington that never fails to get done.

And Congress didn't just pass what the President asked for — they authorized \$8 billion *more* than the request. When was the last time Congress added \$8 billion extra to anything that helped regular people without a fight?

Now, I'm not here to tell you what the defense budget should be. Reasonable people can disagree about that, and honest patriots can land in different places. But I want you to notice the contrast. Congress can't agree on whether you should be able to afford insulin, but it agrees — every year, without fail, for 65 years — on spending nine hundred billion dollars on the military. The thing the donors care about gets done. The thing you care about gets a fight.

Example two: the banks. After the 2008 financial crisis, Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Act to put stricter rules on big banks — stress tests, higher standards, the whole package. The idea was simple: never again let banks take the risks that crashed the economy and cost millions of people their homes and jobs.

Ten years later, in March 2018, the Senate passed a bill called the Economic Growth, Regulatory Relief, and Consumer Protection Act — S. 2155 — that rolled back a big chunk of those rules. It raised the threshold for stricter oversight from banks with \$50 billion in assets to banks with \$250 billion, exempting a whole class of large regional banks from the toughest standards. And it passed 67 to 31 — *with 17 Democrats voting yes*. Republicans and Democrats, together, on behalf of the banks.

Was that the right call? Maybe you think the regulations were too strict. Maybe you think they were too weak. But notice what happened: when Wall Street's lobbyists wanted something, both parties found a way to work together. The same Congress that can't agree on the color of the sky suddenly discovered bipartisanship — for the banks.

Example three: fossil fuel subsidies. In September 2025, a report from the research group Oil Change International — *"Paying for Climate Chaos"* — calculated that the U.S. federal government hands the fossil fuel industry an estimated \$34.8 billion a year in subsidies: tax breaks, cheap drilling rights on public land, regulatory carve-outs, direct spending to clean up the industry's own messes. And Congress *added* to it — the One Big Beautiful Bill Act passed in 2025 added nearly \$40 billion in new fossil fuel subsidies over the next decade, about \$4 billion a year on top of what was already there.

Now here's the kicker, and I want you to sit with this: in 2021, President Biden campaigned on ending fossil fuel handouts, saying publicly that the federal government shouldn't give handouts to Big Oil. His budget even tried to eliminate some of them. And yet, years later, the handouts didn't go away — they grew. Under a Democratic president who promised to cut them, and then under a Republican Congress and president who openly expanded them.

Both parties. Same industry. Same handouts. Different speeches.

When Republicans and Democrats both hold hands with the oil companies — just with different smiles on their faces — that's not a coincidence. That's a consensus. The donor consensus.

Example four: the loophole both parties promise to kill — and neither one does. There's a tax break called carried interest. It lets private equity managers and hedge fund executives have a big chunk of their pay taxed at the 20 percent investment rate instead of the top income-tax rate of 37 percent. Presidents of both parties have promised to close it. A provision to narrow it — projected to raise \$14 billion over ten years — was in the original version of the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022. And then, at the insistence of a single senator whose vote was needed to pass the bill, it was stripped out. The loophole survived. The bill passed. The donors kept their break.

Think about that. A tax favor for some of the richest people in the country, opposed in speeches by everybody, killed in practice by nobody. That's not gridlock. That's consensus — the donor consensus.

They Can Act Fast When They Want To

Now, the defenders of the system will tell you that Washington is just naturally slow. Gridlock. Partisanship. The two sides can't agree on anything, so nothing gets done. Poor Congress — its hands are tied.

Don't believe a word of it.

In March 2020, when the pandemic hit and the economy was seizing up, Congress passed the CARES Act — \$2.2 trillion, the largest emergency spending package in American history. The Senate passed it 96 to 0. Unanimous. The House passed it by voice vote — meaning it was so uncontroversial they didn't even

bother counting. The President signed it the same day. Ninety-six to zero. From introduction to signature in a matter of days.

Let me be fair about this, because fairness matters: a lot of that money went to regular people. The recovery checks helped families pay rent and buy groceries. Expanded unemployment kept people afloat. That part was real, and it mattered.

But here's the part that got less attention: the same bill opened enormous lending windows and backstops for large corporations — hundreds of billions in loans and guarantees routed through the Treasury and the Federal Reserve, with far less scrutiny and far fewer strings than the checks that went to families. The people's relief was the headline. The corporate relief was the fine print. And the fine print passed 96 to 0, just like the headline.

Now here's my question: if Congress can move \$2.2 trillion in days, with total unanimity, when it decides to — then why, when it comes to the things regular people need year after year, is Congress suddenly paralyzed? Why can they find 96 votes overnight for a corporate lending program, but they can't find 60 votes in a decade for the cost of living?

I'll tell you why. Because the 96-to-0 vote is what happens when the donor class needs something. The paralysis is what happens when *you* need something.

This is the pattern, and once you see it, it's everywhere. When the banks needed rescuing in 2008, Congress found the money — fast. When Wall Street needed relief in 2020, Congress found the money — unanimous. When the defense contractors need their annual authorization, Congress delivers — 65 years running. But when working people need affordable housing, or lower drug prices, or wages that keep up with rent, suddenly there's gridlock. Suddenly it's complicated. Suddenly there are procedural obstacles, and poison pills, and "we just don't have the votes."

The gridlock is selective. The speed is selective. And the selection is made by money.

Understand this, and you'll never again be confused by Washington. It's not broken. It's working exactly as designed — just not for you.

Remember that the next time somebody tells you a reform you want is "too complicated" or "can't be done." They moved \$2.2 trillion in days. Complicated is a choice. Can't is a choice. And the choices always seem to go one direction.

The Donor Consensus

Now I want to show you the most important chart in American politics — and it's one neither party will ever put on a flyer.

Go look at where the defense industry's campaign money goes. In the 2024 election cycle, according to the nonpartisan watchdog OpenSecrets, the defense aerospace sector's contributions split nearly down the middle: 47.7% to Democrats, 51.6% to Republicans. Defense electronics: 43.9% to Democrats, 55.9% to Republicans. Miscellaneous defense: 44.5% to Democrats, 54.7% to Republicans.

Think about what that means. The people who make money from the nine-hundred-billion-dollar defense budget aren't picking a side. They're funding *both* sides. They're not betting on a winner. They're buying the winner, whichever one it turns out to be.

This is how the donor class actually works. It's not that corporations love Republicans and hate Democrats, or vice versa. They hedge. They spread their money across both teams like a bet on every horse in the race. Because they understand something most voters don't: in American politics, you don't need the party to love you. You just need whoever wins to owe you.

And it's not just defense. The banks, the pharmaceutical companies, the health insurers, the tech giants, the fossil fuel companies — they all play the same game. They give to the incumbent Republicans *and* the incumbent Democrats. They show up at both conventions. Their lobbyists have lunch with staffers from both parties. They are, in every way that matters, bipartisan.

The voters are partisan. The donors are bipartisan.

Let me say that again, because it might be the most important sentence in this whole chapter: **the voters are partisan, and the donors are bipartisan.** You hate the other team. The people cashing the checks don't care which team wins, because they're getting paid either way.

Now, does that mean every single vote in Congress is corrupt? No. There are good people in both parties who genuinely believe in what they're doing. I've met them. But the *structure* is what it is: the 2024 federal elections were projected to cost \$15.9 billion, according to OpenSecrets — making it the most expensive election cycle in American history, with outside groups alone projected to spend over \$5 billion. Fifteen point nine billion dollars. That's not a democracy where the best ideas win. That's a marketplace where the best-funded ads win.

And where does that money go? A huge chunk of it goes into exactly what this chapter is about: ads designed to make you hate the other side. Attack ads. Anger ads. Fear ads. The donors fund the campaigns, and the campaigns fund the outrage machine, and the outrage machine keeps you fighting your neighbor while the donor consensus gets enacted quietly in the background.

It's a beautiful system. For the people at the top.

And it explains the one mystery that confuses honest people in both parties: why does nothing ever change no matter who wins? Because the winners were bought before the election. The donors don't pick a side — they pick the winner, after you do. Your vote decides which team holds the trophy. Their money decided what the trophy was worth before the game started.

How Identity Fights Distract From Shared Economic Interests

Now let's talk about the deepest layer of the trick, because this is the one that hits closest to home.

I said earlier that the people in my cab — all kinds of people, all kinds of voters — have basically the same list of worries. Rent. Groceries. Bills. Jobs. The kids' future. That's not a theory. That's years of conversations with real human beings, one at a time, in the front seat of a car.

So why, when regular Americans share so many interests, do we hate each other so much politically? Because the system needs us to define ourselves by our *identity* instead of our *interests*.

Your interests are what you need: affordable housing, decent wages, safe neighborhoods, good schools, the ability to see a doctor without going broke. Your identity — as the machine defines it — is your team: red or blue, left or right, urban or rural, which cable network you watch, which flags fly in your yard.

Here's the magic trick: the machine keeps you so focused on identity that you never notice your interests are being traded away. You're arguing about which team is more evil while both teams vote to give the banks what they want. You're fighting over a statue while the defense contractors split their donations fifty-fifty and laugh all the way to the, well, the bank.

And it goes deeper than disagreement about policy. It's become personal. A Pew Research Center study found that large majorities of partisans don't just disagree with the other party — they believe people in the other party *don't share their basic values and goals as Americans*. Fewer than half of Democrats and just 38% of Republicans said the other side shares many of their nonpolitical values. Think about that. We used to disagree about the budget. Now we think the other side is a different kind of human being.

But here's what's fascinating: when researchers strip away the party labels and the media framing and actually get regular Americans in a room to talk about what they want, the agreement is remarkable. Time and again, when you ask people — not as partisans, but as people — what they need, the list is the same. A fair wage. Affordable healthcare. Safe streets. Schools that work. Nobody wants their town's factory to close. Nobody wants their rent to double. Nobody wants their kid hooked on drugs or their mother unable to afford her medication.

The division isn't natural. It's manufactured. And it's manufactured on purpose.

Let me give you the simplest example of how it works. Imagine two neighbors. One flies a flag the other doesn't like. One watches one network; the other watches the other. They've never really talked, but each has seen enough clips of the other's "team" to be pretty sure the other one is the enemy.

Now imagine they actually talk. About the rent going up. About the plant closing. About the clinic that shut down. They'd agree on almost everything. They'd be furious — together — about the same things.

The machine cannot allow that conversation to happen. Because if those two neighbors realize they're on the same side, the whole game falls apart. So the machine makes sure they're too angry to talk. It feeds each one a steady diet of the other's worst moments. It trains them to see a neighbor as an enemy.

Divide and conquer. Two thousand years old. Still working.

The Numbers They Don't Want You to Read

Now let me show you something that should give you hope — because it means the spell is breaking.

In January 2026, Gallup released a finding that should have been the biggest political story of the year: a record-high **45% of Americans now identify as political independents**. Not Republican. Not Democrat. Independent. Republicans and Democrats each sit at just 27%. That's based on interviews with more than 13,000 U.S. adults throughout 2025.

Let that sink in. The independents aren't some fringe group anymore. They are the *largest political bloc in America*. Bigger than either party. And the younger the voter, the more independent they are — 54% of Millennials and 56% of Gen Z identify as independents, according to that same Gallup data. The future of this country is walking away from both parties.

And it gets better. In May 2025, Pew Research Center found that 26% of Americans hold an unfavorable view of *both* parties — the highest share in more than three decades of asking, and more than four times the percentage in 1994. Nearly a third say both parties are "too extreme." About a quarter say neither party governs in an honest and ethical way.

Do you see what's happening? Tens of millions of Americans are looking at this whole rodeo — the outrage, the fundraising emails, the culture-war theater — and saying, "I'm out." They're not apathetic. They're not uninformed. They're *disgusted* — with both sides. And more of them every year.

The machine's greatest fear isn't the other party. It's you walking away from the game entirely.

Because here's the thing the consultants understand perfectly: their whole business model depends on you picking a side. The moment you refuse to hate your neighbor, the outrage machine loses a customer. The moment you say "I don't care about your wedge issue, I care about who's taking my money," the fundraising email stops working. The moment you vote your interests instead of your identity, the donor consensus starts to crack.

That's why this book exists. That's why independence isn't just a label — it's a refusal to be played.

Why They Need You to Hate Each Other

Let me lay this out as plainly as I can, because I want there to be no misunderstanding.

If the country were united around its shared economic interests — wages, housing, healthcare, jobs, the cost of living — then both parties would have to answer some very uncomfortable questions:

Why did defense get \$900.6 billion without a fight, but your insulin prescription gets a debate?

Why did both parties line up to give the banks regulatory relief in 2018, but nobody can seem to do anything about the rent?

Why does the fossil fuel industry get \$34.8 billion a year in handouts — and growing — while working families get told there's no money for anything?

Why did the 2024 election cost \$15.9 billion, most of it spent on ads trying to make you hate somebody, instead of on ads telling you what anyone actually plans to do?

Why does a tax loophole for private equity billionaires — promised to be closed by presidents of both parties — survive every single reform attempt?

Those are questions neither party wants to answer. Because the honest answer to all of them is: *the donors didn't ask for it*.

So instead of answering, they distract. They hand you a new wedge issue every news cycle. They make sure there's always something to be furious about — something that costs them nothing and costs the donors nothing. A fight about words costs Lockheed Martin nothing. A fight about statues costs the banks nothing. A fight about books in libraries costs the oil companies nothing.

But a fight about wages? A fight about healthcare costs? A fight about housing? Those fights cost the donors *real money*. So those fights never happen. Not for real. They get a hearing, a committee, a sound bite — and then nothing.

This is the genius of the modern system. The parties don't need to agree on everything. They just need to agree on what the fight is *about*. And both of them have agreed — whether they admit it or not — that the fight will be about identity, culture, and outrage, and *never* about the money. Because the money is where they both eat.

Think about the last ten years of American politics. Think about the biggest, loudest, most emotional national fights. Now ask yourself: in how many of those fights was the actual prize a transfer of wealth or power *away* from the donor class and toward regular people?

I'll wait.

The answer is close to zero. The loudest fights are always about symbols. The quietest votes are always about money. That's not a coincidence. That's the design.

The Way Out: Refuse to Hate Your Neighbor

So what do we do? Here's the part of the book where some people expect me to say "rise up" or "take to the streets." I'm not going to say that. I'm going to say something harder — and, I believe, more powerful.

Refuse to hate your neighbor.

That's it. That's the revolution. Not a violent one — a mental one. A moral one. A political one.

The entire machine runs on your hatred. The fundraising emails need it. The cable networks need it. The algorithms need it. The campaigns need it. Every single player in the system — every one of them, on both sides — needs you to believe that the person across the street, the person in the other pew, the person with the different bumper sticker, is your enemy.

So the most radical thing you can do is this: don't believe it.

Talk to your neighbor. Not about politics — about life. About the rent. About the grocery bill. About the potholes on your street. About the clinic that closed. About what your kids need. You'll find out

something the machine has been trying to hide from you: you want the same things.

And when you see that — really see it — something shifts. You stop being a Republican or a Democrat first, and you start being an American first. You stop voting your anger and start voting your interests. You stop falling for the wedge issue and start asking the money question: *who benefits from this?*

That's the independent mindset. It's not about being in the middle. It's not about splitting the difference between two parties you don't trust. It's about refusing to be a pawn in somebody else's game.

How to See the Game

Once you decide to see it, you start noticing the pattern everywhere. Let me give you a few tools — things I've picked up over the years — for spotting the con in real time.

First: follow the outrage. Whenever something explodes in the news and everybody is suddenly furious, ask yourself two questions. *Who's raising money off this?* And *what money vote is happening quietly while nobody's looking?* Nine times out of ten, you'll find that the loudest controversy of the week coincides with the quietest giveaway of the year. It's a magic trick: watch the waving hand, ignore the other hand.

Second: watch what they do, not what they say. Politicians talk for a living. Their words are free. Their votes cost them something — or earn them something. When a politician gives a fiery speech about corruption and then votes for the same defense bill and the same bank giveaways, believe the vote. The speech is for you. The vote is for the donor.

Third: notice when they agree. In a system where the two parties supposedly can't agree on anything, agreement is the tell. When Republicans and Democrats suddenly, magically, find common ground — and it happens to benefit banks, defense contractors, oil companies, or Big Pharma — that isn't bipartisanship. That's the donor consensus showing itself. Real bipartisanship would be both parties agreeing on something that helps *you*. Notice how rare that is.

Fourth: check who funded the message. Before you share that outrage post, before you forward that email, before you let a clip ruin your evening — ask who paid for it. A lot of the "grassroots" outrage you see online is funded by the same donor networks that fund both parties. The anger is astroturfed. The division is manufactured. The only thing real about it is your blood pressure.

Fifth: talk to a real person. The machine lives in your phone. The cure lives in the real world. Go sit on a porch. Stand in line at the store. Ride in a cab, if you want — I've got plenty of stories. When you talk to actual human beings, face to face, about real life, the abstractions fall away. The "enemy" turns out to be a tired dad worried about the same bills you're worried about. That's not a theory. That's what happens every single day, in every town in America, whenever two people drop the act and talk straight.

Sixth: watch the quiet votes. Whenever the news is loudest, check what Congress just did. The loudest weeks in Washington are often the ones with the quietest votes — end-of-year bills, holiday-week markups, Friday-night voice votes. If the whole country is screaming about one thing, look for the thing

nobody's screaming about. That's usually the one with your money in it.

The Neighbor Test

Here's a test I want you to carry with you for the rest of your life. I call it the neighbor test, and it's simple.

Whenever a politician, a pundit, or a post tells you to hate a group of people — your neighbors, your fellow Americans — ask yourself: *What does this person gain from my hatred? And what do I lose?*

You gain nothing. You lose a neighbor. You lose sleep. You lose the chance to find common ground with someone who could have been an ally. You lose the only thing that actually threatens the system: ordinary people standing together.

And what does the person gain? Your click. Your donation. Your vote. Your anger, converted into revenue and power. They gain exactly what the system was built to deliver: your division, their profit.

The moment you see that transaction clearly — the moment you understand that your hatred is somebody else's business model — you become very hard to manipulate. And a country full of people who are hard to manipulate is a country the donor class can't control.

What Unity Actually Looks Like

I want to be clear about something, because I know how this can be misread. I'm not saying we should all agree on everything. I'm not saying differences don't matter, or that we should pretend they don't exist. Real disagreements are healthy. A free country needs debate.

What I'm saying is: don't let manufactured disagreements replace real ones. Don't let the machine pick your fights for you.

Real debate looks like this: "Here's my plan for healthcare, here's yours, let's argue it out on the merits and see what works." Manufactured debate looks like this: "THE OTHER SIDE HATES AMERICA AND WANTS TO DESTROY EVERYTHING" — donate now.

Real debate is about policy. Manufactured debate is about identity. Real debate assumes your opponent is a fellow citizen with a different idea. Manufactured debate assumes your opponent is evil. Real debate ends with a vote. Manufactured debate never ends — because it's not supposed to. It's supposed to keep going forever, because forever is how long the money flows.

Unity doesn't mean uniformity. It means refusing to let the people at the top turn the people at the bottom against each other. It means looking at your neighbor and saying, "We might vote different, but I know you're not my enemy. My enemy is the system that needs us to be enemies."

That's what the 99% is. It's not a slogan. It's a recognition: the people at the top — the donor class, the lobbyists, the consultants, the outrage merchants — are the 1%. The rest of us, red and blue, left and right, city and country, are the 99%. And the 99% has more in common with each other than any of us has with

the people cashing the checks.

What an Independent Mindset Looks Like Day to Day

All of this sounds good on paper. But what does it actually look like on a Tuesday? How does a regular person — working a job, raising a family, living a life — actually refuse to play the game? Here's what it looks like in practice. None of this is complicated. All of it is hard, because the machine is designed to make it hard.

First: curate your feed like your sanity depends on it — because it does. The algorithm serves you whatever you engage with. Every angry comment, every quote-post, every "can you believe this" share is a vote for more of the same. So stop voting. Unfollow the outrage merchants — on both sides. Mute the accounts that make your blood pressure rise. You are not obligated to watch the show. The moment you stop engaging, the algorithm stops feeding you, and something remarkable happens: your evenings get quieter, your mind gets clearer, and you start thinking your own thoughts instead of the ones somebody paid to put in your head.

Second: give every controversy 48 hours. The first version of every story is the most inflammatory one — because the first version is the one the clip machines and the fundraising emails need. The full story, the context, the correction, always arrives later, and it always arrives quietly. So make it a rule: you don't get to have an opinion on a breaking controversy for 48 hours. Almost nothing that feels like an emergency on day one still feels like one on day three. And the things that *do* still matter on day three? Those are worth your attention. The rest was product.

Third: ask "who benefits?" every single time. Whenever a headline, a clip, or a pundit tries to make you furious, pause and run the question. Who's raising money off my anger right now? Who's selling ads against my fear? What money vote is happening quietly while everyone's screaming? Make it a reflex, like checking your mirrors. The machine depends on you never asking. Ask anyway.

Fourth: have one real conversation a month with someone who votes differently than you. Not a debate. Not a comment-section war. A conversation — in person, about life. Ask them what they're worried about. Tell them what you're worried about. You don't have to agree on everything. You don't even have to agree on politics. You just have to discover what I discover in my cab every night: the list is the same. Rent. Bills. The kids. The future. One conversation a month is twelve a year, and every one of them is a small act of rebellion against the machine, because the machine's whole business depends on you never having it.

Fifth: vote your interests, not your identity. Before the next election, sit down with a piece of paper — a real piece of paper — and write down your top five kitchen-table issues. Rent. Wages. Healthcare costs. Whatever yours are. Then look at every candidate on your ballot and grade them on those five things. Not on their team. Not on their slogans. Not on who they hate. On your five things. If nobody on the ballot serves your interests, that's information too — and it's the kind of information that matters a whole lot more than which cable network told you to be angry this week.

Sixth: go local. The outrage machine is weakest at the local level, and that's not an accident — it's because local politics is where the money is thinnest and the people are closest. Your city council, your school board, your county races: these are the places where your vote has the most weight and where the donor class pays the least attention. Show up. The machine wants you glued to the national drama and checked out of the local decisions that actually affect your street. Flip that around.

Seventh: starve the outrage economy. Don't donate to the anger merchants. Don't forward the fundraising emails. Don't share the clip. Every dollar that flows into the outrage machine is a dollar that keeps the cycle running for another week. Put that dollar toward your neighbor, your church, your local food bank, your kid's school — somewhere the money does something other than buy more division. The fundraising machines on both sides are businesses. Businesses that don't get paid go out of business.

None of this requires you to change your beliefs. I'm not asking you to switch teams or abandon your values. I'm asking you to do something much harder: to hold your values *without* holding the hatred the machine packaged with them. You can believe what you believe and still refuse to be a customer of the division business. In fact, that's the only way your beliefs ever get a fair hearing — free from the distortion of the people who profit from your anger.

The Choice

So here's where this chapter ends, and where your part begins.

Every day, the machine will offer you a choice. It will show you a headline, a clip, a post, an email — something designed to make your blood boil, to make you hate somebody you've never met, to make you forward your anger to everyone you know.

And every day, you get to decide: Do I take the bait? Or do I see the game?

If you take the bait, nothing changes. The defense bill passes. The banks get their relief. The oil companies get their subsidies. The campaigns get their money. The networks get their ratings. The algorithm gets its engagement. And you get an ulcer and a divided neighborhood.

If you see the game — if you refuse to hate your neighbor, if you vote your interests instead of your identity, if you ask "who benefits?" instead of "who's to blame?" — then everything changes. Slowly, at first. Then faster than anyone expects.

Because here's the secret the machine doesn't want you to know: it only works if you play. The moment enough of us stop playing — stop hating, stop clicking, stop donating to the outrage, stop voting for the team instead of for ourselves — the whole thing collapses. Not in a dramatic explosion. In a quiet, almost boring way. The fundraising emails stop working. The attack ads stop landing. The wedge issues stop wedging.

And what's left is something we've barely seen in this country for a very long time: ordinary Americans, talking to each other like neighbors, voting like citizens, and asking the one question that terrifies the powerful more than anything else:

What about us?

Forty-five percent of Americans have already walked away from the two parties. More are leaving every year. The question isn't whether the game is ending. The question is what we build in its place.

That's what the rest of this book is about. But it starts here, with the simplest and hardest thing of all:

Don't hate your neighbor. See the game. And refuse to play.

Chapter 8: The 99%

On a September morning in 2011, a few thousand people walked into a little concrete park in New York's Financial District and pitched tents. They called the place Liberty Square. The rest of the world called it Zuccotti Park.

They didn't have a platform. They didn't have a candidate. They didn't even have a list of demands that anybody could agree on. What they had was a feeling in their gut — the same feeling you get when you work all week and the money still isn't enough, when the rent goes up and the paycheck doesn't, when the bank that took your house gets a bailout and you get a late fee. A feeling that something was badly, obviously wrong with who the economy was working for.

Somebody held up a piece of cardboard, and three words landed that are still ringing in this country fifteen years later:

"We are the 99%."

A few weeks earlier, a Nobel Prize-winning economist named Joseph Stiglitz had written about the top one percent in a magazine article, laying out how much wealth had pooled at the very top. But it took ordinary people in a park with handwritten signs to turn a statistic into a sentence that belonged to everybody. The tents were cleared in November 2011 — fifty-nine days in — but the phrase never left. Fifteen years later, the park is empty — because the feeling that built it never got answered. The banks got bigger. The bonuses came back. The rent kept climbing, the wages kept crawling, and the people who were right in 2011 are still waiting. The 99% didn't lose the argument. They never got a hearing. Politicians started using it. Comedians started using it. Cable news started using it. Your neighbors started using it.

Because it was true.

This chapter is about who those people are. Not a slogan. Not a protest. Not a party — God knows, we're done with parties in this book. The 99% is everybody else. The truck driver hauling freight through the night on I-44. The nurse finishing a twelve-hour shift with her scrubs still damp with sweat. The single mom working the breakfast shift, then the dinner shift. The kid bagging your groceries who is also trying to pay for community college. The retired factory worker watching his pension buy less every year. The cab driver who has been talking to America through a rearview mirror for decades and can tell you exactly what this country thinks, because he's heard it one fare at a time.

That's you, probably. That's the vast majority of this country. And the most important political fact in America today is this: almost all of us live the same economic life, want the same basic things, and get told every single day that we hate each other.

Let's talk about what's actually true.

Who the 99% Are

First, let's get precise about what the number means, because precision matters and the people in power count on you never asking.

The "99%" refers to the bottom ninety-nine percent of Americans by income and wealth — everybody who isn't in the richest one percent. That's roughly 330 million people. It includes the Black nurse in Memphis and the white coal-country electrician, the Latino warehouse worker in Dallas and the Asian American restaurant owner in Seattle, the farmer in Missouri and the teacher in Brooklyn. It includes people who vote Republican, people who vote Democrat, people who stopped voting because they figured out the game was fixed, and people who never started.

Here's what the 99% is *not*. It is not a race. It is not a region. It is not a party, a union, a religion, or an age group. It is not everybody agreeing about everything. You can be in the 99% and disagree with your neighbor about guns, abortion, immigration, schools, or a hundred other things. That disagreement is fine. It's American. It's healthy, even. What the 99% *is* is a shared position in the economy: we all sell our labor, and none of us write the rules of the game.

And here's the part they don't want you sitting with for too long: the shared economic reality of those 330 million people is remarkably similar. Different details, same squeeze. The cab driver in Springfield and the home health aide in Cleveland and the line cook in Tucson are all living some version of the same sentence: *I work hard, and it keeps getting harder to stay in one place.*

That is not an accident. That is not bad luck. That is the output of a system that was redesigned, piece by piece, over the last fifty years, to send the gains to the top and the costs to everybody else. Chapters Two through Four of this book showed you the machinery — the money, the super PACs, the dark money. This chapter is about the people the machinery runs over.

The squeeze doesn't care about your zip code. The laid-off factory worker in Ohio, the priced-out renter in Phoenix, the dairy farmer getting squeezed by the processors, the teacher in Brooklyn buying her own classroom supplies — different lives, same math. The 99% isn't a place. It's a position: you're in it if you work for your money and the rules weren't written for you.

So let's start with the most basic fact of American economic life, the one that explains almost everything else.

The Shop Owners and the Gig Workers

There's a group inside the 99% that doesn't always get counted, and they should be, because they feel the squeeze from both ends: the small business owners.

The woman who runs the diner on the corner. The guy with the auto repair shop. The family that owns the hardware store that's been there since 1972. The barbershop, the laundromat, the independent pharmacy. These are not the 1%. Nobody's getting rich off a diner in Joplin. These are working people who took the biggest gamble there is — betting on themselves — and the system squeezes them just like it

squeezes their employees.

They pay the same insane health insurance premiums — KFF's 2025 survey put the average family premium at \$26,993, and small employers feel every dollar of it, because they don't have a thousand workers to spread the risk across. They pay commercial rents that climb every year. They get hit with credit card processing fees on every sale — a private tax levied by two or three giant payment networks, amounting to billions siphoned out of Main Street and into Wall Street every year. They compete against mega-corporations that got tax breaks they never saw, subsidies they never got, and bailouts they'd never be offered.

And yet, when the politicians talk about "the economy," they point at the stock market. The stock market is not the economy. The stock market is a scoreboard for the 1%. The economy is the diner owner deciding whether she can afford to give her cook a raise, the repair shop guy deciding whether to eat the cost of a part or pass it to a customer who can't afford it either. That's the real economy, and it lives and dies in the 99%.

Then there are the gig workers — the drivers, the deliverers, the freelancers, the task-rabbits. Millions of Americans now piece together a living from apps that call them "independent contractors," which is a fancy way of saying: no benefits, no overtime, no workers' comp, no unemployment insurance, and you supply the car, the gas, the phone, and the risk. The app takes its cut off the top — always off the top — and the worker gets what's left. It's sharecropping with a smartphone. And a lot of these workers are doing gig work *on top of* a full-time job, because the full-time job doesn't pay enough. The side hustle isn't a lifestyle choice. It's a second shift.

I'm not knocking the hustle. The hustle is honorable. What's dishonorable is an economy that *requires* it — where a full-time worker needs a second job to afford the basics, where the apps extract billions while the drivers can't afford an oil change. The gig economy didn't invent hard work. It invented a way to profit from hard work without paying for any of the protections that a century of labor struggle won.

So when I say the 99%, I mean the employee *and* the small employer. The waitress and the diner owner. The driver and the dispatcher. They're on the same side of the economic line, whether the politics of the moment admits it or not. The line isn't between labor and small business. The line is between the 99% — everyone who works for their money, whether they punch a clock or own the clock — and the 1%, who make money from everyone else's work.

Think about the owner-operator trucker — owns his rig, which means he owns the loan on it and every repair bill that comes with it. Or the franchise owner who bought into a big brand and discovered the corporation takes its cut off the top, sets the prices, controls the suppliers, and leaves her the risk. On paper they're "business owners." In practice they're workers with debt — squeezed by the same corporations, paying the same bills, one bad month from the same cliff. The 1% loves to count them as allies. The math says they're us.

That understanding is the foundation of everything else in this book. Because you cannot build a movement of the 99% if the 99% thinks it's three different groups with nothing in common. The waitress,

the diner owner, and the delivery driver have more in common with each other than any of them has with a billionaire — and the sooner we all see that clearly, the sooner things start to change.

The Great Decoupling: They Got the Productivity, You Got the Bill

For about thirty years after World War II, America had a deal. It wasn't perfect — plenty of people were shut out of it, and let's not pretend otherwise — but the deal was real: when the economy grew, workers' pay grew with it. Productivity went up, paychecks went up. You could feel the connection. Your grandfather got a raise when the company did well. That was normal. That was *expected*.

That deal broke around 1979. And it did not break on its own.

The Economic Policy Institute — a nonpartisan research outfit that has been tracking this for decades — runs the numbers every quarter, using the government's own data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Here is what their tracker shows: from the end of 1979 to the spring of 2026, net productivity in the American economy grew by roughly 93.7 percent. Workers are producing almost twice as much value per hour as they did when disco was still on the radio.

Hourly pay for a typical worker — meaning the 80-plus percent of the private-sector workforce who aren't managers or supervisors — grew nowhere close to that. Over that same stretch, typical pay grew at about 0.6 percent a year in real terms, while productivity grew at about 1.4 percent a year. The lines on the chart separate like a pair of scissors, and the blades have been opening for nearly fifty years.

Let me put that in dollars, because charts don't pay rent. The Economic Policy Institute calculates that if the pay of production and nonsupervisory workers had simply kept pace with productivity growth since 1979 — if the old deal had held — a typical worker's pay would be about **45 percent higher** today. That's roughly **\$30,000 a year** more for a full-time worker. Thirty thousand dollars. Every year. That's a down payment. That's college tuition. That's the emergency fund that means a busted transmission doesn't become a spiral.

Where did that thirty grand go? It didn't evaporate. It went upward — to corporate profits, to executive pay, to shareholders. The people at the top of the income ladder captured the gains from your increased productivity. You produced more. They kept the difference.

And nowhere is the split clearer than at the very top. The Economic Policy Institute's annual report on executive pay found that from 1978 to 2023, compensation for CEOs at America's largest companies shot up 1,085 percent — while a typical worker's pay rose just 24 percent. In 2023, those CEOs made 290 times what a typical worker made. Back in 1965, it was 21 times. The AFL-CIO's 2024 report put the average S&P 500 chief executive at \$18.9 million in total compensation — a 285-to-1 ratio over the median worker. I'm not saying nobody should get rich. I'm saying the deal broke: your productivity nearly doubled, your pay crawled, and the boss's pay went to the moon. That's not a market. That's a rigged scoreboard.

Now, I want to be fair about one thing, because fairness is what separates us from them. This isn't about hating rich people. This country was built by people who started with nothing and made something

— I respect that more than anyone. This is about a *deal* being broken. The deal was: we all row, and we all move forward together. The new deal is: you row, and they buy a bigger boat.

You feel that broken deal every time your grocery bill climbs and your raise — if you get one — doesn't cover it. You feel it when the company posts record profits and your department gets a pizza party instead of a raise. You feel it when you do the math and realize your dad supported a family of four on one paycheck in the '80s and you and your partner both work full time and still can't save.

That's the 99% experience. It doesn't matter what you look like or where you pray or who you voted for. The math is the math.

And it gets uglier the closer you look at the floor.

The federal minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour. It has been \$7.25 an hour since July of 2009 — seventeen years without a raise, the longest freeze since the minimum wage was created back in 1938. Thirty states and the District of Columbia have stepped in and set higher minimums on their own, because they could see what Washington wouldn't admit. But in the states that default to the federal floor — Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Texas, Georgia, and others — a full-time worker is still legally paid a wage set when the iPhone was two years old.

Run the inflation math and it's brutal: the Economic Policy Institute reported in 2026 that the federal minimum wage had fallen to its lowest inflation-adjusted value in 77 years. Read that again. The floor under American labor — the legal minimum the country says a worker's time is worth — has not been this weak since before most of our grandparents were born. Every year Congress does nothing, the floor quietly sinks a little further, and millions of people's pay sinks with it.

Now, somebody will say the minimum wage only affects teenagers flipping burgers. That's a lie that has been told so often people stopped checking it. The people working minimum-wage and near-minimum-wage jobs are adults — home health aides, childcare workers, retail clerks, food service workers, warehouse hands. They are disproportionately women. Disproportionately people of color. And they are 100 percent part of the 99%.

Hold those two facts side by side: the floor hasn't been this weak in 77 years, and the ceiling — the CEO's pay — has never been higher. That's not two separate stories. That's one story, told from opposite ends.

So that's the first shared reality: **we work more, produce more, and keep less of it than any generation in modern American history.** That is not a left-wing statement or a right-wing statement. It's an accounting statement. And it applies to almost everybody reading this book.

The Roof Over Your Head

Ask the 99% what keeps them up at night, and housing is always in the top three. Not abstract housing policy — *housing*. The place you sleep. The roof. The single biggest line item in almost every working family's budget, and the one that has been running away from wages for years.

The numbers tell the story plainly. According to Zillow's market data from the spring of 2025, the typical American home was worth about \$359,741. For a buyer putting 20 percent down — twenty percent, which on that home is roughly \$72,000 in cash, money most working people do not have lying in a drawer — the typical monthly mortgage payment ran about \$1,855. Zillow's economists calculated that the typical mortgage payment was up 108.8 percent since before the pandemic. Read that slowly: the monthly cost of buying the same typical house had more than doubled in about five years.

The National Association of Realtors reported that the national median price of an existing single-family home reached \$414,900 in the final quarter of 2025. And here's the detail that matters most: Zillow found that a mortgage payment on a typical home was eating up more than 30 percent of the median household's income — the line economists use to define a "housing burden," the point where the house starts owning you instead of the other way around. For first-time buyers, the Realtors' data showed payments consuming around 37 percent of a typical family's income.

Now translate that into a human life. A young couple in Springfield, Missouri — a teacher and a mechanic — doing everything right. Both working. No debt except the car. They sit down with a calculator and discover that the down payment alone would take them eight, ten years to save, because the rent they're paying right now eats the savings. So they keep renting. And the rent goes up again. This is not a story about irresponsibility. This is a story about arithmetic. The math doesn't work, and no amount of budgeting advice from a cable news host is going to change it.

Renters have it no better. Rents surged during the pandemic years and never came back down to earth. In city after city, working people are paying half their income — sometimes more — just to keep a roof overhead. The old rule was that housing should cost about a third of your pay. For millions of Americans, that rule is now a fantasy. They are choosing, every single month, between the rent and the dentist, the rent and the car repair, the rent and the groceries. And they are choosing rent, because you can skip a dentist appointment but you can't skip the landlord.

The cruelest part is the generational math. A generation ago, a working person could reasonably expect to own a home — not a mansion, a *home* — on one or two ordinary incomes. Today, homeownership is slipping out of reach for millions of people who did everything they were told to do. They got the job. They worked the hours. They saved what they could. And the goalpost moved so far that it left the stadium.

The 99% feel this in their bones. The warehouse supervisor who has lived in the same apartment for six years because moving would mean a higher deposit and first and last month's rent he can't front. The grandmother raising her grandkids in a house she bought in 1998 that she could never afford to buy today. The twenty-eight-year-old with a good job and a college degree who has quietly given up on ever owning anything and tries not to think about what that means for his kids.

None of this is because there aren't enough houses, or because Americans got lazy, or because of whatever scapegoat is being served up on tonight's outrage broadcast. It's because the economy was tilted — by policy, by design, by the people Chapters Two through Four introduced you to — so that the gains flow up and the costs flow down. Housing is just where the squeeze is most visible, because you can see it

from the street.

And notice who profits from the squeeze. Every rent hike is somebody's revenue. Every bidding war is somebody's windfall. The housing crisis isn't a natural disaster — it's a transfer, from the people who need a place to live to the people who own the places. The 99% pays the rent. The 1% collects it.

The Bill That Can Ruin You

If housing is the slow squeeze, healthcare is the trapdoor.

America spends more on healthcare than any other wealthy country on Earth, and it is not close. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reported in its 2025 *Health at a Glance* survey that the United States spends \$14,885 per person per year on health — more than twice the OECD average of \$5,967. Health spending eats up 17.2 percent of our entire economy, compared to an OECD average of 9.3 percent. We pay the most, by far, and every American who has ever opened a medical bill knows we are not getting the most.

Let me make that personal, because statistics about GDP don't make anybody angry the way a hospital bill does.

KFF — the nonprofit health research organization that tracks this stuff better than anyone — found in its 2025 Employer Health Benefits Survey that the average annual premium for employer-sponsored family health insurance hit **\$26,993** in 2025. Twenty-seven thousand dollars a year. For *insurance* — not care, just the right to have care covered. That's the third straight year premiums rose 6 percent or more, the first time that's happened in two decades. Of that \$27,000, the worker pays about \$6,850 straight out of their paycheck, and the employer pays the rest — money that, in a sane world, would be wages. For single coverage, the average premium was \$9,325, up 5 percent.

Nearly half the country — about 154 million people under 65 — gets health coverage through a job. So for a huge chunk of the 99%, "healthcare" means: your employer picks a plan, you pay thousands out of your paycheck for it, and then you *still* pay deductibles, copays, and coinsurance when you actually get sick. And if you change jobs, lose a job, or work for a small employer that can't afford to offer coverage, you're on your own in a system that was designed by insurance companies, for insurance companies.

The stories are endless because the system manufactures them. The insulin that costs a few dollars to make and hundreds of dollars to buy. The ambulance ride that costs more than the car that hit you. The family that does everything right — jobs, insurance, savings — and gets wiped out by a cancer diagnosis, because the copays alone are a second mortgage. Medical debt is the kind of debt that doesn't care about your politics. It doesn't ask who you voted for. It just ruins you.

And here's what makes it a 99% issue rather than a partisan one: almost everybody agrees the current arrangement is insane. We'll get to the polling in a minute, but think about it as a person for a second. Does anyone you know — anyone — defend the American healthcare system as it works today? Not the idea of healthcare. The *system*. The bills, the networks, the prior authorizations, the surprise charges, the drug prices. Nobody defends it. Nobody loves it. Everybody pays for it. That is about as close to unanimous as

this country gets.

The drug prices deserve their own moment, because they are the purest example of the whole rotten structure. Americans pay the highest prescription drug prices in the world — higher than Canadians, higher than Europeans, higher than almost everybody — for medicines that are often invented with American taxpayer-funded research and then sold back to Americans at the highest prices on the planet. The pharmaceutical lobby spends more money influencing Washington than almost any other industry. And the result is a country where people ration their pills, cut them in half, skip doses, or drive across a border to buy the same drug for a tenth of the price.

You don't need a political theory to understand that. You just need a pharmacy receipt.

The polling backs up what the receipts say. KFF found that about half of U.S. adults say it is difficult to afford health care costs, and one in four say they skipped or postponed care they needed in the past year because of the cost. One in five didn't fill a prescription because of the price. And this isn't a red-or-blue thing: at least seven in ten Democrats *and* seven in ten Republicans say they're worried about being able to afford health care services, and even more worry about surprise bills. A 2026 KFF poll found health care had become Americans' top financial worry — ahead of groceries, utilities, and housing. When the country agrees this hard on something and nothing changes, you're not looking at a disagreement. You're looking at a system that answers to someone else.

And the debt follows you. A medical bill doesn't just empty your savings — it sits on your credit for years and decides whether you can rent an apartment or buy a car. It's the only kind of debt you can take on without signing up for it, without choosing it, without doing a single thing wrong. Nobody budgets for cancer.

What We Actually Agree On

Now we come to the most important section in this chapter, and maybe in the whole book. Because everything you've read so far — the wages, the housing, the healthcare — is the shared *condition* of the 99%. This section is about the shared *conviction*.

Every day, the loudest voices in American life tell you that this country is hopelessly, irreconcilably divided. That your neighbors are your enemies. That the other side — whichever side that is — is evil, stupid, or both. The cable channels run on it. The social media algorithms are tuned to it. The political consultants get rich on it. Chapter Seven showed you how the division machine works and who profits from it.

So let me show you what the country actually thinks, when pollsters ask plain questions about plain things. Not the culture-war fireworks. The kitchen table.

Term limits for Congress. The Pew Research Center asked Americans in 2023 whether they favor limiting the number of terms members of Congress can serve. **Eighty-seven percent** said yes. Eighty-seven. In the same survey, 79 percent said they want an age limit for Congress. You could not get 87 percent of Americans to agree that water is wet on some cable news panels, but on term limits — on the

simple idea that nobody should hold a congressional seat for forty years — the country speaks with one voice.

Banning congressional stock trading. A 2023 Nielsen survey found that **86 percent of Americans** support banning members of Congress from trading individual companies' stocks. Research out of UC San Diego found that more than 86 percent of *both* Democrats and Republicans support the ban. Think about what that means: in a country where the two parties can't agree on what day it is, nearly nine in ten people — across every party line — agree that the people who write the laws shouldn't be day-trading on the inside information those laws create. A *New York Times* analysis found that 97 members of Congress made trades between 2019 and 2021 that could have been conflicts of interest based on their committee assignments. The public sees it. The public hates it. The public agrees.

Lower drug prices. KFF's tracking poll found that **83 percent of Americans** — including 91 percent of Democrats, 85 percent of independents, and 76 percent of Republicans — support letting the federal government negotiate lower prescription drug prices. And 93 percent of the public said that even with lower prices, drug companies would still make plenty of money to fund research. The agreement survives even when pollsters read people the pharmaceutical industry's counterarguments. People hear both sides and still land in the same place: the prices are a rip-off, and everybody knows it.

The government has too much power. Gallup's September 2025 survey found that **62 percent** of Americans say the federal government has too much power — the highest that figure has been in years. That's not a left or right finding. That's a *people versus the machine* finding.

Congress itself. In a Gallup poll conducted in the spring of 2026, approval of Congress had fallen to **10 percent**, with disapproval at **86 percent** — tying the record high for the institution. Gallup has been asking this question since 1974. In all that time, in all those congresses, under presidents of both parties, the American people have almost never thought less of the legislature than they do right now. When 86 percent of the country disapproves of the people in charge, the problem is not the people. The problem is the people in charge.

The list keeps getting longer the more you look. Here are four more — each one polled, each one bipartisan, each one ignored.

Money in politics. Pew Research Center found that 85 percent of Americans say the cost of political campaigns makes it hard for good people to run for office. Eighty percent say big campaign donors have too much influence on members of Congress, and 73 percent say the same about lobbyists. Eighty-one percent say members of Congress do a bad job of keeping their personal financial interests separate from their work. And 72 percent support limits on campaign spending. Here's the part that matters: Republicans and Democrats agree — 83 percent of Republicans and 80 percent of Democrats say big donors have too much influence. The only people who disagree are the people cashing the checks.

Corruption in government. An AP-NORC poll in early 2025 found that about two-thirds of Americans say corruption and inefficiency are "major problems" in the federal government — and a majority of Democrats agree with Republicans on that. About six in ten said it's a bad thing for a president

to rely on billionaires for advice about government policy. Not a partisan finding. A people-versus-the-machine finding.

A raise for the lowest-paid workers. Pew found that 62 percent of Americans favor raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour. And here's the detail that kills the "hopelessly divided" story: among the 38 percent who *oppose* \$15, most say they'd support a smaller increase. Almost nobody thinks \$7.25 — a wage set when the iPhone was two years old — is fine. The argument is about the number, not the direction.

Health care you can afford. About half of U.S. adults say it's difficult to afford health care costs, and one in four skipped or postponed needed care in the past year because of the price — that's KFF's polling, not a campaign ad. At least seven in ten Democrats and seven in ten Republicans say they're worried about affording health care services. On the thing that can bankrupt your family, the country is already united.

Now step back and look at that list. Term limits. Stock trading bans. Drug price negotiation. Too much government power. Throw-the-bums-out levels of congressional disapproval. Money out of politics. Corruption cleaned up. A raise at the bottom. Health care you can afford. These are not fringe positions. They are not radical positions. They are the *mainstream* positions — the actual, polled, documented mainstream of American opinion. On the issues that touch ordinary life, this country is not divided. It is overwhelmingly, almost comically united.

So why does nothing happen?

That's the question the whole book is building toward, and by now you know the answer. Nothing happens because the system is not designed to respond to the 99%. It is designed to respond to the money. Term limits poll at 87 percent and go nowhere, because the people who would have to pass term limits are the people term limits would remove. The stock trading ban polls at 86 percent and stalls for years, because the traders are the legislators. Drug negotiation polls at 83 percent and gets fought tooth and nail, because the pharmaceutical lobby is one of the biggest spenders in Washington.

The division you see on television is real in the sense that people feel it. But on the things that actually determine whether your life works — your pay, your rent, your doctor bill, whether the people in power are on the take — there is no division. There is a consensus. And there is a system engineered to ignore it.

That is the most hopeful and the most infuriating fact in American politics. Hopeful, because it means we are not each other's enemies. Infuriating, because it means the enemies are the ones telling us we are.

The People Who Keep the Lights On

Let me tell you what I see from the driver's seat.

I drive a cab. Night shift, mostly. I've been doing it long enough that I can read a city by its streetlights. And here's what I know that the think tanks and the cable panels will never tell you: this country runs on people whose names you will never know, doing work that never makes the news, for pay that never matches the value.

The 99% is not an abstraction. It's the woman who cleans the hospital at 4 a.m. so the surgeons walk into a sterile room. It's the guy on the garbage truck in January, when the wind cuts through everything, because the trash doesn't stop for weather. It's the warehouse worker whose scanner tracks every step she takes and whose back will give out by fifty. It's the electrician, the plumber, the roofer, the welder — the skilled tradespeople who literally built everything you're looking at right now. It's the teacher buying classroom supplies with her own money. It's the home health aide bathing somebody else's mother with more tenderness than most people show their own family. It's the short-order cook, the farmhand, the bus driver, the nursing home worker, the retail clerk who stands for eight hours and smiles at people who don't smile back.

It's the truckers. God bless the truckers. Everything you own — your phone, your couch, your kid's medicine, the food in your fridge — was on a truck. There are more than three million truck drivers in this country, and when they stop, America stops. They sleep in cabs, eat at truck stops, miss birthdays and ball games, and keep the shelves stocked. Nobody throws a parade for them. The economy would collapse in a week without them.

It's the night-shift people — the ones I share the dark hours with. The convenience store clerk. The security guard. The bakery worker whose shift starts at 2 a.m. so your bread is fresh. The hospital staff. The cab drivers and the rideshare drivers and the delivery drivers, ferrying the city around while it sleeps. There is a whole America that only exists between midnight and dawn, and it is kept alive by people working jobs the daytime world barely notices.

And it's the caregivers — mostly women, mostly underpaid, often invisible — raising the next generation and tending the last one. The single mother working two jobs who still makes it to the parent-teacher conference. The grandmother raising grandkids on a fixed income. The stay-at-home parent whose labor doesn't show up in the GDP but without whom nothing else works. The sand in the gears of every economic model is a person, usually a woman, doing unpaid or underpaid work that holds families together.

It's the school bus driver up at five in the morning, responsible for forty kids' lives on icy roads, for pay that qualifies her for the same assistance programs she drives past on her route. It's the lineman out in a storm at 2 a.m., climbing a pole in the rain so your lights come back on, knowing his own family is sitting in the dark like everyone else's. It's the paramedic who has seen people on the worst day of their lives, every day, for years — and still shows up gentle. It's the school custodian who knows every kid's name and mops up after all of them. It's the hotel housekeeper, the dishwasher, the meatpacker, the call-center worker reading from a script while a timer counts her seconds.

None of these people will ever be on a magazine cover. None of them will ever testify before Congress — Congress doesn't take their calls. But take any one of them out of the picture and the country notices within a week. Take the donor money out of politics and the country wouldn't miss it for a day. That's the whole argument of this book in one sentence.

I want to say something about dignity, because this country has a sickness around it. We have been trained — by television, by movies, by the whole status machine — to rank human worth by income. The

surgeon matters; the orderly doesn't. The CEO matters; the janitor doesn't. That's a lie, and it's a lie that serves the 1% beautifully, because if you believe your worth is your wage, you'll never ask why the wage is rigged.

Here is the truth from the driver's seat: there is more honor in an honest day's work than in a lifetime of moving money around. The person who unclogs the drain at midnight has done more for humanity that day than the hedge fund manager who made a million dollars betting on which way a stock would twitch. The nurse's aide who holds a dying man's hand is doing sacred work. The farmer who gets up before dawn to feed a country that barely knows he exists is doing sacred work. The cab driver who gets the nurse home safe at 3 a.m. is doing sacred work.

Work is not just a paycheck. Work is how most of us participate in the world, how we contribute, how we earn our place. The 99% understand this in their bones, because most of us have done the hard, unglamorous, necessary work. We know what it costs. We know what it's worth. And we know — we *know* — that the people who do the most essential work are paid the least, while the people who do the most abstract work are paid the most. That inversion is not natural. It was built. And what was built can be unbuilt.

There's another thing I see from the driver's seat, and it matters for everything this book is trying to do. I pick up everybody. The Black grandmother going to church. The white construction worker heading to the job site. The Latino family going to the quinceañera. The college kid, the veteran, the preacher, the bartender. And you know what? In the back of that cab, people talk. They tell the driver things they don't tell the pollsters. And across every race, every neighborhood, every accent, I hear the same things: the rent's too high, the job doesn't pay enough, the doctor bill was a nightmare, the kids deserve better, and nobody in Washington gives a damn about people like us.

Nobody in Washington gives a damn about people like us. I've heard that sentence — or some version of it — from Republicans, Democrats, and independents. From Black folks and white folks and brown folks. From the city and the country. That is the 99% talking. That is the consensus of the back seat.

The division machine needs you to believe your fellow passengers are the problem. The guy in the back seat next to you — different skin, different vote, different church — is not the reason your rent went up. The reason your rent went up is sitting in a boardroom, and the reason nothing changes is sitting in a congressional office, and both of them are counting on you staying mad at the passenger instead of looking at the driver of the system.

The Myth of the Hopeless Divide

Let's name the myth directly, because it's the single biggest obstacle to everything this book proposes.

The myth says: America is split down the middle into two tribes that hate each other, want opposite things, and can never agree. Red versus blue. Us versus them. Fifty-fifty, forever, amen.

The reality says: on the issues that determine whether ordinary life works, the country agrees by margins that would make any election a landslide. Eighty-seven percent for term limits. Eighty-six percent

against congressional stock trading. Eighty-three percent for negotiating drug prices. Eighty-six percent disapproving of Congress. Sixty-two percent saying the federal government has too much power.

If America were really split fifty-fifty on everything, those numbers would be impossible. You cannot get 87 percent of a hopelessly divided country to agree on lunch, let alone on term limits. A country where 87 percent agree on term limits isn't divided. A country where eight in ten Republicans and eight in ten Democrats say donors have too much influence isn't divided. What's divided is the television screen — and the screen is a business. The agreement is real. The division is manufactured — or at least, it is wildly exaggerated by the people who profit from it.

Now, to be honest with you — and this book is nothing if not honest — there *are* real disagreements in this country. People genuinely differ on abortion, on guns, on immigration, on the role of government, on a lot of things. I'm not going to pretend those disagreements don't exist or don't matter. They matter to people, and in a free country, people get to disagree.

But notice something about the disagreements that dominate our politics: they are almost never about money. They are about values, identity, culture, and fear — the things that make for great television and terrible policy. The parties will fight to the death on camera about a flag or a slogan or a bathroom, and then quietly, together, off camera, they'll make sure the carried-interest loophole survives another year and the defense contractors get paid and the drug companies keep their prices. The culture war is the show. The money is the business. And the business is bipartisan.

This is the oldest trick in the political book, and both parties play it. Keep the 99% divided into teams, keep the teams mad at each other, and while they're fighting, keep the machinery running. As long as the truck driver in Ohio thinks his enemy is the teacher in Oregon — and the teacher in Oregon thinks her enemy is the truck driver in Ohio — neither of them is looking at the people who wrote the tax code, gutted the unions, shipped the factories overseas, financialized the housing market, and turned healthcare into a wealth-extraction machine.

The 1% doesn't care which team you're on. The 1% cares that you're on a team. Because teams fight each other, and a country that won't fight together can't change anything together.

Here's the reality the myth is designed to hide: the Black nurse and the white electrician and the Latino warehouse worker and the Asian restaurant owner have the same enemy, and it isn't each other. Their enemy is a system that takes their productivity and hands the gains to someone else. Their enemy is a political class that ignores 87-percent consensus the way you'd ignore a telemarketer. Their enemy is an economy where the people who do the essential work can't afford the essentials.

When the 99% finally sees that — really sees it, all at once, across every line the dividers drew for us — the game changes. Not through violence. Not through hate. Through the most powerful force in a democracy: an overwhelming majority that knows what it wants and refuses to be divided.

What We Do With This

So here we are. The 99%. Three hundred and thirty million people who work, who struggle, who keep this country running, who agree on the big kitchen-table issues by margins that pollsters dream about — and who are told, daily, that we are hopelessly divided and powerless.

We are not powerless. We are the *majority*. An overwhelming one. The only reason we don't act like it is that we've never been organized as what we actually are.

Think about the math of it. The 1% is about three million people. The 99% is about 330 million. In any fair fight, in any real democracy, 330 million beats three million every single time. The only way three million wins is if the 330 million never show up as one force — if they're split into teams, kept busy, kept scared, kept tired, kept divided. And look at what showing up actually takes. Not a revolution. Not a party — we've tried parties, and the parties work for the money. It takes the 99% doing the simplest thing in a democracy: recognizing itself. When the nurse and the trucker and the teacher and the cook understand they're the same team, the teams the machine built start to look like what they are — costumes. That division is exactly what's been done to us, on purpose, for decades.

But here's what gives me hope, and it's not wishful thinking — it's arithmetic plus evidence. The evidence is in this chapter: we already agree. The consensus is already there, hiding in plain sight in poll after poll. We don't need to be convinced. We need to be *connected* — to each other, across the lines, around the things we already share.

The next chapter is called "The Independent Majority," and it's about what happens when the 99% stops renting its political power to two parties that serve the 1% and starts exercising it directly. But before we get there, I want to leave you with the heart of this one.

You are not alone in this. Whatever your job, whatever your zip code, whatever your color or creed or vote — if you work for a living and the system feels rigged, you are part of the biggest "we" in American life. The nurse, the trucker, the teacher, the cook, the aide, the driver, the clerk, the farmer, the builder, the cleaner, the caregiver. The people who keep the lights on.

They told us we were divided. The polls say we're united. They told us we were powerless. The math says we're the majority. They told us nothing can change. But nothing changes until the 99% decides it does — together, lawfully, peacefully, at the ballot box and in the public square, with the quiet confidence of people who finally understand their own strength.

We are the 99%. It's time we started acting like it.

Chapter 9: The Independent Majority

I drive a cab for a living. That means I get a front-row seat to America that most politicians never see — the back seat, at two in the morning, when people finally tell the truth.

Republicans get in my cab. Democrats get in my cab. And you know what both of them tell me when the meter's running and nobody's recording? The same thing.

"I can't stand my own party."

I've heard it from a union electrician who votes Democrat every November and curses them the whole ride home. I've heard it from a small business owner with a Trump sticker on his truck who tells me the Republicans sold him out. I've heard it from nurses, truckers, teachers, waitresses, retired soldiers, college kids, grandmothers. Different accents, different skin, different paychecks — same sentence.

Neither one of them speaks for me.

Now here's what I want you to understand, and I want you to sit with it for a minute, because everything in this chapter hangs on it:

Those people in my back seat aren't the fringe. They're the majority.

Not a slim majority. Not a technicality. The largest political bloc in the United States of America — bigger than the Republican Party, bigger than the Democratic Party, bigger than either one has ever dreamed of being — is the people who refuse to join either one.

Gallup has been asking Americans the same simple question since 1988: do you identify as a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent? And in January 2026, Gallup released its numbers for the year 2025, and they were a bombshell: **a record-high 45% of American adults identified as political independents**. Forty-five percent. Meanwhile, exactly 27% called themselves Democrats and exactly 27% called themselves Republicans.

Read that again. Forty-five to twenty-seven to twenty-seven. It isn't close. It's a blowout.

This wasn't some phone poll of four hundred people on a Tuesday afternoon. Gallup interviewed more than 13,000 American adults, spread across the whole year of 2025. And the trend behind the number is even more devastating than the number itself. Before 2011, independents had *never* hit 40% in Gallup's tracking. Since 2011, they've been at 40% or higher nearly every single year. They tied the old record of 43% in 2014, 2023, and 2024 — and then they smashed it in 2025.

Meanwhile, both parties are scraping along near their historic lows. The Democrats' record low was 27%, set in 2023 — they're sitting right on it. The Republicans' record low was 25%, set in 2013, and they've been parked around 28% for six years. Gallup's own analysts said it plainly: **both parties are near their historic low points in party identification**.

Now let me show you how we got here, because the timeline is the tell. When Gallup started measuring party identification by telephone in 1988, it was practically a dead heat: 35% Democrat, 30%

Republican, 35% independent. That 35.6% Democratic figure turned out to be the party's all-time high — they've never touched it again. Through the nineties, independents kept climbing, hitting 39.1% in 1995 — a record that stood for sixteen years. Then came 2011, and the dam broke: independents hit 40% and, except for two presidential-election-year dips, never came back down. Not once. Every time the number dipped in a presidential year, it bounced back higher. Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three — tying the record in 2014, 2023, and 2024 — and then the all-time high of 45% in 2025.

That's not a blip. That's a thirty-year migration. Two generations of Americans have looked at the two parties, weighed them, and walked away — and the younger the American, the more likely they are to have left.

And it's not just polls. The registration rolls — the actual names on the actual books — tell the same story. Ballotpedia tallied the states that track party registration, and as of 2025, registered independents and third-party voters combined (39.2 million) have outnumbered registered Republicans (38 million) since 2016. Democrats still lead on paper with 44.9 million — but look at which direction the people are moving. In Pennsylvania, NBC News found that between 2021 and 2024, some 160,000 registered Democrats switched to the Republicans — and another 83,000 walked away from *both* parties to register unaffiliated. Only 58,000 Republicans moved the other way. The people aren't just telling pollsters they're done with the parties. They're filing the paperwork.

And in most years since Gallup started doing this by telephone in 1988 — going on four decades now — independents have been the largest political group in the country. Let that sink in. For the better part of forty years, the biggest "party" in America has been *neither party*, and the political establishment has spent those forty years pretending otherwise.

At one point, in a single month of Gallup's tracking, independent identification hit 51% — an outright, absolute majority of the country. Half the nation, plus some, looked at the two parties and said: *no thanks*.

This chapter is about those people. It's about who they are, why they walked away, how much power they actually hold — and why the two parties are terrified of the day they figure that out.

The Great Walkout

People didn't become independents by accident. They walked out. And they walked out for reasons.

Start with the young, because they're the leading edge of the whole story. In 2025, **56% of Generation Z adults identified as independents** — more than half. Millennials weren't far behind at 54%. More than four in ten Gen Xers were independents. Compare that to one-third or less of baby boomers, and about a quarter of the Silent Generation.

Now, the old-timers in politics will tell you this is normal. "Young people always say they're independent," they say, "and then they grow up and pick a party." That's how it used to work. The Silent Generation and the boomers did exactly that — they aged into partisanship like it was a mortgage.

But Gen X and the millennials broke the pattern, and that's what has the party bosses losing sleep. Gallup found that 44% of Generation X identifies as independent today — **unchanged from three decades ago**, when the first wave of them was entering adulthood. They were supposed to settle down and pick a team. They never did. And the millennials? The majority of them, 52%, are independent, and that number has *increased by five percentage points in each of the past two decades*. They aren't drifting toward the parties as they age. They're drifting away.

Each younger generation, at every stage of life, has been more independent than the one before it. 56% of Gen Z today, versus 47% of millennials back in 2012 when they were the young ones, versus 40% of Gen X back in 1992. It's a staircase, and every step goes in the same direction: away from the parties.

Why? Because the young ones watched the whole thing happen in real time. They watched a financial crisis where the banks got bailed out and their parents got foreclosed on. They watched two decades of wars that both parties voted for. They watched the rent go up, the wages stay flat, and the politicians get rich. They didn't read about the corruption in a history book — they lived through it with a phone in their hand, fact-checking the lies in real time. The parties think the young will "grow out of it." The young think the parties are the ones who never grew up.

So who are these people, really? Not what the parties say they are — what they actually are.

First, they're not confused. The Unite America Institute polled the independents who get locked out of closed primaries, and what they found should embarrass every pundit who calls independents "low-information voters." Forty-eight percent of them don't lean toward either party at all — they're genuinely unattached. Sixty percent call themselves moderates. And here's the kicker: **70% of them say both parties are too extreme**. That's not confusion. That's a verdict.

Second, they're not some narrow slice of the country. They're everybody. Forty-six percent of these excluded independents have *always* been independent — they never belonged to a party in the first place. Twenty-six percent used to be Democrats. Twenty-seven percent used to be Republicans. Do the math: the two parties bled out roughly equally. This isn't a left-wing exodus or a right-wing exodus. It's a *people* exodus.

And third — and this is the one the parties really don't want you thinking about — they're the ones the system was built to ignore. Pew Research found that **25% of American adults say neither party represents the interests of people like them, even somewhat well**. One in four Americans. Not "my party could do better." *Neither party represents me at all*.

Pew also found that only 41% of Americans have a favorable view of the Democratic Party, and only 37% have a favorable view of the Republican Party. Think about that. In a country where you're told these are the only two choices, *neither one can get four in ten Americans to say something nice about them*. A restaurant with those approval ratings would be out of business by spring.

Now, the parties have an answer for all of this, and you've heard it a thousand times: "Oh, most independents are really partisans. They just won't admit it. When you push them, they lean."

It's true that when Gallup pushes independents to say which party they lean toward, the 45% breaks down into roughly 20% Democratic leaners, 15% Republican leaners, and 10% who lean toward neither. And when you fold the leaners in, Democrats hold a 47-to-42 edge overall. The parties love this math, because it lets them pretend the independent majority is an illusion.

But here's what that math actually tells you. Pew dug into the leaners and found something the parties don't put in their fundraising emails: huge numbers of these people lean toward a party mainly because **they can't stand the other one**. Their loyalty isn't love — it's fear and disgust. They're not *for* the Democrats or *for* the Republicans. They're *against* the alternative, and they've been herded into a camp by a system that tells them there's nowhere else to go.

That's not a party base. That's a hostage situation.

And even the leaners know the system is rotten. Nearly half of all independents — 48%, including 53% of Democratic leaners and 48% of Republican leaners — say they often wish there were more political parties to choose from. Even the people standing closest to the two parties are looking at the door.

So why did they leave? Ask them and you'll hear the same answers I hear in my cab at 2 AM. The parties stopped representing people and started representing donors. The parties stopped solving problems and started performing for cameras. The parties stopped being vehicles for the people's will and became machines for their own survival — and everybody with eyes can see it.

Gallup asked Americans straight up, in September 2025: do the Republican and Democratic parties do an adequate job of representing the American people, or do they do such a poor job that a third major party is needed? **Sixty-two percent said a third party is needed.** Only 30% said the two parties do an adequate job. And among independents? Seventy-four percent said a third party is needed. Support for a third party has been hovering near 60% or higher since 2013. This isn't a mood. It's a consensus.

People didn't walk out because they're apathetic. They walked out because they're paying attention.

2024: The Year the Independents Showed Their Teeth

If you want to know who actually decides elections in this country, don't look at the party conventions with their balloons and their chanting delegates. Look at the exit polls from November 2024.

Edison Research, which has been running exit polls since 2004, reported something that had never happened before: **self-identified independents made up 34% of the voters who showed up — tied with Republicans and bigger than the Democrats' 32%.** For the first time in the history of Edison's exit polling, independents outnumbered one of the two major parties at the ballot box. And the independent share of the electorate was up eight full points from 2020, when it sat at 26%.

Let me translate that into plain English. In the most consequential election of our lifetimes — the one where both parties spent billions of dollars screaming that the republic itself was at stake — more than a third of the people who voted refused to wear either team's jersey. And there were more of them than there were Democrats.

That's not a swing bloc. That's the *deciding* bloc. In a country split nearly 50-50 between the two parties, the 34% in the middle doesn't just influence the outcome. They *are* the outcome. Every presidential election, every Senate majority, every House majority runs through them.

And 2024 proved it in the most dramatic way possible — because the independents didn't behave the way either party expected.

Nationally, the Edison exit poll showed independents breaking narrowly for Kamala Harris, 50% to 45% for Donald Trump. But that national number hides the real story. In the battleground states that actually decided the presidency, independents went for Trump — and that's what put him back in the White House. Trump improved his standing with independents by four points compared to 2020.

But here's the part that should make every party strategist break out in a cold sweat: **the same independent voters who helped elect Trump in those states turned around and elected Democrats in key Senate races — in Arizona and Michigan, among others.** A Republican won the presidency in a state while a Democrat won a Senate seat in the same state, on the same ballot, on the same day. The only way that happens is if a huge chunk of voters looked at each race individually and voted for the *person*, not the party.

It didn't stop there. In Wisconsin, voters reelected Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin on the same day they voted for Donald Trump for president — the first time since 1968 that Wisconsin split its Senate and presidential votes between the parties. In North Carolina, they voted for Trump — and elected Democrat Josh Stein as governor by nearly 15 points, the largest gubernatorial margin in the state in 44 years. Exit polls found Stein won independent voters by 23 percentage points.

Race by race, office by office, millions of Americans split their tickets — the unmistakable fingerprint of voters who don't belong to anybody. They're not voting for a team. They're voting for the person. And neither party knows how to stop it, because both of them built their entire strategy on the idea that you'd never do that.

That's what independents do. Arizona State University's Center for an Independent and Sustainable Democracy studied the 2024 results and put it bluntly: independent voting behavior can't be predicted from party loyalty, because it isn't driven by party loyalty. It's shaped by the candidates, the political climate, and what's actually happening in people's lives. The analysts noted that campaigns are increasingly focused on courting these voters because they will, in the near future, definitively make up the largest voting share in national elections.

Read that again: *the largest voting share in national elections*. Not someday in theory. In the near future. The trend lines all point the same way.

Pew Research's validated-voter analysis of 2024 found that independents including leaners split dead even — 48% for Harris, 48% for Trump. Four years earlier, that same group favored Joe Biden by 9 points. That's a 9-point swing in the bloc that decides everything, in a single cycle. And PRRI's post-election survey found independents voting 53% for Harris and 44% for Trump — with a meaningful slice refusing both.

Now compare that to the partisans. In 2024, 95% of Republicans voted for Trump and 95% of Democrats voted for Harris — identical to 2020. The parties' bases are locked in concrete. They don't move. They're not persuadable. They're the floor, not the ceiling.

So when the talking heads spend election night marveling at some county in Pennsylvania or some suburb in Georgia, understand what they're really marveling at: **the independents made the call, and neither party controlled them.**

This is the electoral math the two parties understand perfectly — and it's why they spend billions of dollars every cycle on one obsessive project: making sure the independent majority never figures out it's a majority.

Because here's the nightmare scenario for both parties. Not that independents vote Republican. Not that independents vote Democrat. Both parties can live with losing an election — they've both done plenty of it. The nightmare is independents *stopping the game entirely*. The nightmare is 45% of the country looking around, realizing they outnumber both parties combined, and deciding to act like it.

Everything the parties do — every dollar, every ad, every scare tactic — is designed to prevent that realization.

Why They're Terrified of You

Let me tell you what the Republican and Democratic parties actually are, underneath all the flags and the slogans. They're two private organizations — and I want you to really hear that word, *private* — that have captured the public machinery of American democracy. They write the ballot access laws. They run the debate commissions. They draw the district lines. They decide who gets to vote in the primaries that, in most districts, are the only elections that matter.

And they both know the same secret: **their survival depends on the independents never getting organized.**

Think about it from their perspective. The Republican base is about 27% of the country. The Democratic base is about 27% of the country. Neither one can win a national election alone — not even close. They *need* the independents. Every cycle, both parties spend staggering sums of money — and as we've covered in this book, we're talking about billions in campaign funds, super PAC money, and dark money — on a single mission: herding enough independents into their corral to get past 50%.

And watch what happens the moment an independent threatens to actually win instead of just being herded. In 2024, Democratic Party lawyers filed challenge after challenge to keep third-party and independent candidates off state ballots — not because those candidates were unqualified, but because they might pull votes away from the machine. Republican lawyers have done the exact same thing everywhere a challenger threatened them from their side. Two parties, one shared terror: a ballot with more than two real choices on it.

That's the tell. They don't fear independents who stay home. They fear independents who show up organized.

They don't need you to love them. They don't even need you to like them. They just need you scared enough of the other side to hold your nose and vote for them. That's the whole business model. Fear of the other team is the product, and you're the customer whether you buy it or not.

This is why both parties, the moment an independent candidate starts gaining real traction, react with identical panic. It doesn't matter if the candidate is left, right, or center. The response is always the same: *spoiler. Wasted vote. You're helping the enemy.* The Republicans said it about every third-party challenger from their right. The Democrats said it with special venom in 2000, in 2016, and every cycle since. Different jerseys, same playbook.

Because an independent candidate who can actually win doesn't just threaten one party's chances in one election. They threaten the entire duopoly — the arrangement where two private organizations take turns holding power while agreeing, behind closed doors, never to let a third player at the table. The parties will fight each other to the death over *which one of them* gets to drive the car. What they will never tolerate is someone suggesting we don't need their car at all.

And notice how they do it. They don't argue that the independent candidate is wrong on the issues. They argue that voting your conscience is *dangerous*. They've turned the most basic act of democracy — voting for the person you actually believe in — into something you're supposed to feel guilty about. Gallup found that nearly six in ten Americans are highly concerned that voting for a third-party candidate would mean wasting their vote on a losing candidate or helping elect their least-preferred candidate. That fear wasn't an accident. It was manufactured, over decades, by the two organizations that benefit from it.

Here's the thing they don't want you doing the math on: **if everyone who says "I'd vote independent but I don't want to waste my vote" actually voted independent, the independent would win in a landslide.** The "wasted vote" is the most successful scam in American politics. It's a spell, and it only works as long as you believe in it. The moment enough people stop believing, it evaporates — because the votes were always there. The majority was always there.

The parties also know something else about you that you might not know about yourself: you're not actually that divided. The whole country is told, every single day, that Americans are split into two warring tribes who can't agree on anything. But the independents — the actual majority — keep telling pollsters the opposite. Seventy percent of the independents locked out of closed primaries say *both parties are too extreme*. Sixty percent call themselves moderates. They trust Democrats more on healthcare and Republicans more on the economy. They're not ideologues. They're pragmatists. They want the thing to *work*.

A self-aware independent majority wouldn't be a third tribe at war with the other two. It would be the grown-ups walking into a room full of screaming children and taking the car keys away. That's what terrifies them. Not that you'll join the other side — that you'll stop playing their game.

The Math That Rules Everything

Now let me show you the arithmetic the party bosses do in private — the math that explains every dollar they spend and every lie they tell.

Start with the bases. In 2024, 95% of Republicans voted for Trump and 95% of Democrats voted for Harris — the exact same lockstep loyalty as 2020. Pew found the same pattern. The partisan bases do not move. They are bedrock. Roughly 27% of the country on each side, immovable, voting the party line in their sleep.

Now look at the country those two bedrocks are sitting in. It's split functionally 50-50. Neither bedrock is anywhere near a majority. So every election — *every single one* — is decided by the only voters who can still be persuaded: the independents.

This is the open secret of American politics. The two parties don't campaign to convince each other. They campaign to capture the middle. Every "swing voter" ad, every "moderate" costume a candidate puts on in October, every poll-tested promise — it's all aimed at the 34% who showed up in 2024 without a party jersey, and the 45% who refuse to wear one at all.

And here's the part that should radicalize you, in the peaceful, democratic, voting-booth sense of the word: **the independents have already proven they can do this.** We have the receipts.

In 1992, a Texas businessman named Ross Perot ran for president as an independent — no party machine, no donor network, basically just a message and a stubborn streak. He won **18.9% of the popular vote — nearly 20 million votes** — the strongest showing by any non-major-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. He finished second in Maine with 30.4% and second in Utah with 27.3%. Exit polls showed his support came from everywhere: 53% moderates, 27% conservatives, 20% liberals. And the great "spoiler" myth the parties still chant? The exit data showed he drew about 38% of his vote from Bush voters and 38% from Clinton voters — he didn't steal the election from either side. He revealed a third side that was there all along.

Now, the parties will rush to tell you Perot "failed" because he won zero electoral votes. And technically, that's true — the Electoral College's winner-take-all machinery turned 20 million votes into nothing. But think about what that actually proves. It proves the *votes are there*. One man, with no party, no organization, and a fraction of the money the duopoly spends, pulled nearly one in five American voters away from both machines. Imagine what an organized independent movement — with ballot access, with candidates in every district, with the shared mindset this book is about — could do with the 45% that's already walked out.

Perot ran again in 1996 and still pulled 8% — after both parties spent four years telling the country he'd been a fluke. He wasn't.

And Perot isn't the only proof. The history books are full of independents who beat the machine — the parties just hope you never read those chapters.

In 1998, a former pro wrestler named Jesse Ventura ran for governor of Minnesota on Ross Perot's Reform Party ticket. The experts laughed. Then he beat both the Republican and the Democratic candidates with 37% of the vote — the only time the Reform Party ever won a major office anywhere in America, and the lowest winning share for a Minnesota governor since 1890. He didn't win a majority. He didn't need one. He just needed more votes than either machine could muster.

In Maine, Angus King was elected governor as an independent in 1994, then reelected in 1998 by one of the largest margins in the state's history. In 2012 he ran for the U.S. Senate as an independent and won with nearly 53% in a six-way race — Maine's first independent senator — and the voters have sent him back twice since, in 2018 and 2024. Two terms as governor, three terms in the Senate, never once wearing a party jersey.

Bernie Sanders — whatever you think of his politics, and plenty of the people this book speaks to disagree with him — won Vermont's House seat in 1990 as an independent, the first independent elected to the House in forty years. Then he won the Senate in 2006 and never left. He's now the longest-serving independent in congressional history.

In 2014, Bill Walker — a former Republican — ran for governor of Alaska as an independent on a unity ticket with a Democrat as his running mate, and beat the sitting Republican governor with 48.1% of the vote.

In December 2022, sitting U.S. Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona walked out of the Democratic Party and registered as an independent — while holding one of the hundred most powerful seats in the country.

And in 2024, a Nebraska mechanic and union leader named Dan Osborn ran for the U.S. Senate as an independent — no party, no machine — and took 46.5% of the vote against a sitting Republican senator, in a state Donald Trump carried by more than twenty points. It was the strongest showing by an independent Senate candidate in Nebraska history. He lost — but he scared the machine so badly they're still talking about it.

Notice the pattern: every one of them built something first — local credibility, a coalition, a reason to vote *for* them, not just anger at the other two. That's the difference between a protest and a movement.

Now, the parties will point at the presidency and say the Electoral College makes it impossible. They've got half a point: in 1980, John Anderson won 6.6% of the national vote — 5.7 million people — and got zero electoral votes for it, because winner-take-all erases support that isn't concentrated in one state. But the other half of the story is George Wallace in 1968: 13.5% of the vote and 46 electoral votes — the most recent time an outsider won electoral votes at all. The votes are there. The system just decides which ones count.

Perot was a preview. A trailer. The feature film hasn't played yet.

And the math keeps getting more favorable. Remember: the independent share of the actual voting electorate jumped from 26% in 2020 to 34% in 2024 — eight points in four years. The identification

numbers keep climbing: 43%, 43%, 45%. The young keep refusing to age into parties. Every trend line in American politics points in one direction, and it's away from the duopoly.

So when both parties tell you that voting independent is "throwing your vote away," understand what they're really saying. They're saying: *please don't do the math*. Because the math says the 27% cannot rule the 45% forever. The math says the only persuadable voters in a 50-50 country are the prize, and the prize is getting bigger every cycle. The math says the dam is cracking.

The "wasted vote" isn't a fact. It's a spell — and spells break the moment you stop believing in them.

The Playbook: Divided, Demoralized, Herded

So how do two parties, each backed by barely a quarter of the country, keep the other 45% — plus the millions who've checked out entirely — from taking power? They've got a playbook, and once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Step one: lock you out of the room where it happens.

In 22 states, if you're registered as an independent, you are legally barred from voting in the taxpayer-funded party primaries. Let me say that slower, because it's obscene: *elections that you pay for with your tax dollars, and you're not allowed to vote in them*.

The Unite America Institute counted it up for the 2024 cycle: **more than 23.5 million registered independents across 22 states were shut out of the presidential primaries or caucuses**, plus another 3.5 million voters registered with minor parties — **27 million Americans total**, told to sit down and shut up while the two private clubs picked the candidates everyone else would be allowed to choose from in November.

And because most congressional districts are drawn to be "safe" for one party or the other — according to the Unite America Institute, 85% of them were safe in 2022 — the primary is the *only* election that matters in those districts. The November election is a coronation. So when independents are barred from the primary, they're not missing some warm-up event. They're being locked out of the actual decision.

Oh, and the bill for those private club meetings? Taxpayers footed it. Open Primaries' research found that **closed presidential primaries cost taxpayers at least \$287.8 million** in the 2016 cycle alone — your money, funding elections you're forbidden to vote in. If a restaurant charged you for a meal and wouldn't let you in the door, you'd call it theft. When the parties do it, they call it democracy.

The exclusion is getting worse, not better. In the states with closed presidential primaries, the share of voters not registered with a major party has grown by nearly 20% since 2010. More and more Americans are walking away from the parties, and the parties' response is to deadbolt the doors a little tighter.

And the people being locked out aren't who the parties say they are. They're disproportionately *younger* than the general voting population. They're disproportionately *veterans* — people who served this country and came home to find out they're not trusted to vote in its primaries. The system takes their service and their taxes and gives them a ballot with the real choices already made.

Independent voters know it's rigged. They overwhelmingly call the exclusion unfair, they support opening the primaries, and they say they'd vote in primaries if they were allowed to. In Florida — one of only 14 states that still bars its 3.4 million independent voters from primaries — 96% of independents and 93% of Democrats support opening them. The people want in. The parties want them out.

Step two: keep you divided.

This is the one they work hardest at, because a divided majority is no majority at all. The entire media-entertainment-political complex runs on a single fuel: making the 45% see each other as the enemy instead of seeing the system that's robbing all of them.

Left independent versus right independent. Urban versus rural. Young versus old. Every wedge they can find, they hammer in deeper — because the moment a left-leaning independent nurse and a right-leaning independent trucker realize they agree on 80% of what matters — the corruption, the money, the fact that neither party represents them — the game is over.

Notice what the parties never do: they never run on the things independents actually agree on. Cleaning up corruption. Getting the money out. Term limits. Ending the insider trading. Making the system fair. There's a reason — those are the issues that would *unite* the independent majority, and unity is the one thing the duopoly can't survive.

Step three: keep you demoralized.

"You can't win." "It's always been two parties." "You're throwing your vote away." "Be realistic."

Demoralization is quieter than division, but it's just as deliberate. Every election cycle, the message rains down from every screen: the only serious candidates are the Republican and the Democrat, the only serious choice is which one you fear less, and anyone who tells you different is naive.

But look at the numbers again. Congress — the institution both parties run together — has an approval rating that has touched **10%, while disapproval has hit 86%, tying the record high**. Nine out of ten Americans disapprove of the job Congress is doing. And yet we're told the only realistic option is to keep electing the same two parties' candidates to it. That's not realism. That's learned helplessness, taught by the people who profit from it.

Step four: herd you back into a camp.

This is the harvest. After locking you out, dividing you, and demoralizing you, both parties spend the final months of every election cycle running the same operation: scare the independents home.

The Republicans tell their-leaning independents the Democrats will destroy the country. The Democrats tell their-leaning independents the Republicans will destroy the country. Both of them are selling the same product — fear of the other side — and the price is your vote. Not your enthusiasm. Not your belief. Just your vote, extracted under duress, counted the same as a true believer's.

And it works just well enough, every time, to keep the duopoly alive. Not because independents love the parties — remember, only about four in ten Americans can even say something favorable about either

one — but because the alternative has been made to feel impossible.

That's the playbook. Lock you out. Divide you. Demoralize you. Herd you. It's worked for decades.

It's starting to stop working.

What's Missing

Here's the honest question, and I want to be straight with you about it: if independents are the biggest bloc in the country, if 45% of Americans have walked away from the parties, if 62% say a third party is needed and 74% of independents agree — why hasn't the independent majority taken power already?

Because a majority without three things is just a crowd. And the independent majority is missing all three.

What's missing, first, is organization.

The Republican Party has county chairs in nearly every county in America. The Democratic Party has the same. They have voter files, donor lists, volunteer networks, legal teams, and a hundred years of institutional muscle memory for how to get a candidate on a ballot and get voters to the polls.

Independents have... what? Poll numbers. Sentiment. A shared eye-roll at the state of things. That's not nothing — it's the raw material of everything — but raw material isn't a machine. You can't beat an organization with a mood. The parties know this. It's why they're not actually afraid of your *opinions*. They're afraid of your opinions *getting organized*.

And let's be honest about what organization actually means, because it's not glamorous. It means somebody in every county who knows how to file the paperwork. It means a list of volunteers you can call on a Tuesday night. It means candidates who don't have to build a campaign from scratch every time because there's a structure underneath them — training, funding, legal help, a brand people recognize on the ballot. The Republicans and Democrats spent a hundred years building that machinery, precinct by precinct, courthouse by courthouse. Then they used the power it gave them to write the rules so nobody else could build one.

That's the part nobody wants to say out loud: the playing field isn't just tilted, it's *owned*. The two parties are the landlords, the referees, and the home team, all at once. An independent movement doesn't just have to win the game — it has to build its own stadium first, while the landlords keep changing the building codes.

But here's the thing about landlords: they only collect rent as long as the tenants keep paying. Forty-five percent of the country has already stopped paying in the only currency that matters — their loyalty. The tenants have moved out emotionally. They just haven't built the new house yet. Organization is the house. It's the least exciting word in politics and the most powerful one.

Every successful movement in American history — labor, civil rights, women's suffrage — was a majority sentiment that got organized. The sentiment came first. But the sentiment alone never won anything. Somebody had to build the vehicle.

What's missing, second, is ballot access.

This one is by design, and it's the dirtiest trick in the book. In every state, the rules for who gets on the ballot are written by — take a wild guess — the two parties that already hold power. Republican legislators and Democratic legislators, who agree on almost nothing, agree completely on this: the bar for anyone else should be as high as possible.

So an independent or third-party candidate who wants to run for office has to navigate fifty different sets of rules — signature thresholds, filing deadlines, petition challenges, fees — each one engineered to exhaust outsiders before they ever reach a voter. The parties, meanwhile, get on the ballot automatically, by law, because they're the parties. The referee is also one of the teams. Actually, the referee is *both* of the teams, and they've agreed to call every game against you.

This is why you can have 45% of the country identifying as independent and still look at a November ballot with exactly two viable names on it. The will of the people is being filtered through a machine built by the duopoly, and the machine is doing exactly what it was built to do.

Fixing ballot access doesn't require a revolution. It requires organization — lawyers, volunteers, petition drives, state by state — the unglamorous work the parties did a century ago and then pulled the ladder up behind them. Colorado showed what's possible when independents actually get on the rolls and get organized: **registered independents there surpassed 50% of the voting population in 2025**. Half the state. When the door is open even a crack, people walk through it.

What's missing, third — and this is the one this book exists to fill — is a shared mindset.

Organization without a shared mindset is just another party machine waiting to be corrupted. Ballot access without a shared mindset just gets you more names on a ballot nobody trusts. What turns a crowd into a movement is the moment people start seeing themselves not as isolated individuals who happen to be fed up, but as *members of something* — a majority with a name, a creed, and a purpose.

That's the independent mindset. It's the recognition that you are not alone, you were never alone, and the loneliness was manufactured. It's the understanding that the 45% isn't a collection of political orphans — it's the American people, and the two parties are the fringe.

Think about what the parties have that independents don't. It's not just money and lawyers. It's *identity*. A Republican knows what team he's on. A Democrat knows what team she's on. They have a story about who they are and what they're fighting for — even if the story is mostly fiction at this point.

Independents have been denied that. The system calls them "unaffiliated," "undeclared," "nonpartisan" — every label is a *negative*, defined by what they're *not*. Nobody ever built them a positive identity. Nobody ever said: here's what you *are*. Here's what you stand *for*. Here's your creed.

That's the gap. And it's the whole reason this book is in your hands.

The Majority Is Already Here

Let me bring it back to the cab, because that's where I learned all of this.

Every night, I pick up people who have nothing in common on paper — different races, different jobs, different neighborhoods, different votes — and within ten minutes they're telling me the same story. The system is rigged. The parties are corrupt. Nobody represents people like me. I don't know what to do about it.

They think they're alone in thinking it. The television tells them they're alone. The parties tell them they're alone. Their politically obsessed uncle at Thanksgiving tells them they're alone.

They are not alone. They are the 45%. They are the largest political force in the United States, larger than either party has ever been, growing every year, getting younger every year, and holding the deciding votes in every election that matters.

The two parties know it. That's why they lock you out of primaries you pay for. That's why they spend billions herding you with fear. That's why the moment anyone suggests the independent majority should act like a majority, both parties — *both* of them, in perfect harmony — scream "spoiler" and "wasted vote" in unison. Watch for that unison. It's the tell. It's the one moment the duopoly drops the act and shows you who they really are: two wings of the same bird of prey, circling the same carcass.

Everything they've built — the closed primaries, the ballot barriers, the fear machine, the "wasted vote" spell — is a dam holding back a river. And the river keeps rising. Forty percent, forty-three, forty-five. Gen Z at fifty-six. Colorado at fifty. Every year, the water gets higher. Dams don't hold forever.

And the dam is already cracking. In Colorado, registered independents passed 50% of the voting population — the majority, on paper, in the books. In state after state, the unaffiliated column is the biggest column on the registration rolls. Every independent who wins — a governor in Maine, a senator in Vermont, a Reform Party wrestler in Minnesota — is a crack in the dam. Proof it can be done. Proof the water finds a way through.

Here's what the parties don't want you to put together: the 45% isn't a mood. It's not a vibe. It's 39.2 million registered names in the states that count them, plus tens of millions more in the states that don't. It's the deciding vote in every presidential election, every Senate majority, every House majority. It's the reason both parties spend billions of dollars a year trying to scare you back into the corral — because if you ever stopped being scared, the game would be over in a single cycle.

But rivers don't organize themselves. Water doesn't file petitions or knock on doors or build a movement. People do. That's what's missing — not the numbers, not the will, not the righteous anger. The numbers are here. The will is here. What's missing is the *decision* — millions of individuals making it at the same time — to stop acting like a scattered crowd and start acting like what you are.

The majority.

The next chapter is the playbook — the actual, practical steps for turning this majority into power: opening the primaries, fixing ballot access, building the organization, and running candidates who answer to the 99%, not the 1%. The chapter after that is the mindset itself — the creed that holds it all together.

But none of it works until you believe the first thing, the thing the parties have spent forty years and billions of dollars trying to keep you from believing:

You're not the fringe. You're not the spoiler. You're not the "undecideds" or the "low-information voters" or the herd to be driven home every November.

You're the biggest bloc in American politics. You've been the biggest bloc for most of the last forty years. And the day you start acting like it is the day everything changes.

Chapter 10: The Playbook

If you've read this far, you know the diagnosis. The system isn't broken by accident — it's fixed by design. The two parties sell you the disease and then sell you the cure, and the cure is always "vote for us harder." Lobbyists write the bills. Super PACs pick the winners before you ever see a ballot. Congressional seats have become family heirlooms, passed along through fundraising networks, and your vote in November is mostly a permission slip for someone the machine already chose.

So what do we do about it?

That's what this chapter is. No more complaining. This is the plan. Every reform in this chapter is real, it's specific, and most of it is already working somewhere in America right now. None of it requires a revolution. None of it requires violence — and I want to be crystal clear about that, because the day people start talking about tearing things down with force instead of building things up with votes is the day we lose everything that makes this country worth saving. We don't burn the house down. We change the locks, we replace the plumbing, and we fire the contractor who robbed us blind.

This is lawful, democratic, peaceful reform. It's the playbook.

Let me say one thing up front that I want you to carry through every page: you don't have to do all of this. Pick the one that fires you up and work that one. Movements don't win because a million people did everything. They win because a million people each did one thing.

Let's get to work.

Term Limits for Congress

Let's start with the most popular idea in American politics — and I mean that literally. It's the most popular because the numbers aren't close.

In July 2023, the Pew Research Center surveyed American adults about changes to the political system, and 87% said they favor limiting the number of terms members of Congress can serve. Let that sink in: eighty-seven percent. Not 51–49. Not a squeaker. Eighty-seven percent, including 90% of Republicans and 86% of Democrats. In a country that can't agree on what day it is, 87% of us agree on this one. Pew revisited the question in 2026 and the support was still there, still overwhelming, still bipartisan. This is the closest thing to a national consensus that exists in American politics.

And yet nothing happens. Why? Because Congress would have to vote itself out of a career, and that's like asking a casino to ban gambling.

Here's what the reform actually looks like. The most common proposal — and the one with a live bill in Congress right now — limits members of the U.S. House to three two-year terms (six years total) and U.S. Senators to two six-year terms (twelve years total). That's it. Six years in the House, twelve in the Senate. Serve your time, go home, and go live under the laws you wrote.

There's a bill on the table. In January 2025, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas introduced S.J.Res.1, a joint resolution proposing a constitutional amendment to do exactly this: three terms in the House, two in the Senate, ratification by the states required within seven years. Twelve of his Senate colleagues signed on as cosponsors. It was read twice and referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee, where it sat. No hearing. No vote. No action. That is the story of every term-limits bill ever introduced in Congress: introduced with great fanfare, cosponsored by ambitious politicians who know it will never get a vote, and quietly buried by the leadership of both parties, who have every incentive to keep the system exactly as it is.

But this fight didn't start yesterday. It started with the voters — and the voters were winning, until the courts took it away.

On September 18, 1990, Oklahoma voters approved State Question 632, making Oklahoma the first state in America to enact term limits. Two months later, Colorado became the first state to pass congressional term limits — overwhelmingly — and California followed the same day. The movement's only real setback was Washington state in 1991, and then 1992 hit like a tidal wave: voters in state after state approved term-limit initiatives in a single election. By the time the dust settled, 23 states had enacted congressional term limits — 21 of them by citizen ballot initiative, with average support above 64%, and two more, New Hampshire and Utah, by their legislatures. Congress's own committee reports called it one of the largest grassroots movements in modern American history. Average citizens, with petitions and clipboards, against the entire political establishment — and the citizens were winning.

That's what made *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton* such a gut punch. On May 22, 1995, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that states couldn't add qualifications for federal office — and in one decision, wiped out what voters in 23 states had demanded. One vote. One justice. Twenty-three states' worth of the people's will, gone.

And here's a detail worth remembering: after the 22nd Amendment limited presidents to two terms in 1951, President Dwight Eisenhower — a Republican, a general, a man who understood power — said, "What is good for the President might very well be good for the Congress." That was 1951. We're still waiting.

Now here's what you need to understand about the mechanics, because the mechanics are where the parties hide. You cannot term-limit Congress with an ordinary law. The Supreme Court decided that in 1995, in a case called *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton*. Back in the early '90s, twenty-three states passed their own congressional term limits. The Court struck them all down, 5-4, ruling that the Constitution's qualifications for federal office are exclusive — states can't add to them, and by the same logic, Congress can't change them with a simple statute. The only legal path is a constitutional amendment, the way we did it for the presidency with the 22nd Amendment (proposed by Congress in 1947, ratified by the states in 1951, after Franklin Roosevelt's four terms broke the old two-term tradition).

And getting an amendment through Congress is the hard way by design. Article V of the Constitution gives two routes. Route one: two-thirds of both the House and the Senate propose an amendment, and then three-fourths of the states — 38 out of 50 — ratify it. We've done it this way for all 27 amendments in American history. But asking Congress to propose term limits on itself is asking the fox to design the

henhouse lock. The closest Congress ever came was in 1995, when a term-limits amendment got 227 votes in the House — a majority, but short of the two-thirds supermajority an amendment needs. The career politicians who voted it down weren't stupid. They were protecting their jobs.

So here's route two, and this is the one that matters. Article V also says that if two-thirds of the states — 34 of them — apply for it, Congress *must* call a convention to propose amendments. Not "may call." *Shall* call. Congress has no discretion. And the states don't need Congress's permission to start the process.

This is where the action is. An organization called U.S. Term Limits has been running a state-by-state campaign, and as of 2026, fourteen state legislatures have passed single-subject applications for a term-limits convention: Florida, Alabama, Missouri, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, South Carolina, South Dakota, Kansas, and Arizona. Fourteen down, twenty to go to reach 34.

Now, is the convention route scary? Some people on both the left and the right worry about a "runaway convention" — delegates showing up to talk about term limits and rewriting the whole Constitution. Here's the thing that fear leaves out: anything a convention proposes still has to be ratified by 38 states. A convention can propose. It cannot enact. Three-fourths of the states have to agree, and that's a bar so high that nothing crazy clears it. The fear is a talking point used by the people who benefit from the status quo to keep you afraid of changing it.

Think about what term limits would actually change. Right now, the incumbent reelection rate in Congress is obscene. In 2024, 97% of congressional incumbents who ran were reelected, according to Ballotpedia's analysis. In 41 states, every single incumbent who ran won. That's not democracy; that's a coronation with extra steps. The longest-serving senator in American history, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, served nine terms — 51 years. The longest-serving House member, John Dingell of Michigan, served nearly 59 years. These men arrived in Washington before man walked on the moon and were still voting when the iPhone came out.

Career politicians don't just stay in office; they accumulate power in ways that have nothing to do with serving you. Committee chairmanships run on seniority. The longer you stay, the more power you get, the more lobbyists court you, the more donors fund you, and the harder you are to beat. Term limits break that cycle. They say: your time is up, the seat belongs to the people, and the next citizen legislator gets a turn.

And here's the proof it works: sixteen states already limit their own state legislators' terms, per Ballotpedia's 2025 reporting — North Dakota's voters approved limits by ballot initiative in 2022, joining states like California, Michigan, Florida, Ohio, and Arizona. Those statehouses didn't collapse. The lobbyists lost some of their grip. Fresh people with real-world experience — business owners, teachers, veterans, nurses — started winning seats that used to belong to lifers.

The argument against term limits is that you lose experienced legislators and hand more power to lobbyists and staff, who never term out. It's not a crazy argument. But here's my answer: experience in Washington has come to mean experience in serving Washington, not experience in serving us. And I'll take a citizen legislator who has to go back and live under the laws they passed over a thirty-year "expert"

in parliamentary procedure who owns three houses, any day of the week.

What can you do? Two things. First, find out if your state has passed the Article V application — and if not, push your state legislators to pass it. State legislators are regular people you can actually reach; they live in your town. Second, support the amendment effort directly through organizations like U.S. Term Limits, and make term limits a non-negotiable question for every candidate who asks for your vote. "Will you cosponsor and vote for the term-limits amendment?" If the answer is anything but yes, walk away.

Ban Congressional Stock Trading

This one makes people furious, and it should. Here's the situation: the same people who write the laws, fund the agencies, and oversee the industries that move the stock market are legally allowed to trade stocks in those very industries — while holding information you and I will never have.

Let me give you the history, because the history tells you everything about how Washington works.

For most of American history, members of Congress simply assumed insider-trading laws didn't apply to them. Legal scholars argued that insider-trading law required a breach of fiduciary duty, and members of Congress, technically, owed no fiduciary duty to anyone. So they traded. Freely. Openly. And they did very well at it.

Then in November 2011, *60 Minutes* ran a segment exposing how members of Congress were trading on inside information — including during the 2008 financial crisis, when members sitting in classified briefings about the collapsing economy went home and made trades on what they'd learned. The public outrage was volcanic. A bill called the STOCK Act — the Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge Act — had been sitting around since 2006 going nowhere. Suddenly it was unstoppable. The Senate passed it 96–3. The House passed it 417–2. President Barack Obama signed it into law on April 4, 2012.

What did the STOCK Act actually do? Two things. First, it formally declared that members of Congress are subject to insider-trading laws — closing the legal loophole the *60 Minutes* piece exposed. Second, it required members and senior staff to publicly disclose any stock, bond, or commodity trade over \$1,000 within 45 days, instead of the old vague annual disclosures.

Sounds good, right? Here's what happened next: nothing. Almost nothing.

The penalty for late or missing disclosure under the STOCK Act is \$200. Two hundred dollars. That's roughly an hour of a member of Congress's salary. A senator who makes a trade on advance knowledge of, say, a drug approval or a defense contract — a trade that could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars — can simply not file, pay \$200, and walk away. And the fine is rarely even collected. Enforcement is, for all practical purposes, nonexistent.

And if you want to see how Washington treats its own ethics laws, look at what happened exactly one year after the STOCK Act passed.

In April 2013, Congress quietly gutted the law's transparency teeth. A bill called S. 716 repealed the requirement that the financial disclosures of some 28,000 senior federal employees be posted online in a

searchable public database. How did it pass? The Senate approved it on a Thursday evening. The House approved it on a Friday. Both times by unanimous consent — no debate, no recorded vote, no fingerprints. Just a quiet Friday news dump on a bill nobody was supposed to notice. President Obama signed it. The Sunlight Foundation, which fights for open government, called it "an epic failure."

Think about what that tells you. When the cameras were on in 2012, they passed the STOCK Act 96-3 and 417-2 and held a signing ceremony. When the cameras were off in 2013, they carved out the part that would have let ordinary citizens actually see the money — without a single recorded vote. That's Washington in one story: transparency for the cameras, darkness for the donors. And that's exactly why a real ban — not disclosure, not wrist-slaps, a ban — is the only reform that matters.

Then came the COVID trades, and if you want to understand why this chapter exists, read this part twice. On January 24, 2020, the Senate received a classified intelligence briefing on the emerging coronavirus — including projections of market disruption. You and I didn't know. We were living our lives. But in the weeks after that briefing, Senator Richard Burr of North Carolina sold between \$628,000 and \$1.72 million in stocks — including hotel and hospitality stocks. Senator Kelly Loeffler of Georgia made 29 transactions totaling between \$1.3 million and \$3.1 million in sales, including airline stocks — and bought stock in a company selling remote-work software. Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma sold between \$180,000 and \$400,000. Senator Dianne Feinstein's husband sold between \$1.5 and \$6 million in biotech stocks.

The FBI seized Burr's phone. Investigations were opened. And the criminal prosecutions that followed? Zero. The Justice Department declined every case. Not one sitting member of Congress has ever been criminally prosecuted for stock trading under the STOCK Act. Not one.

And here's the detail that should end the argument: a 2022 *New York Times* analysis found that 97 members of Congress — nearly one-fifth of the entire House and Senate — made trades from 2019 to 2021 that amounted to potential conflicts of interest based on their committee assignments. One-fifth. These are people sitting on committees that regulate industries, trading stocks in those industries.

Now, what does a real ban look like? Not the STOCK Act's wrist-slap — a genuine prohibition. It has three parts:

One: no individual stock ownership or trading by members of Congress, period. Not "disclose it within 45 days." Not "don't trade on inside information, wink wink." A flat ban on owning or trading individual stocks, bonds, and other securities while in office. Blind trusts are fine — put your money in a trust managed by someone else, where you don't know or control what's being bought and sold. Broad-based mutual funds and index funds are fine — nobody on the Armed Services Committee can move the S&P 500. But no individual company stocks. If you want to day-trade, don't run for Congress.

Two: it covers spouses and dependent children. This is the loophole that kills every weak bill. If the member can't trade but their spouse can, you haven't banned anything — you've just moved the brokerage account to the other side of the marriage. The strongest bills extend the ban to spouses and dependents, and that's non-negotiable.

Three: real penalties and real enforcement. Fines equal to a month's salary for every month of non-compliance. Criminal penalties for willful violations. An enforcement mechanism that doesn't depend on the goodwill of the people being regulated. The current \$200 slap-on-the-wrist has to die.

Here's the good news: the public is already there. A 2023 Nielsen survey found 86% of Americans support banning members of Congress from trading individual stocks. The University of Maryland's Program for Public Consultation, in a 2023 survey, found 86% support too — 87% of Republicans, 88% of Democrats, and 81% of independents. A 2022 Data for Progress poll put it at 76%. This is another one of those rare issues where the country agrees and Washington stalls.

And there is movement. In July 2025, a bill called the HONEST Act — introduced by Republican Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri and Democratic Senator Gary Peters of Michigan — advanced out of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on an 8–7 vote. It would ban members of Congress, the president, and the vice president (and their spouses) from trading individual stocks. A companion push, the Restore Trust in Congress Act, combines years of bipartisan bills. Even the House Speaker and the House Minority Leader have signaled support. The bills keep moving out of committee and then dying before a floor vote — because, again, the people who would have to pass it are the people it would restrict.

What can you do? Same playbook as term limits, and honestly these two reforms are twins — pass one and the other gets easier. Make the stock-trading ban a litmus test for every candidate. Ask the question on camera if you can: "Will you vote to ban members of Congress from trading individual stocks?" Post the answer. Candidates who dodge it are telling you everything. And support the groups tracking this stuff — there are public databases now that track every congressional trade in near-real time, built by ordinary citizens who got tired of waiting for the government to police itself.

Close the Revolving Door

You know what happens to a lot of members of Congress when they leave office? They don't go home. They walk across the street — sometimes literally across the street — and become lobbyists. They spend their last years in office building relationships with industries, and their first years out of office selling access to those relationships. The revolving door: government service on one side, K Street on the other, and the same people spinning through it in both directions.

The numbers tell you how big the industry is. In 2024, federal lobbying spending hit a record \$4.4 billion, according to OpenSecrets. That's not a typo: four point four billion dollars, in one year, spent to influence the federal government. Spending has been climbing since 2016, up more than a billion dollars over the past decade. That's the official, registered number — and experts will tell you the real number is higher, because a whole class of "shadow lobbyists" influence policy without ever registering.

Now, lobbying itself isn't the problem. The First Amendment protects the right to petition the government. If a group of farmers wants to hire someone to explain farm policy to Congress, that's legitimate. The problem is the *revolving door* — when the people writing the laws are auditioning for the industries they're supposed to be regulating, and when the people who just left Congress are selling their

Rolodex to the highest bidder.

Here's what the law currently says. After the scandals of the mid-2000s, Congress passed the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007. It set "cooling-off" periods: a former Senator can't lobby Congress for two years after leaving; a former House member can't for one year; very senior executive-branch officials face two years. It's in the federal criminal code, 18 U.S.C. § 207.

One year. Two years. That's the great reform. A House member can vote on a bill written by an industry on Friday, retire on Saturday, and be on that industry's payroll by the following year — and in the meantime, there's nothing stopping them from "advising" clients on how to lobby their former colleagues, as long as they don't make the calls themselves. OpenSecrets documented this years ago: the loopholes are so wide that former members can sit in the room, coach the lobbyists, and strategize the whole campaign — they just can't be the one to pick up the phone. That's not closing the revolving door. That's putting a "please knock" sign on it.

And the gift rules. Both the House and Senate have rules that generally cap gifts from private sources at under \$50 per gift and under \$100 per year from any single source, with gifts of \$10 or more counted toward that annual total. Registered lobbyists are specifically barred from using even that small *de minimis* exception — they can't give members gifts under the normal allowance; they'd need to fit under a different, narrow exception. Travel paid for by lobbyists is restricted. Sounds strict on paper. In practice, the money just flows around it — through campaign contributions (exempt), through "educational" events, through the spouse's consulting contract, through the job waiting on the other side.

Here's what a real revolving-door reform looks like:

First, extend the cooling-off period — substantially. Five years minimum for members of Congress before they can lobby the federal government, and the ban should cover *all* lobbying activity, not just direct contacts. No "advising." No "strategic consulting." No sitting in the room coaching the team. If you want to sell influence, you should have to wait long enough that your influence has an expiration date. Some reformers have proposed a lifetime ban on lobbying for former members. I'd support that too. But five years is the floor, not the ceiling.

Second, a real gift ban. No gifts, meals, travel, or entertainment from lobbyists or their clients — zero, not \$50, not "nominal value." When a lobbyist buys a congressman dinner, the congressman isn't the customer. The American people are the product. End it.

Third, close the shadow-lobbying loophole. If you're getting paid to influence federal policy, you register as a lobbyist. Period. No more "consultants" and "advisors" doing a lobbyist's job under a different title. The disclosure threshold should be based on what you *do*, not what you call yourself.

Fourth, ban the golden parachute job negotiations. Right now, a member of Congress can be quietly negotiating their seven-figure K Street job while they're still voting on legislation that affects their future employer. That's a conflict of interest so obvious it shouldn't need explaining. Members should be barred from negotiating private-sector employment with anyone who lobbies the government while they're still in office — and for a period after.

The parties will tell you this is complicated. It's not. The rule is simple: you serve the public, or you serve the highest bidder. Pick one. The revolving door exists because we let people do both, in sequence, and call it a career.

Take Florida. In 2018, Florida voters put a six-year lobbying ban for former lawmakers and other officials into their state constitution — and it passed with nearly 80% of the vote. Not 51-49. Nearly eight in ten. The implementing laws took effect in January 2023: six years before an ex-lawmaker can come back and lobby the government they just left, with fines up to \$10,000 for violations. That's what a real cooling-off period looks like — long enough that the Rolodex goes stale and the favors get forgotten. The lobbying industry has been fighting it in court ever since, which tells you everything about who it threatens. Public-interest watchdogs point to states like Iowa and North Dakota as the strongest models in the country, because their bans cover both branches of government and ban all lobbying activity, not just direct phone calls. The laboratories are open. Washington is the one refusing to learn.

What can you do? Watch the exits. When your representative retires or loses, watch where they land. If they land at a lobbying firm or a corporation they used to regulate, say so — loudly, publicly, with dates and dollar amounts. Sunlight is the whole game here. And push your state to go further than the federal rules: several states already have stricter revolving-door laws than Washington does, and that's a laboratory the whole country can learn from.

Ranked-Choice Voting

Now we get to the machinery of elections themselves — because it's not enough to change *who* can run. We have to change *how* we choose.

Right now, almost every election in America uses what mathematicians call "plurality" or "first-past-the-post" voting: whoever gets the most votes wins, even if "the most" is 34% and 66% of voters picked someone else. This system has a brutal logic. It punishes anyone who runs outside the two big parties, because voting for your actual favorite feels like "wasting" your vote — or worse, like helping the candidate you like least by "splitting" the vote. Every independent candidate in American history has heard it: "I like you, but I can't waste my vote." The system is designed to make that sentence true.

Ranked-choice voting — RCV — breaks that trap. Here's how it works: instead of picking one candidate, you rank them. First choice, second choice, third choice, as many as you like. If someone gets a majority of first-choice votes, they win, same as always. But if nobody gets a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and the people who voted for them have their votes transferred to their second choice. This repeats, round by round, until someone has a majority.

Think about what that does to incentives. Under the current system, candidates win by terrifying you about the other side — because fear is what drives single-choice voting. Under ranked-choice, candidates need to be *someone's* second choice to survive the later rounds. That means there's a real reward for not being hated. A candidate who runs a vicious, scorched-earth campaign might lock up 30% of first-choice votes and then get eliminated, because nobody ranked them second. A candidate who runs on ideas, who treats opponents with respect, who builds a broad coalition — that candidate picks up second-choice votes

from everywhere and wins. RCV doesn't just change who wins. It changes how people campaign. It rewards the politics of addition instead of the politics of division.

And this isn't theory. It's running right now, in real American elections.

Maine was the first state to use RCV for federal elections, starting in 2018, for congressional and presidential races. **Alaska** went further: in 2020, Alaska voters approved a system with an open top-four primary — all candidates on one ballot, all voters vote, top four advance — followed by ranked-choice voting in the general election. It's been used for Alaska's state, congressional, and presidential elections since 2022. The establishment hated it so much they put a repeal on the ballot in 2024 — and the repeal failed by 664 votes. Six hundred and sixty-four votes. The people of Alaska looked at the system, looked at the alternative, and kept it.

Since 2025, **Washington, D.C.** uses ranked-choice voting for all its elections. **Hawaii** uses it for special congressional elections. And at the local level, it's everywhere: as of 2025, RCV is used in about 47 American cities, including New York City, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Seattle, Minneapolis, and Santa Fe. Cambridge, Massachusetts has been using a form of ranked voting to elect its city council since 1941 — over eighty years.

Now I'll be honest with you about the headwinds, because there are real ones. Since 2020, voters in several states have rejected ballot initiatives to adopt RCV. And a growing number of state legislatures — around 17 states as of 2025 — have *banned* RCV statewide. The bans are concentrated in states where one party holds total control and likes it that way. When the people in power move to outlaw a voting method, that tells you the method threatens them. Nobody bans something that doesn't work.

Let me give you the 2024 scorecard, because it's ugly and you deserve the truth. Idaho's Proposition 1 — open top-four primaries plus ranked-choice in the general — was crushed, with nearly 70% voting no. Oregon's Measure 117 lost 58 to 42. Colorado's Proposition 131 lost 53.5 to 46.5, even though supporters spent roughly \$19 million. Nevada's Question 3 is the heartbreaker: it *won* in 2022 with 53% of the vote, but Nevada requires constitutional amendments to pass twice, and in 2024 it lost its second vote. One win away. And in Missouri, voters passed Amendment 7 — which banned ranked-choice voting outright — with 68% of the vote.

So yes, the headwinds are real. The parties and their allies outspent and out-organized the reformers in state after state, and they won those rounds. But look at what else 2024 proved. Alaska's repeal failed, which means the system survived its first real-world stress test. Washington, D.C.'s voters approved ranked-choice in 2024 and it took effect in 2025. And nearly every one of those losses was a first attempt — reform movements in American history almost always lose the first round. Reforms like the secret ballot were fought tooth and nail before they became the law of the land. Women's suffrage lost vote after vote before it won. The question isn't whether 2024 was a setback. It's whether the reformers come back in 2026 and 2028. They will — because the math for independents only gets better.

The honest criticisms of RCV: it's more complex than "pick one," and complexity can confuse voters, especially older voters and voters with less formal education. It costs money to implement — new

machines, new ballots, voter education. And in rare cases, the round-by-round elimination can produce a winner who wouldn't have won under a different counting method. These are real concerns, and the answer to them is better implementation and better voter education, not banning the idea.

But here's the bottom line for independents: under the current system, an independent candidate is a "spoiler" by definition. Under ranked-choice, the spoiler problem disappears — because if your independent doesn't win, your vote flows to your second choice instead of being wasted. RCV is the single most important structural reform for breaking the two-party duopoly, because it removes the fear that keeps voters locked in. No more "lesser of two evils." Rank your actual favorite first, and let the system do the rest.

What can you do? If your state or city is considering RCV, get involved — these fights are usually won or lost at the ballot-initiative stage, and they need volunteers and donors, not just voters. If your state has banned it, that ban is a political choice by a legislature, and legislatures can be changed. And talk about it in plain language: "Rank the candidates. If your favorite can't win, your vote goes to your second choice. Nobody wastes a vote ever again." That's the whole pitch, and it's a good one.

Open Primaries and Ballot Access

Here's a dirty secret about American elections: in most states, the election that actually decides who represents you isn't the general election in November. It's the party primary months earlier — and you might not be allowed to vote in it.

About half the states have some form of closed or semi-closed primaries, where you have to be a registered party member to vote in that party's primary. If you're one of the 45% of Americans who identify as independent — a record high, per Gallup's 2025 data — then in many states, you're locked out of the only election that matters in districts drawn to be safe for one party. Think about that. In a deep-red or deep-blue district, the November election is a formality. The real choice happens in the primary. And the parties have decided that independents — nearly half the country — don't get a say in it.

That's not an accident. That's the parties protecting their turf.

Open primaries fix this. In an open primary, any registered voter can vote in any party's primary, regardless of their own registration. About 14 states do this, per Ballotpedia — states like Texas, Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin, Virginia, and Missouri. A related version, the **semi-closed** primary, lets independents choose which party's primary to vote in. And then there are the bolder models: **California** and **Washington** use a top-two system, where all candidates run on one ballot and the top two advance regardless of party. **Alaska**, as I mentioned, uses top-four with ranked-choice in the general.

Nevada is the cautionary tale and the hope, both at once. In 2022, Nevadans voted 53% to 47% for Question 3 — open top-five primaries with ranked-choice in the general election. But Nevada's constitution requires amendments to win twice, and in 2024 the measure lost its second vote by almost the same margin, the other way. One election. That's all that separated Nevada from the biggest primary reform in America. But the story isn't over: in 2025, the state Assembly's own speaker pushed a simpler

semi-open primary bill — just let independents vote in a party primary without changing their registration — and the legislature passed it. The Republican governor vetoed it. So the voters want it, the legislature passed it, and one pen blocked it. That's not democracy failing. That's the machine showing you exactly where the gears are — and gears can be replaced.

Why does this matter so much? Because closed primaries are the engine of extremism. In a closed primary, the only voters who matter are the party's most loyal, most ideological members — often 10 to 20% of the electorate. Candidates don't need to appeal to the middle. They need to appeal to the base. So they move to the extremes, and then they carry that extremism into office, where they govern a district full of moderate people who never got to vote in the primary that chose them. Open primaries break that dynamic: when independents and moderates can vote, candidates have to appeal to a broader electorate, and the winners look more like the district.

But primaries are only half the battle. The other half is **ballot access** — the thicket of rules that determines whether an independent candidate can even get on the ballot in the first place. And this thicket was planted, deliberately, by the two parties.

In many states, a Democrat or Republican candidate gets on the ballot almost automatically — the party's nomination is the ticket. An independent running for the same office might need to collect tens of thousands of valid petition signatures, in a short window, with strict formatting rules, facing legal challenges funded by the parties the moment they file. Miss the signature threshold by a handful, and you're done. The requirements vary wildly by state and by office, and that's the point: complexity is the barrier. The parties wrote rules that are easy for parties and punishing for everyone else.

Real ballot-access reform means three things. **One:** equal signature requirements — an independent shouldn't need ten times the signatures a party candidate needs. **Two:** reasonable filing windows and clear, uniform rules, so a regular person without a law firm can actually navigate the process. **Three:** an end to the legal harassment — when the parties use their war chests to challenge independent petitions on technicalities, that's not election integrity, it's voter suppression with a lawyer.

What can you do? This one is beautifully local. Ballot-access rules are set by state legislatures, and state legislators are accessible — they hold town halls, they answer their phones, their offices are in your community. Push for open or top-two/top-four primaries in your state. And if you're thinking about running for something yourself — we'll get to that — learn your state's ballot-access rules early, because the petition clock starts ticking the day you decide.

End Gerrymandering

Let me tell you the most corrupt legal practice in American politics, and it's not even close: politicians choosing their voters instead of voters choosing their politicians.

Every ten years, after the census, states redraw their congressional and state legislative districts. In most states, the state legislature draws the maps. The majority party draws the maps. And they draw them with surgical precision — using voting data down to the city block — to pack the other party's voters into a

few districts and spread their own voters across the rest. The result is districts shaped like salamanders, dumbbells, and ink blots, drawn for one purpose: to make the general election a foregone conclusion.

This is gerrymandering, and both parties do it with equal enthusiasm whenever they hold the pen. Republicans gerrymander Texas and Florida. Democrats gerrymander Illinois and Maryland. It's not a partisan sin; it's a bipartisan business model. And the business it's in is killing competition: when districts are drawn to be safe, the only election that matters is the primary, which — as we just covered — is controlled by the party base. Gerrymandering and closed primaries are a one-two punch that locks the parties in power forever.

The fix is conceptually simple: take the pen away from the politicians. **Independent redistricting commissions** — bodies of ordinary citizens, balanced between the parties, with explicit rules against favoring any party or incumbent — draw the maps instead.

And this works. It's working right now. According to Common Cause, which has led this fight for years, seven states have independent commissions with real partisan balance and final authority over the maps: **Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, Montana, and Washington.** California's commission, created by voters in 2008 through Proposition 11, is the gold standard: any citizen can apply (except politicians and lobbyists), the selection is designed for balance, and the public process is massive. Michigan's voters created theirs by constitutional amendment in 2018. Colorado did it in 2018 too. Arizona's has been running since 2000 — and when the Arizona legislature sued to kill it, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld it 5–4 in 2015, ruling that voters can take redistricting power away from legislators through ballot initiatives.

Now, do commissions produce perfect maps? No. Nothing produces perfect maps — drawing lines around 700,000-plus people will always involve judgment calls. But the honest research question isn't "are commission maps perfect." It's "are they better than letting the foxes draw the henhouse." And the answer to that is yes, overwhelmingly. Commission states have more competitive districts, fewer absurd shapes, and — this matters — legislators who actually have to earn their seats instead of inheriting them from a mapmaker.

The strongest version of this reform has a few key features worth fighting for. **One:** commissioners must be ordinary citizens, not politicians, lobbyists, or their staff — the conflict of interest has to be designed out, not managed. **Two:** partisan balance, with a meaningful role for independents and unaffiliated voters, who are now the largest group in the country and usually get zero seats at the table. **Three:** clear, public criteria — contiguity, compactness, respect for communities of interest, no partisan favoritism — applied in open hearings, not back rooms. **Four:** final authority resting with the commission, not subject to a legislature's veto, because a veto is just gerrymandering with extra steps.

The path here runs through ballot initiatives in the roughly half of states that allow them. Arizona, California, Michigan, Colorado — every one of these commissions was created by voters going around the legislature, because legislatures will never voluntarily give up the power to draw their own districts. If your state allows citizen initiatives, this is one of the highest-leverage reforms you can put on the ballot. One initiative, one election, and you've changed every election for the next decade.

And here's a thought for the long term: the deepest fix for gerrymandering is making districts matter less — through proportional systems or multi-member districts. That's a bigger conversation for another day. But the commission is the reform we can win now, in state after state, with the tools we already have.

And the fight is live right now. In Nevada, reformers have refiled a ballot initiative for an independent redistricting commission — balanced equally between Democrats, Republicans, and non-major-party voters — after earlier attempts never even made the ballot. The legislature will never vote to give up its own map-drawing pen. So the people are reaching for the pen themselves. That's how Arizona did it. That's how California did it. That's how Michigan and Colorado did it. Every single one of these commissions exists because voters went around the politicians, not through them.

Start Local: Where Independents Can Win Right Now

Here's the part of the playbook nobody talks about enough, because it's not glamorous. Everybody wants to start at the top — Congress, the presidency, the big stage. But the top is where the parties are strongest, the money is deepest, and the barriers are highest.

So start at the bottom. That's where they're weakest.

Get this: there are over 500,000 elected offices in the United States. Of those, 537 are federal — the president, the vice president, and Congress. About 7,000 are state legislators and governors. The other 490,000-plus are *local*: mayors, city councils, county commissions, school boards, sheriffs, judges, township trustees, water boards, library boards. Local offices are where nearly all the governing that touches your daily life actually happens — your roads, your schools, your water, your property taxes, your police — and most of them are decided by a few hundred or a few thousand votes.

And here's the beautiful part: at the local level, the parties' advantages mostly evaporate. There's no super PAC spending ten million dollars on a school board race. There's no national media narrative. It's your neighbors, your name recognition, your reputation, and your shoe leather. An independent with deep roots in the community can beat a party machine at the local level — and it happens all the time, in every state, in every cycle.

Local races are also where the farm team is built. Every career politician in Washington started somewhere — city council, state legislature, county office. The parties know this, which is why they invest in local pipelines. If independents want to compete for Congress in ten years, we need independents winning school boards and county commissions *now*. The 99% doesn't take power in one election. We take it precinct by precinct, office by office, until the pipeline that feeds Washington is full of people who don't owe the parties anything.

So let's get practical. Here's how to run, how to support independent candidates, and how to organize your neighbors.

How to run. First, pick the right race. Look at what's on your ballot next cycle — your county clerk's website lists every office up for election. School board and city council are the classic entry points: low filing fees, small voter universes, and campaigns you can run on weekends. Check the filing requirements

early — signatures, deadlines, fees — because ballot-access rules bite hardest at the local level, where the windows are short.

Second, count your votes before you spend a dime. Get the voter file or past election results for your district (your county election office can help). If the last school board race was decided by 400 votes, you need 401 people who know your name and trust you. That's not a media campaign. That's knocking on doors, showing up at every community event, and being the person people already know.

Third, run on the potholes, not the platform. Local voters don't care about your position on foreign policy. They care about the roads, the schools, the water bill, the property tax assessment, the response time when they call 911. Be the candidate who knows the specific, local, fixable problems — and has a specific, local, fixable plan. "I'm going to fix the drainage on Elm Street" beats "I'm going to fight for our values" every single time at the local level.

Fourth, money: you'll need less than you think, and small donors will carry you. A competitive city council race in a mid-size town can be won on a few thousand dollars — yard signs, a simple website, some targeted mail or digital ads. Take no money from anyone who wants something from the office. At the local level, a \$500 donation from a developer who has business before the council is a scandal waiting to happen, and your opponents will find it.

How to support independent candidates. Not everyone can run — most of us have jobs, kids, lives. But everyone can do one of these. *Donate*: independent candidates are starved for early money; \$25 in the first month of a local campaign is worth \$250 in the last month. *Volunteer*: knocking doors, making calls, hosting a meet-and-greet at your house — campaigns run on people, and local campaigns run on neighbors. *Amplify*: share their stuff, vouch for them in community groups, be the person who says "I know her, she's solid" when someone asks. In local races, a personal recommendation from a trusted neighbor is worth more than any ad buy.

How to organize your neighbors. This is the unglamorous engine of everything. Start with the people around you — your street, your church, your union hall, your kid's school. You don't need a formal organization. You need a group text, a regular meeting (same time, same place, every month), and a shared list of what's happening locally: who's running, what the council is voting on, when the school board meets. Show up to those meetings — I mean physically show up, because in most towns, a dozen organized citizens in the room is a political earthquake. Local officials are used to governing in front of empty chairs. Fill the chairs, and the dynamic changes overnight.

And here's the long game: build a local independent network that outlasts any single candidate. A list of volunteers, a list of small donors, a list of people who'll knock doors — that's infrastructure, and infrastructure is what the parties have that we don't. Every cycle you run candidates, win or lose, that list gets bigger and more experienced. That's how a movement compounds.

One more thing about starting local: it inoculates you against despair. National politics is designed to make you feel powerless — the money, the media, the machine. But nobody can make you feel powerless at a school board meeting where your vote is one of nine and the room holds forty people. Win there. Then

win the next one. Power is built from the ground up, and the ground is where you live.

The Call to Action

Alright. You've got the playbook. Let me tell you what I actually believe, straight, no polish.

I believe the two parties are not going to reform themselves. I've watched them for decades — from the back of a cab, listening to passengers from every walk of life, and from inside the arena as a candidate myself. The Republicans talk about draining the swamp and then hand the ladle to their donors. The Democrats talk about democracy and then rig their own primaries. They're not enemies of each other; they're business partners in the same enterprise, and the enterprise is keeping you out.

I believe the reforms in this chapter — term limits, a real stock-trading ban, closing the revolving door, ranked-choice voting, open primaries, fair ballot access, independent redistricting, and a local-first strategy — are not radical. They're common sense. The polling proves it: 87% for term limits. 86% for the stock-trading ban. Record numbers of Americans calling themselves independents — 45% in Gallup's 2025 data, the highest ever recorded. The people are already there. It's the system that's behind.

And I believe the system changes when ordinary people decide it does. Not when a party allows it. Not when a billionaire funds it. When we decide.

So here's what I'm asking you to do. Not someday. Now.

Pick one reform from this chapter. Just one. The one that made your blood boil or your heart lift. Term limits. The stock ban. Ranked-choice. The school board. Pick one.

Learn it cold. Know the numbers in this chapter. Know what's already passed in which states. When someone tells you "it'll never happen," you tell them about Alaska keeping ranked-choice by 664 votes, about fourteen states already calling for a term-limits convention, about a stock-trading ban clearing a Senate committee. Facts are armor.

Find your people. You're not the only one in your town who feels this way — you're just the only one who hasn't found the others yet. Start the group text. Hold the meeting. Show up at the council chambers. Movements are just friendships with a purpose.

Make every candidate answer. From dogcatcher to Congress: "Do you support term limits? A stock-trading ban? Open primaries?" Get the answer on the record. Share it. A candidate who won't answer is a candidate who's already told you.

Run for something. Or find someone good and convince *them* to run. The 500,000 local offices in this country are the battlefield where independents win, and most of them are sitting there right now, held by whoever bothered to show up last time. Be the person who bothers.

And vote like it matters — because the primaries are where it matters most. If your state lets independents vote in primaries, do it. If it doesn't, that's your first fight.

Here's the last thing, and I want you to hear the hope in it, not just the fight.

America has done this before. We've amended the Constitution 27 times. We ended slavery, we gave women the vote, we limited the president to two terms — every one of those was "impossible" until ordinary people made it inevitable. The people who benefit from a broken system always say it can't be fixed. They're saying it now. They said it then, too.

The 99% isn't a slogan. It's a math problem the parties can't solve. There are more of us than there are of them — more of us than their donors, their lobbyists, their consultants, and their machines combined. Forty-five percent of the country already refuses their labels. We don't need their permission. We never did.

They divided us so they could rule us. This chapter is how we stop letting them.

The playbook is in your hands now. Run it.

Chapter 11: The Independent Mindset

There's a ride I think about a lot. It was late, past one in the morning, and two people climbed into my cab outside a bar downtown. One of them had a red hat. The other had a blue shirt. You could tell they'd been arguing before they even got in the car, because they were doing that thing where both of them are talking but neither one is listening.

"Turn on the news," the red-hat guy said. So I did.

For about three minutes, nobody said a word. Then the blue-shirt guy went off. Then the red-hat guy went off. Then they were both going off at each other, loud, over the back seat, about things neither one of them actually had any power over — politicians in a city a thousand miles away, saying things on television designed to make them mad.

I drove. That's my job. And somewhere around the fourth stoplight, it hit me like it always does:

These two people agree on almost everything that actually matters.

They both work hard. They both pay too much for rent. They both want their kids to have it better than they had it. They both think the people in charge are crooked. They'd probably help each other change a tire in the rain. But put a screen in front of them, put the right words in their ears, and they'll scream at each other for twenty minutes about which team is destroying America — while the actual people destroying their bank accounts go completely unmentioned.

I dropped them off. They paid. They went home and probably woke up tired, still mad, still broke, and told themselves the other side did it to them.

That's not a political problem. That's a thinking problem. And this whole book has been building to one simple idea:

The most dangerous person in American politics isn't a Republican or a Democrat. It's a regular American who thinks for himself.

Everything before this chapter was the diagnosis. The trap. The money. The super PACs. The campaign funds. The con jobs on both sides. The divide-and-conquer machine. This chapter is the prescription. And it doesn't require a law degree, a donation, or permission from anybody. It just requires you to do the one thing the whole machine is engineered to prevent:

Think.

The One Thing They Can't Afford

Let me tell you something about how the business works. I've been a cab driver for years. A cab is a strange place — it's the one room in America where people tell the truth. They get in, the door closes, and suddenly it's a confessional. I've driven professors and plumbers, preachers and strippers, judges and junkies. And you know what I've learned?

Almost everybody is decent. Almost everybody is tired. And almost everybody knows — *knows* — that something is rotten at the top.

Pew Research found that 65% of Americans say they always or often feel exhausted just thinking about politics. Two out of three of us. Only one in ten feels hopeful about it. Only 4% think the system is working well. Read those numbers again. Four percent. Ninety-six percent of this country agrees the machine is broken, and yet somehow we've been convinced the other 96% is the enemy.

That's the trick. That's the whole trick. And it works because it's not really about policy. It's about *identity*.

The parties don't need you to agree with everything they do. They just need you to *hate the other side* enough that you'll never ask questions about your own. Outrage is cheaper than answers. Fear is cheaper than solutions. And contempt — pure, hot contempt for your neighbor — is the cheapest weapon in American politics, because it's free, it spreads by itself, and it points the gun in exactly the wrong direction.

Understand this: manufactured outrage is a *business model*. Angry people donate. Angry people vote. Angry people click, share, buy the merch, and show up at rallies. Calm people who read the fine print and ask follow-up questions? Those people are a problem. Those people are dangerous — not to America, but to the business.

So the business has one goal: keep you mad at the wrong people.

And here's the part they really don't want you to understand: in this business, *you* are the product. Your attention is harvested and sold. Your outrage is harvested and sold. Your vote is the raw material, your donation is the revenue, and the donor class is the customer. The parties are two competing firms selling the same thing — your loyalty — to the highest bidder, and then using your loyalty to protect the bidders. You're not the client. You're the inventory.

The independent mindset starts the day you stop being inventory. The day you say: my attention is mine, my outrage is mine, my vote is mine — and none of them are for sale. A citizen who can't be bought, can't be herded, and can't be scared is the one thing this business model cannot afford. That's not a slogan. That's the math. And the math is on your side. Forty-five percent of the country, all deciding at once to stop being sold — that's not just a movement, that's a market correction.

The Night Everything Made Sense

I drove a lobbyist once. Real one, registered and everything. Nice suit, expense account, the whole package. He was a little drunk and a little chatty, and he said something I've never forgotten.

He said, "Alexander, you know the difference between a Republican lobbyist and a Democrat lobbyist?"

I said no.

"Nothing," he said. "Same restaurants. Same golf courses. We all went to the same schools. Our kids play on the same teams. The parties are for the customers. The relationships are for us."

The parties are for the customers.

Let that sink in. You're the customer. The red team and the blue team are the product. The marketing department — that's the media, the pundits, the influencers, the whole outrage industry — exists to make you believe you're choosing between two completely different companies that hate each other. Meanwhile, behind the curtain, the same donors fund both sides, the same lobbyists write both parties' bills, and everybody cashes the same checks.

You've read this whole book. You know about the money. You know about the super PACs and the dark money and the campaign funds that turn public servants into millionaires. I won't relitigate it here. I'll just say this:

George Washington saw it coming. His farewell address — September 19, 1796, over two hundred years ago — warned Americans in the strongest language he had against what he called "the baneful effects of the spirit of party." He said factions would become, and I quote, "potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government."

He wrote that when the ink on the Constitution was barely dry. The man who could have been king walked away from power and used his last words to the nation to say: *watch out for the parties. They will eat this country alive.*

And we filed his warning under "history" and kept doing exactly what he told us not to do.

But Washington wasn't the last American to sound that alarm — and the independent mindset isn't some new invention. It's the oldest American tradition there is.

In January 1776, with the colonies still unsure about breaking from Britain, a 47-page pamphlet called *Common Sense* hit the streets of Philadelphia. Thomas Paine wrote it in plain language, for ordinary people — no Latin, no legal theory, just straight talk about why a king three thousand miles away had no business ruling free people. It sold some 120,000 copies in its first three months, in a country of only 2.5 million people — proportionally, that's like selling 15 million copies today. They read it aloud in taverns and meeting houses. It was the original viral post, and it talked a continent into independence. Paine didn't ask permission from any party. There were no parties. There was just a man with a printing press and the truth.

Seventy-three years later, Henry David Thoreau sat in a Massachusetts jail cell — he'd refused to pay a tax that funded a war he opposed — and wrote *Civil Disobedience*. The first line is the whole independent mindset in one sentence: "That government is best which governs least." Thoreau's point was that your conscience doesn't belong to the majority, the party, or the government. It belongs to you, and no law can make an unjust thing just.

A few years after that, Frederick Douglass — a man born into slavery who freed himself and became the nation's conscience — gave the independent mindset its creed. When the radicals of his own movement demanded absolute loyalty to their faction, Douglass answered: "I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong." Read that again. *Anybody* to do right. *Nobody* to do wrong. Not your team.

Not your tribe. Right and wrong. That's the whole ballgame, and a man who'd been owned by other human beings understood it better than most senators ever will.

The Anti-Federalists — the ones who fought the Constitution itself because they feared a distant, powerful government — wrote under fake names like "Brutus" and "Cato" because they knew what happens to people who question power openly. The Populists of the 1890s — farmers getting crushed by banks and railroads — built their own People's Party from scratch because neither major party would touch their suffering.

Generation after generation, Americans have looked at the machine of their moment and said: *no. I'll think for myself.*

You're not starting something new. You're picking up something old — older than the parties, older than the duopoly, as old as the republic itself.

How They Manufacture Your Opinions

Here's the thing nobody wants to admit: most of what you think about politics was *manufactured* — assembled in a studio, focus-grouped, and delivered to your phone with the precision of a targeted ad. Because it literally is a targeted ad.

I'm not saying your beliefs aren't real. Your values are real. Your experiences are real. Your struggles are real. But the *outrage* — the specific things you're told to be furious about this week, the villains you're told to hate, the slogans you're told to repeat — that stuff has a supply chain. And you are not at the top of it.

Let me show you how the machine works. Once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Step One: Pick the Wound.

Every week, the outrage industry picks a wound — real or invented — and pours salt in it. A video clip, a tweet, a headline, a leaked memo. It doesn't have to be the most important thing happening in the country. It just has to be the thing that makes *your side* furious at *their side*. Sometimes the wound is real and serious. Sometimes it's a nothing story dressed up as a crisis. The quality of the wound doesn't matter. The salt matters.

Step Two: Frame It as a War.

Nothing is ever a disagreement. It's always an attack, an invasion, an assault, a threat to everything you hold dear. The language of war is deliberate — because soldiers don't ask questions. Soldiers don't read the fine print. Soldiers don't say, "Hey, wait a minute, this doesn't add up." War framing turns citizens into troops, and troops follow orders.

Step Three: Give You a Villain with a Face.

Systems are hard to hate. Lobbyists are boring. Campaign finance law is boring. But a *person* — a smug pundit, an arrogant politician, a celebrity with a hot take — that's easy to hate. So the machine

always puts a face on the outrage. Your side gets a hero with a catchphrase. Their side gets a villain with a sneer. You cheer, you boo, you share. The donor class stays anonymous.

Step Four: Drown Out Everything Else.

While you're screaming about the villain of the week, nobody's talking about the stuff that actually runs your life: who wrote the tax code, who owns your mortgage company, why your medicine costs ten times what it costs everywhere else, why your vote counts less than a super PAC's check. The outrage isn't just a distraction. It's a *smokescreen*. It keeps your eyes on the puppet show while the real business happens in the back room.

Step Five: Repeat.

Every day. Every week. New wound, new war, new villain. The cycle never ends because the business never ends. The moment you calm down, you're no use to them. Calm people cancel subscriptions. Calm people ask questions. So the machine makes sure you're never calm.

Once you understand the five steps, watch the news for one week — really watch it — and tell me I'm wrong. I'll wait.

How to Tell When You're Being Played

This is the media literacy part. And I want to be clear: this isn't about left media versus right media. The whole spectrum plays the game. If you're only watching for manipulation from *one* side, you're already being played by the other.

Here are the tell-tale signs — the fingerprints of manufactured outrage. Regular people can spot these without a journalism degree:

1. It makes you feel something before it tells you anything. Real information informs first and emotes second. Manufactured outrage does it backwards. If a headline hits your gut before it reaches your brain — if you're furious before you've read the second paragraph — somebody engineered that feeling. Stop. Breathe. Ask yourself: what do I actually *know* here, versus what am I being told to *feel*?

2. It only tells one side's version. A real story has complexity. A manufactured one has a hero and a villain, and the villain is always the other team. If you're reading a story about the other party's scandal and you can't find a single sentence that complicates the narrative — not one — that's not reporting. That's a script.

3. It demands an immediate reaction. "Outrage now, details later." The machine runs on speed. It wants you angry *before* the full story comes out, because once the full story comes out, the outrage usually falls apart. The tell is urgency: *share this now, be mad now, donate now, decide now*. Independent thinkers decide on their own schedule.

4. It never follows the money. Here's a rule of thumb that will serve you the rest of your life: if a political story is getting huge attention and nobody is asking *who profits*, you're watching theater. The

money question is the one question the machine never wants asked, because the money trail is where both parties' fingerprints show up.

5. It makes your neighbor the enemy instead of the system. This is the big one. The moment a story positions an ordinary person — a voter, a parent, a worker — as your enemy, ask yourself who benefits from you hating them. The answer is never you. The answer is always the people who'd rather you fight your neighbor than audit their books.

6. The "sources say" trick. When a story leans on anonymous sources for its most explosive claims, slow down. Sometimes anonymous sources are legitimate — whistleblowers need protection. But when the *entire* outrage rests on people who won't put their names on it, you're being asked to get furious on someone else's word. Fine. Let them show their face first.

7. It disappears when it's inconvenient. Watch what happens when your side does the thing they condemned last month. Watch the story vanish. Watch the pundits go quiet. Watch the outrage machine suddenly discover nuance. That whiplash — fury one month, silence the next, about the *same behavior* — is proof the outrage was never about principle. It was about teams.

Print that list. Tape it to your fridge. Run every political story through it for a month, and I promise you: the world will look completely different. Not because the news changed. Because *you* did.

Question Everybody — Especially Your Own Side

Now we come to the hardest part. The part where most people close the book.

It's easy to question the other party. That's comfortable. That's fun, even. Everybody loves catching the other team in a lie. It feels like winning.

But the independent mindset doesn't ask you to question the *other* side. It asks you to question *your* side. Your party. Your news channel. Your favorite pundit. Your tribe. Because that's where your blind spots live.

Let me be blunt: if you have never once caught your own side lying to you, you're not informed. You're *managed*.

I say this as somebody who has been burned by trusting blindly. I've been on the wrong side of the system. I've watched people in power — people who smiled and promised and shook hands — do the exact opposite of what they swore. And the lesson I took from it wasn't "trust the other team." The lesson was: **trust is earned daily, by everybody, including your own people.**

Here's a practice that will change your life. I call it the flip test.

When your side does something — passes a bill, makes a statement, runs an ad — flip it. Imagine the *other* side did the exact same thing. Same words, same action, different jersey. Would you still defend it? Would you still cheer? Or would you be furious?

If the answer changes when the jersey changes, you don't have principles. You have a team. And teams are exactly what Washington warned about.

Run the flip test on the last three things your side did that you cheered for. Be honest. I'll wait again.

This is the part of independence that costs something. It costs you the warm feeling of belonging. It costs you the easy certainty of always knowing who's right. It costs you friends who'd rather have a loyal soldier than an honest neighbor.

But here's what it buys you: it buys you your mind back. And your mind is the one thing they can never take from you unless you hand it over.

Nobody — not a party, not a president, not a pundit, not a preacher, not me — gets your trust for free. Not anymore. From now on, everybody auditions. Every claim gets checked. Every narrative gets flipped. That's not cynicism. That's citizenship.

Here's one more practice, and it's the simplest one in this whole book: once a week, check one claim. Just one. Take something your feed told you this week — a number, a quote, a "they said" — and spend ten minutes finding out whether it's true. Not whether your side's version is true. Whether it's *true*. You'll be amazed how often the answer is "sort of," "out of context," or "made up entirely." Do it for a month and you'll never read the news the same way again. Do it for a year and you'll be the most clear-eyed person in every room you walk into. The machine runs on unexamined claims. One examined claim a week is a wrench in the gears.

Put the Phone Down and Talk to Your Neighbor

The most radical political act in America right now isn't a protest. It isn't a vote. It isn't a donation or a bumper sticker or a hashtag.

It's a conversation. In person. With a real human being who disagrees with you.

I know that sounds small. It's not. It's the one thing the entire machine is designed to prevent, because the moment you actually *talk* to the people you've been told to hate, the whole illusion collapses.

Here's what I mean. I drive people all night. Red, blue, and everything in between. And I have never — not once — had a real conversation in my cab where the person across from me turned out to be the monster the television said they were. Not once. The monsters only exist on the screen. In real life, there are just tired people trying to make it.

Your neighbor with the flag you don't like? He coached your kid's Little League team. The lady with the sign in her yard that makes your blood boil? She brought soup when your mother was sick. The guy at the plant who votes the "wrong" way? He'd pull your car out of a ditch at midnight and refuse your money.

The screen turns neighbors into avatars. Real life turns avatars back into neighbors. And that is exactly why the machine keeps you glued to the screen.

So here's my challenge to you — and this one is practical, something you can do this week:

Have one real conversation with one person you disagree with. Not a debate. Not a dunk. Not a "let me explain why you're wrong." A conversation. Ask them what they're worried about. Ask them what they want for their kids. Listen — actually listen — to the answer. Don't plan your rebuttal while they're talking. Just listen.

I guarantee you this: you will find more common ground in twenty minutes of honest conversation than in twenty years of cable news. You will discover that the person across the table wants the same things you want — safety, dignity, a fair shot, a future for their kids. You will discover that the differences are real but they're *small*, and the agreements are huge.

And you will discover the most dangerous truth of all: **you were never each other's enemy. You were each other's cover story.** The parties needed you divided so they could loot the place in peace. Every minute you spend hating your neighbor is a minute you're not watching the people who are actually picking your pocket.

Real community is the antidote to manufactured division. Not online community — *real* community. The block. The church. The union hall. The diner. The barbershop. The front porch. The places where people know your name and your story and your struggles, where "the other side" is just *Steve*, and Steve's a good guy even if his yard sign is wrong.

Rebuild that. One conversation at a time. It's slow. It's unglamorous. It doesn't trend. But it's the only thing that has ever actually changed a country — people, face to face, deciding they belong to each other more than they belong to a party.

Independence Is a Verb

Let me clear up a misconception, because it's an important one.

Being independent is not a box you check on a voter registration form. It's not a label. It's not a brand. It's not a team with better merch.

Independence is a *practice*. It's a verb. It's something you do, every day, in a hundred small ways that nobody sees and nobody applauds. The registration card is the least important part. Here's what the actual practice looks like:

Read the bill, not the headline. When a politician brags about what a law does — or when the other side screams about what it does — don't take either one's word for it. The text of legislation is public. It's boring. It's long. Read the summary anyway. You will be shocked how often both sides are lying about what's actually in the thing.

Follow the money locally. Everybody obsesses over Washington. But the decisions that hit your daily life — your property taxes, your schools, your roads, your water, your zoning — get made by people you've never heard of, in meetings you never attend, funded by donors you'll never see. Go to one city council meeting. One school board meeting. Just one. Watch who shows up, who talks, who gets what they want. Local politics is where the corruption is cheapest and the citizen is most powerful — because at the

local level, *you* can still outnumber the lobbyists.

Know your representatives' actual record. Not what they say. Not what their ads say. Their *record*. How they voted. Who funded them. What they promised versus what they delivered. This information is public — voting records, donor disclosures, all of it. If your representative votes against your interests and you keep voting for them because of the letter after their name, that's not loyalty. That's a habit. Break it.

Serve on a jury. When that summons comes, don't dodge it. A jury is one of the last places in America where twelve ordinary people — not donors, not lobbyists, not party bosses — get the final word. It's democracy in its purest form, and it's dying because too many of us treat it like an inconvenience. Don't. Show up. It's an honor.

Talk about money in politics at the dinner table. Make it normal. The machine depends on this stuff being "too complicated" or "too boring" to discuss. It's not. "Who paid for that ad?" is a question a ten-year-old can understand. Teach your kids to ask it. Teach your friends to ask it. Make "follow the money" a household phrase.

Vote in every election — especially the boring ones. Primaries. Special elections. Bond issues. Ballot measures. The turnout for these is embarrassingly low, which means your vote counts for *more*, not less. The parties count on you only showing up for the big show every four years. Surprise them.

Use the secret ballot like it was meant to be used. Here's a piece of history they don't teach enough. For most of the 1800s, there was no secret ballot in America. The *parties* printed the ballots — party tickets, they were called — and everybody could see which ticket you dropped in the box. The ward boss watched. Your employer watched. Vote the wrong way and everybody knew. Then reformers fought for the Australian ballot — a government-printed, private ballot — and Massachusetts adopted it in 1888. Within a few years, 38 states had followed. They gave you a curtain and a private vote so the machine couldn't watch you vote. That curtain is a gift from reformers who are all dead now, and the way you honor it is simple: vote your conscience behind it. Nobody gets to know. Nobody gets to punish you. That's what it's *for*.

Build something. A neighborhood group. A community garden. A mutual aid network. A podcast. A newsletter. A business that treats people right. The system wants you to believe change only comes from the top — from Washington, from the parties, from the next savior. It doesn't. It comes from the bottom, from people who stop waiting for permission and start building the world they want to live in.

Teach one young person. The parties are spending billions to program the next generation before it can think — find one kid, yours or somebody else's, and teach them the two questions: *who benefits, and who paid?* Show them how to check a claim. Show them Washington's farewell warning and Douglass's creed. You don't have to give them your opinions. Give them the tools and trust the tools. A generation that knows how to think is a generation the machine can never own.

None of this requires you to be a hero. It requires you to be *awake*. That's the whole practice: stay awake. Ask the question. Read the fine print. Talk to the neighbor. Show up to the meeting. Every day, in small ways, refuse to be managed.

That's the independent mindset. Not a label — a lifestyle.

What They Don't Want You to Know

Let me tell you what the machine fears most. It's not a third party. It's not a protest. It's not even losing an election.

What the machine fears most is *you, awake, talking to each other*.

Here's why. The whole system runs on a bluff. The bluff is that the two parties are the only game in town — that you have to pick one, that there's no alternative, that thinking outside the red-blue box is naive or dangerous or wasted.

But look at the actual numbers. Gallup found that a record 45% of Americans now identify as independents — more than either party, with Democrats and Republicans each at just 27%. Nearly half the country. More than half of young people — Gen Z and Millennials — have walked away from both parties. The independent majority isn't a dream. It's already here. It's the biggest political fact in America, and the machine's entire business model depends on you not noticing it.

Think about that. The two parties that claim to represent you are each chosen by barely a quarter of the country. The other half — the biggest half — wants nothing to do with either of them. And yet the red-blue story plays on every screen, every day, as if those are the only two teams that exist.

They're not. *You're* the biggest team. You just haven't been introduced to each other yet.

Here's the other thing they don't want you to know: **the system only works by your consent**. That's not poetry. That's mechanics. Governments, parties, media empires — they all run on the participation of ordinary people. Your attention. Your votes. Your donations. Your obedience. Your belief that this is the only way it can be.

The moment enough people withdraw that consent — not violently, not illegally, but simply by *thinking for themselves and acting like it* — the whole thing has to change. Not because anybody overthrew anything. Because the customers walked out of the store.

That's how every real change in American history happened. Not from the top down. From ordinary people deciding, together, that they'd had enough of the old story — and writing a new one. Peacefully. Lawfully. Relentlessly. The vote. The jury box. The town meeting. The free press. The peaceful assembly. These aren't quaint traditions. They're *weapons* — the most powerful ones ever invented — and they belong to you.

The machine knows this. That's why it works so hard to make you feel powerless. Powerless people don't show up. Powerless people don't organize. Powerless people scroll and fume and do nothing, which is exactly the business plan.

But you're not powerless. You're the 99%. You're the ones who drive the cabs and fix the pipes and teach the kids and grow the food and keep the lights on. The 1% doesn't run this country. *You* run this country — you've just been convinced to rent out the driver's seat.

Take it back. Not with anger. Not with violence. With your mind, your voice, your vote, and your neighbor standing next to you.

Break Out of the Echo Chamber

There's something I need to tell you about your phone, and you're not going to like it.

Your phone is not showing you the world. It's showing you a *version* of the world, custom-built to keep your thumb moving. Every app, every feed, every "recommended for you" — it's an algorithm, and the algorithm has one job: keep you engaged. And nothing engages like outrage. Nothing keeps you scrolling like anger. Calm, balanced, nuanced information? That's terrible for business. It makes you put the phone down.

So the machine feeds you a steady diet of exactly what you already believe, plus a little extra fury each day to keep you hooked. Psychologists call it the echo chamber. I call it the padded cell — soft, warm, comfortable, and completely cut off from reality.

Here's the insidious part: it doesn't feel like manipulation. It feels like *being right all the time*. Everybody in your feed agrees with you. Every article confirms what you already thought. Every meme dunks on the people you already dislike. It feels great. It feels like truth. But it's not truth — it's a mirror. And a mirror only shows you yourself.

The independent mindset requires you to do something that feels deeply unnatural: **deliberately seek out information that challenges what you believe.**

Not the strawman version. Not the cherry-picked clip your side shares to mock the other side. The real thing. Read the other side's best writers — not their worst trolls. Watch the other side's most thoughtful voices — not the ones your feed holds up for ridicule. Read a newspaper you disagree with, cover to cover, for one month. Not to convert. Not to argue. To *understand*.

Here's what happens when you do this — and I know because I've done it: about a third of the time, you'll find out the other side has a point you hadn't considered. About a third of the time, you'll find out they're just as manipulated as you were, saying the same slogans in a different jersey. And about a third of the time, you'll sharpen your own position, because you'll finally understand what you're actually arguing against instead of a cartoon version of it.

All three outcomes make you stronger. The echo chamber makes you weaker — certain, smug, and wrong in ways you'll never discover because nobody in the cell is allowed to disagree.

Practical steps, starting today:

Follow five people you disagree with. Not trolls. Not rage-bait. Smart, serious people from the other side. Read them for a month. You don't have to agree. You just have to listen.

Get your news from at least three sources that hate each other. If they all tell the same story the same way, it's probably solid. If they tell wildly different stories, the truth is somewhere in the gap — and now you know there's a gap, which is more than the echo chamber ever gave you.

Notice what your feed never shows you. The algorithm doesn't just choose what you see — it chooses what you *don't* see. Stories that complicate your side's narrative. Scandals on your team. Wins by the other team. Victories by ordinary people that don't fit the script. What's missing from your feed is often more important than what's in it.

Take a weekly news fast. One day a week — pick Sunday, pick whatever — no political news. No feeds, no pundits, no outrage. Talk to real people. Touch grass, as the kids say. You'll be amazed how much of your "informed opinion" was actually just yesterday's adrenaline wearing off.

The echo chamber is the machine's favorite prison because the prisoners guard themselves. They call it "staying informed." They call leaving it "betrayal." But an informed citizen who only hears one side isn't informed — they're *programmed*. And the independent mindset is, at its core, a deprogramming.

Walk out of the cell. The air is better out here.

They'll Call You Names — Let Them

I want to warn you about something, because nobody else will.

The minute you start thinking for yourself — really thinking, not performing — both sides will come for you. Not with arguments. With *names*.

The right will call you a liberal. The left will call you a conservative. Your own tribe will call you a traitor, a sellout, a useful idiot, a closet whatever. Friends you've had for years will look at you sideways. Family members will forward you articles "to set you straight." Somebody at work will stop inviting you to lunch.

I know this because I've lived it. The minute you stop reciting the catechism — the minute you say, "Hold on, that doesn't add up," or "Actually, the other side has a point here," or "I don't care which party did it, it's wrong" — you become a problem. Tribes don't tolerate independent thinkers. Tribes tolerate *loyal* thinkers.

So let me tell you what those names really mean.

When they call you a traitor, what they mean is: *you stopped being useful to the team*. When they call you confused, what they mean is: *you stopped reciting the script*. When they call you "both-sides" as an insult, what they mean is: *how dare you notice that both sides do it*.

Every one of those names is a leash. They're trying to yank you back into the pen. The names only work if you care more about belonging than about truth. And here's the hard question the independent mindset forces you to answer: **which one matters more to you?**

I'm not going to lie to you — it costs something. I lost friends over this. People I drank with, people I trusted, people I thought would be in my corner. Some of them came back. Some of them didn't. And every single one of those losses hurt.

But here's what I got in return: I got my mind back. I got the ability to look at any claim, from any side, and ask "is this true?" instead of "does this help my team?" I got conversations with people I'd been told to hate, and discovered they were some of the best people I've ever met. I got the quiet confidence that comes from knowing your opinions are *yours* — built from evidence and experience, not downloaded from a feed.

And here's the secret nobody tells you: **you're not alone out here.** Remember that Gallup number — 45% of Americans now call themselves independents. Nearly half the country is standing outside the pen with you. They're just quiet about it, because the machine made independence feel lonely. It isn't. It's the biggest crowd in America. We just haven't all found each other yet.

So when the names come — and they will — let them. Wear them like a badge. Every insult from a tribe is proof you're thinking. Every lost "friend" who only liked the programmed version of you is a relationship you were renting, not owning. The people who matter — the real ones — will respect you more for thinking, not less. And the new people you'll meet out here, the fellow independent thinkers, will be the most interesting people you've ever known. Because they got here the same way you did: the hard way, one honest question at a time.

There's an old saying: if you want to know who controls you, look at who you're not allowed to criticize. The independent mindset flips it: if you want to know you're free, notice that you're allowed to criticize *everyone* — including your own side, including yourself.

That's not betrayal. That's the whole point.

And if the names bother you, remember who else got called names. The fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence committed treason against the most powerful empire on earth — the punishment for treason was death. They weren't called "independents." They were called traitors, criminals, fools. King George didn't send them a strongly worded letter; he sent an army. Every American tradition of thinking for yourself started with somebody being called a name worse than anything you'll ever hear at Thanksgiving. The names mean you're over the target.

The Creed

I want to close this book with something you can carry. Not a slogan for a bumper sticker — a creed. Something to read when the noise gets loud and the screen gets tempting and the old habits start pulling you back toward the red team or the blue team.

Read it slow.

I am not a Republican. I am not a Democrat. I am an American, and I think for myself.

I will not hate my neighbor to make a politician rich.

I will question every narrative — especially the ones that flatter me.

I will follow the money, read the fine print, and check the record.

I will put down the screen and pick up the conversation.

I will show up — at the meeting, at the jury box, at the ballot box, in my community.

I will not be managed, marketed to, or herded. My mind is my own.

I believe change comes peacefully, lawfully, and democratically — or it isn't change worth having.

I am one of the 99%, and I am not alone.

Say it until you believe it. Then live it until it's true.

The Future Belongs to the People Who Think

Here's my last story, and then I'm done.

A few years back, I picked up an old man at the airport. He must have been eighty-five, sharp as a tack, the kind of man who's seen enough to stop being impressed by anything. We got to talking — the way people do in cabs — and he told me he'd been a civil rights marcher in the sixties. Marched in Selma. Got his head cracked open for the right to vote.

I asked him what kept him going back then, when everything was against them. When the laws were against them, the governors were against them, the dogs and the fire hoses were against them.

He looked out the window for a long time. Then he said: "Son, we didn't have the money. We didn't have the power. We didn't have the newspapers or the politicians. All we had was each other — and the truth. And it turned out that was enough."

All we had was each other — and the truth. And it turned out that was enough.

That's the whole book in one sentence. That's the independent mindset. Not a party. Not a platform. Not a savior on a screen. Just ordinary people, standing together, refusing to be lied to anymore.

The parties will tell you it's hopeless. The pundits will tell you it's naive. The machine will tell you to pick a side and hate the other one and go back to sleep.

Don't.

The future doesn't belong to the loudest voice on the screen. It doesn't belong to the biggest donor or the slickest consultant or the angriest mob. The future belongs to the people who think for themselves — who ask the hard questions, who talk to their neighbors, who show up, who refuse to be divided and conquered.

That's you. If you've read this far, that's you.

So here's my charge to you, from one working man to another, from the driver's seat to wherever you're sitting right now:

Think. Question. Talk. Show up. Build. Vote. And never — *never* — let anybody, red or blue, tell you that you're powerless. Because the day the 99% starts thinking for itself is the day the game changes forever.

Not with a riot. Not with a revolution. With a million quiet decisions, made by a million ordinary people, to stop being customers and start being citizens.

The parties had their two hundred years. Washington warned us. We didn't listen.

We're listening now.

Welcome to the independent mindset. The future is yours — go take it back.

And here's what taking it back looks like on a Tuesday. It looks like you, at the dinner table, saying "who paid for that ad?" when the commercial comes on — and teaching your kids to ask it too. It looks like you walking into a city council meeting, sitting in one of those empty chairs, and asking one question out loud. It looks like you telling your coworker, "I don't do teams anymore — I do right and wrong," and meaning it. It looks like you registering independent and telling the pollster why, so the next Gallup number is 46, then 47, then 50.

Paine's pamphlet was read aloud in taverns because ordinary people carried it there. Thoreau's essay was passed hand to hand for a hundred years before it helped topple empires — Gandhi read it in South Africa, and King read it in an Alabama jail. Douglass's words outlived every party of his century. None of them had a super PAC. None of them had a cable network. They had the truth and they refused to shut up about it.

This year — 2026 — America turns 250 years old. Two hundred and fifty years since a pamphlet talked a continent into thinking for itself. The parties will spend the anniversary wrapping themselves in the flag and telling you the founders would have voted their ticket. Don't believe it. The founders warned us about the parties. The anniversary doesn't belong to them. It belongs to the tradition they started and the parties betrayed: ordinary people, thinking for themselves, changing the country one honest mind at a time.

Two hundred and fifty years. The experiment is yours now. Don't waste it.

One last thing, and I mean it: don't just read this book and put it on a shelf. Lend it. Talk about it. Argue about it at the dinner table and the diner counter and the barbershop. The machine counts on these ideas staying trapped between two covers. Prove it wrong. The conversation you start tomorrow might be the one that changes everything.