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Corporatocracy: How Corporations Keep Control.

On January 20th, 2025, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 47th president of the United States. Behind him sat the three wealthiest men in the US: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg. This image encapsulates the influence of corporate power in American politics, where wealth shapes policy and representatives of corporations increasingly seem to have more voice than the citizens who elected the president. The presence of these CEOs is also an indicator that the US might be entering an era of corporatocracy. The increasing influence of corporations in American politics has concentrated power among a wealthy elite, systematically exploited the working class, and distracted voters with manufactured controversies. This strategy undermines democratic accountability and the promise of equal representation, leaving the question: What can be done to reclaim a political system that genuinely serves all its citizens?

In 2010, the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* allowed unlimited spending on electoral candidates by corporations (Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 2010). This decision led to the formation of super political action committees (PACs), which have funneled billions of dollars into political advertisements and donations, all so the wealthy can ensure their favorite candidate is elected (Jimenez, Pulos). This raises two key questions: Why do corporations seek such influence, and how do they maintain it?

The ‘why’ is simple: corporate executives seek to maximize their wealth and often operate under the belief that they are inherently deserving of it. As leaders of publicly traded companies, they face pressure from shareholders to continually increase profits, further driving their pursuit of financial and political influence. The *Harvard International Review* highlights this by stating, “unregulated flows of money into politics reinforce the idea that the government is beholden to the wealthy and that democratic participation for those who fall outside the upper echelons of society is of little value” (Ahmad). This dynamic leads to a government that increasingly caters to the interests of the rich, leaving the rest of society feeling marginalized and powerless. A 2009 study published in the Journal of Law and Politics found that corporations lobbying for tax benefits saw returns on investment as high as 22,000%, making political influence an extremely profitable endeavor (Noor). Additionally, in 2023 alone, the fossil fuel industry spent $243 million on lobbying efforts, meaning that they may have gotten a return upwards of 53.46 billion dollars (Alexander et al). As these elite groups continue to consolidate their power, the public is left with fewer opportunities to influence policies that affect their own lives, reinforcing the cycle of wealth and political inequality.

Next is the ‘how’: how do corporations get away with this? Why does nobody seem to notice or care? Corporations don’t just rely on money to maintain power; they also manipulate public discourse to keep people from questioning their influence. Noam Chomsky describes this tactic, stating, “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum” (Chomsky). While corporate influence quietly shapes policy behind the scenes, the public is kept distracted by culture wars and manufactured divisions. Instead of uniting against economic inequality, voters are pulled into endless debates over fundamental human rights. For example, trans people: as of February 12th, 2025, 462 anti-trans legislations have been introduced throughout the country. All this legislative effort targets just 1.14% of the population, whose only request is to live freely and safely (2025 anti-trans bills tracker). Or the 127 federal bills introduced against immigrants, or the focus on women's reproductive rights when all people should have the right to decisions on their own body. These legislative efforts are not simply grassroots moral crusades; they are often funded and amplified by corporate donations. Between 2020 and 2023, companies that publicly condemned anti-LGBTQ+ legislation contributed over $2.4 million to state legislators who played key roles in passing such bills (Center for Responsive Politics). Similarly, private prison corporations like GEO Group spent over $690,000 in lobbying efforts for stricter immigration enforcement policies, including alternatives to detention within ICE (Evers-Hillstrom). Additionally, organizations advocating for anti-abortion policies have received substantial corporate-backed donations, with companies like Amazon donating over $450,000 to politicians who oppose the Equality Act (Milman et al.). By fueling these cultural divisions, corporations prevent the working class from recognizing their shared struggle. As long as people are fighting each other instead of the systems keeping them powerless, corporate influence remains unchallenged, and economic inequality deepens.

The influence of corporate power extends beyond politics, affecting the daily lives of individuals. Many employees face stagnant wages and demanding working hours, often struggling to access essential benefits like health care, education, and housing. This systemic issue is heightened by corporate practices that prioritize profit over employee well-being. In various industries, workers endure challenging conditions with minimal compensation. For instance, in the meatpacking sector, employees often work in cold, strenuous environments, facing safety risks and job insecurity (Tran). Similarly, shrimp farmers in countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, and India experience exploitation due to the relentless pursuit of lower prices by major supermarkets, leading to reduced earnings and hazardous working conditions (Rising). Additionally, corporations frequently exploit labor in countries with lax labor laws, employing child labor and upholding poor working conditions. These conditions are not just the result of a competitive market but a deliberate strategy to suppress wages and limit workers' bargaining power. As corporations outsource jobs to countries with weaker labor protections, domestic workers are left with fewer opportunities and stagnant pay, forced to accept exploitative conditions out of necessity. This economic precarity makes it increasingly difficult for employees to demand fair wages, benefits, or workplace protections. Furthermore, the long hours and financial stress imposed on workers leave little time or energy for activism, effectively stifling efforts to unionize or push for systemic change. As a result, wage stagnation persists, allowing corporations to maximize profits while keeping workers trapped in a cycle of economic insecurity.

Wage stagnation has been a persistent issue in the United States, particularly affecting middle and lower-income workers. According to the Economic Policy Institute, from 1979 to 2019, median hourly wages rose by only 15.1%, while wages for the 95th percentile increased by 63.2% during the same period (Mishel). This disparity highlights how wage growth has been disproportionately concentrated among the highest earners, leaving the majority of workers with minimal real income growth. Additionally, the National Bureau of Economic Research notes that factors such as outsourcing, foreign competition, automation, and the decline of unions have contributed to stagnant wages and a declining share of labor income in GDP in recent decades (Maas). This stagnation has resulted in many workers struggling to keep up with the rising costs of living, leading to increased financial insecurity and widening economic inequality. I’ve seen the effect of this personally; when I was 14, I worked at a McDonald's in Kansas, making $7.50 an hour. Another employee there, making the same wage, worked over 100 hours each week, relying on a bicycle for transportation due to the inability to afford a car. Despite this, he could barely afford his apartment. During one of his shifts, he received a call informing him that his apartment complex was on fire. Without renter's insurance, he lost everything, and I never saw him again. Yet, despite all of this, corporations continue to sell the lie that if workers just "work hard enough," they can achieve the American Dream. But how can you pull yourself up by the bootstraps when the boots have been stolen, resold at a markup, and the factory that made them was outsourced for cheaper labor?

While many workers struggle to make ends meet, top executives continue to amass wealth, using their financial influence to shape policies that maintain their economic advantages. They buy off lawmakers, manipulate public discourse, and distract people with culture wars while quietly siphoning every last drop of value from those who actually keep the country running. As this unchecked exploitation deepens, one cannot help but ask, if corporations continue to thrive at the expense of ordinary lives, how much worse will things get? What must be done to stop this? How do we break this cycle of corruption and reclaim democracy for the people instead of the billionaires?

The pervasive influence of corporate money in American politics has raised significant concerns about democratic integrity. In the 2022 election cycle, business interests contributed a staggering $3.5 billion to federal political campaigns, outspending organized labor by a ratio of 14-to-1 (Center for Responsive Politics). This disproportionate financial power enables corporations to shape policy decisions in their favor, often at the expense of the broader public interest. To address this imbalance, aggressive action may be necessary. One potential solution is banning corporate donations entirely and placing strict limits on how much any individual or organization can contribute to campaigns. Additionally, publicly funded elections, where candidates receive government funding instead of relying on private donors, could remove corporate influence altogether. Some countries have already implemented versions of this system, reducing the power of wealthy elites in politics. Another option is a constitutional amendment overturning Citizens United, which would allow for stronger restrictions on corporate spending in elections. While these solutions would face political resistance, they could fundamentally shift power away from corporations and back to the people.

Labor unions play a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights and promoting economic equality. However, union membership has declined over the decades, with only 11.2% of U.S. workers unionized in 2023 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Despite this decline, union activity has been resurgent; the National Labor Relations Board reported a 3% increase in union election petitions and a 10% rise in unfair labor practice charges in the Fiscal Year 2023 compared to the previous year (Economic Policy Institute). To bolster labor rights, it is essential to reform labor laws to facilitate unionization and protect workers from employer retaliation. Strengthening penalties for labor law violations and streamlining the union election process can empower workers to collectively bargain for better wages and working conditions, thereby reducing economic disparities.​

The growing influence of corporate-controlled media is a critical challenge to democracy and informed public discourse. Combating corporate control over media requires a multifaceted approach. One effective strategy is to support and promote independent journalism, which provides diverse perspectives and counters corporate narratives. Transparency in media ownership is also crucial; when audiences are aware of who owns and funds media outlets, they can better assess potential biases. Implementing regulations that prevent excessive media consolidation can reduce the dominance of a few corporations over public discourse. Encouraging media literacy education empowers individuals to critically evaluate media content and recognize corporate influences. These measures collectively aim to democratize information flow, ensuring that media serves the public interest rather than corporate agendas.

If we fail to address the overreach of corporate power in our society, our core principles as a country will begin to fall.

If we fail to confront the unchecked expansion of corporate power infiltrating our politics, labor rights, and media, the very essence of our democracy stands at the precipice of collapse. The chasm between the ultra-wealthy and the rest will grow ever wider, as those with deep pockets tighten their stranglehold on politics, rendering the average citizen's voice a mere whisper drowned out by the cacophony of corporate interests. Workers, stripped of essential protections and bargaining power, will find themselves toiling in increasingly oppressive conditions, their pleas for justice muffled by the relentless march of profit. Our media, once a bastion of diverse thought and critical discourse, risks devolving into a monolithic echo chamber, where genuine suffering is callously overshadowed by the ceaseless barrage of advertisements peddling the next trivial product. As John Whitehead starkly observed in his commentary “The Rise of Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy”, "corporate greed is slowly doing away with diversity and independent reporting. Most importantly, it poses a dire threat to American democracy" (Whitehead). This is not a distant dystopia but an imminent reality demanding our immediate and unwavering action.

Although the relentless encroachment of corporate power on our political institutions, labor rights, and media poses a severe threat to the very foundations of democracy, there remains a path forward through decisive, collective action. By banning corporate donations, instituting publicly funded elections, reforming labor laws to robustly protect workers, and enforcing strict transparency in media ownership, we can dismantle the oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalize the vast majority of citizens. Countries like Germany, for instance, have long employed codetermination policies that secure worker representation on corporate boards, ensuring that decisions are made with public interest in mind rather than pure profit. Similarly, France’s strict bans on corporate political donations have significantly curtailed the influence of money on political outcomes, preserving the independence of its democratic process, proving that when citizens unite, systemic change is achievable. This approach is not merely a remedy but a moral imperative to reclaim a political system that truly serves the people. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once declared, 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter' (King). His words remind us that our persistent, united voice can redirect the course of history toward justice and equity, offering hope that even the deepest wounds inflicted by corporatocracy can begin to heal when we dare to stand together."

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